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Research article

Understanding gaps between student and staff perceptions of university study in South Africa: A case study

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Abstract

"Under-preparedness" of students entering higher education is an issue that many academic institutions in South Africa are currently trying to address. Such students are seen as disadvantaged, lacking the skills, knowledge and/or language proficiency to navigate their way to success in higher education. This paper seeks to identify students' understanding of the behaviour they should display in higher education and how this clashes with the expectations of academics, through the lenses of different discourses and academic literacy models. Specifically, the focus is on how students try to engage with the institutional discourse and how they try to identify a "sense of being" through a case study of the Extended Curriculum Programme in Nature Conservation at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology. Here, qualitative research was used through the administration of student essays, as well as individual face-to-face interviews. Lecturers were also interviewed so that a comparison could be made between what students perceive and the expectations of higher education. Different themes were identified through the analysis of the data, using an inductive approach; by developing the themes, the gaps are better identified and analysed with a view to redress.

Keywords

Higher education, teaching and learning, extended curriculum programmes, academic literacy, South Africa.

Introduction

Although the number of black students entering higher education has increased significantly since 1994, in post-apartheid South Africa, the throughput rate remains low. For example, Scott, Yeld and Hendry (2007) reported that of the intake of students registered for study at universities of technology, only 23% graduated within five years, 11% remained in the institution's system, and 66% disappeared from the system without graduating. The majority comprised 'black' students, thus issues of race continue to bedevil South African higher education, even 20 years after the advent of democracy. The low

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throughput rate could be attributed to a variety of reasons, including socio-economic factors (Scott, Yeld & Hendry, 2007), as well as students struggling to access the discourse of the institution (Boughey, 2008).

One response to low throughput of black students in South African universities and the associated issue of high levels of under-preparedness of first-year students is the introduction of Extended Curriculum Programmes (ECP). ECPs are foundation programmes where the focus is on enabling talented students from disadvantaged educational backgrounds to build sound academic foundations for success in the programmes of their choice. Disadvantage is and remains a contested term, which may differ across institutions. In the South African university context, it usually refers to black students (including Indian and Coloured students) who may meet general Faculty entrance requirements but not necessarily those of the programme, or who fall into a borderline category (Leibowitz & Bozalek, 2015; Dhunpath & Vital, 2012).

Not only is the issue of "disadvantage" contested, but so, too, the purpose of the ECP itself. ECPs, as they stand, may further perpetuate racial differences as opposed to creating equal opportunities for success at university (Leibowitz & Bozalek, 2015). Rather, the authors suggest, all students should be seen as having different learning needs regardless of their racial heritage. Thus more flexible mainstream curricula to accommodate diversity, rather than the current ECP model, would go some way to reducing differentiation, and possibly stigmatisation, on the basis of race.

In this context, the research reported in this paper was conducted in the Nature Conservation ECP in the Faculty of Applied Science at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology, in the early part of 2012. As the ECP is specifically designed to assist students in entering higher education and succeeding, it is an ideal site to explore the difference in discourse between students and staff and it allows us to comment on ways to better assist in teaching and learning. By exploring the perceptions of staff and ECP students of what it means to be a Nature Conservation student, a better understanding may be gained of differences between what students bring with them to the university and the university requirements.

The starting point for this research is that university practices are, by and large, different from practices in everyday life. This particular difference is captured in Bernstein's (1999) analysis of more formal knowledge discourses typical of traditional university fields. These "vertical discourses" (Bernstein, 1999, p. 159) are typified by dense and abstract conceptual networks that serve to organise knowledge and explain events. Horizontal discourse, on the other hand, is likely to be "oral, tacit, local, specific to particular contexts, multi-layered and contradictory across but not within contexts" (p. 157). This is the dominant discourse of the home and society. Even though schooled knowledge may contain some elements of vertical discourses, there still tends to be a divide between school and university discourses (Boughey, 2008; Slonimsky & Shalem, 2006).

An additional way of understanding differences between different institutions and practices is through Gee's (1990) concept of discourses. He views discourse as the ways in which people act out different societal roles and how they use and interpret language. Each

community and social group masters a home-based discourse that integrates words, actions, interactions, values, feelings, attitudes and thinking in specific and unique ways. Discourse contributes to the construction of systems of knowledge and belief. These are connected to a particular social group's way of being in the world, their "form of life", their identity, who they take themselves to be (Gee, 1996). Thus, in terms of discourse, academic practices are constituted through webs of values, criteria, conceptual tools, specialised means of activity, and forms of communication that practices in other sites of knowledge production do not fully share, though they may have some elements in common (Slonimsky & Shalem, 2006, p. 38).

Boughey (2013) explains, following and developing Gee's discourse theory, that entering higher education is neither a natural process nor one easily acquired; the transition needs much support from staff to students and what counts as "being a student" to be overtly taught. Certain discourses may enable or disable access; this can be seen in Boughey's view of home-based literacies that are linked to individuals' chances of accessing and succeeding in higher education. According to Boughey (2008, p. 7):

> A position which views education as natural would have to argue that working class students do less well in education because they themselves are lacking in some way; that is: the reasons for failure would be located in factors inherent to the individual.

Boughey (2013, p. 5) argues that literacy practices are embedded in those discourses, and academics need to understand those practices as related to valuing and believing, and to a person's identity and sense of self.

Access to higher education can be further complicated as, according to Boughey (2013, p. 3), literacy is a multiple rather than unitary phenomenon, and is more than the ability to read and write. She identifies multiple academic literacies, and these literacies are related to disciplinary difference. There are values that underpin these, rather than a generic set of practices often conceptualised as skills.

Lea and Street (2006) propose a three-tier model for what has come to be known as "literacy" at universities. There is, firstly, the skills model, in which becoming literate is largely a technical task to be learnt independently of the discipline under study or even the nature of the university. This includes sentence and paragraph level but may also include more general reading and writing skills such as identifying main points, summarising and essay writing (Lea and Street are less clear where these latter skills lie). The second enculturation model focuses strongly on literacy as being embedded generally in how knowledge is understood at university, for example as distantiated from personal experience (Slonimsky & Shalom, 2006) but also embedded in and partly structured by particular disciplines. Thus Nature Conservation would have particular reading and writing requirements that are different from, for example, Chemistry studies. In the enculturation model, the particular literacies of university and the discipline would need to be overtly taught. The third model, academic literacy, contains elements of the first two but understands literacy as less fixed in time involving issues of "meaning making, and identity that are implicit in the use of literacy practices within specific institutional settings" (Lea & Street, 2006, p. 370).

McKenna (2004), like Boughey, acknowledges that students' background does not make it easy to take on a literacy practice, pointing to the difficult transition into higher education and that consideration needs to be given to the fact that students need to be guided into academic practices. Students' home-based and previous schooling practices are different from those of higher education and, at times, may not be enough of a basis for students to deal with higher education. Accordingly, this paper sets out to examine perceptions of studying at university from both students and staff, and to investigate whether there are differences and, if so, what the nature of these differences is. The research can then contribute to our understandings of "discourse clashes" at university, as raised by Boughey and McKenna. It can also contribute to a better understanding of the high dropout rate of predominantly black students at South African universities.

Research methods

Interviews were conducted with eight first-year Nature Conservation students on ECP and three lecturers who have extensive teaching experience in the programme. Lecturers were interviewed to obtain a clear understanding of what Nature Conservation entailed and what completing a National Diploma in Nature Conservation would allow students to do. We wanted to get clarity on the expectations of academics; we also wanted to establish what were considered valuable ways of learning from academic staff. Responses would also serve as a yardstick for gauging the responses of the student participants.

In this study, participants were not directly asked what they thought the gap to be; rather, their understandings of what was involved in studying in the field were probed. What constituted any possible gap could then be inferred by comparing student and staff responses to the questions. Students and staff were asked what they understood the field of Nature Conservation to entail, as well as what they understood constituted learning within the field.

Data analysis

An inductive approach was first employed to analyse data, and data from staff and students was treated separately. According to Thomas (2006, p. 239), the primary purpose of an inductive approach is to allow research findings to emerge from frequent, dominant, or significant themes inherent in the raw data, without the restraints imposed by structured methodologies.

Data was analysed and coded repetitively so that categories could be formulated. The type of coding used first was *in vivo* coding (Saldaña, 2009, p. 4) in that reference is made directly to what participants have said. These are referred to as patterns in Table 1 (see below). From the patterns, categories of student and staff perceptions of what it is to be a nature conservation student could then be identified by providing words or short phrases that described and organised the raw data into the themes. Patterns and themes were tabulated (Table 1) so that differences in perceptions could be identified across the themes, as discussed in the findings. These gaps were then linked to discourse theory and understandings of academic literacy in the discussion and conclusion sections so that recommendations may be made for future practice.

Research findings

The patterns identified from the student and staff interviews could be classified into the four following themes, as reflected in Table 1: (1) *Attitude to learning* reflects the general characteristics that students should have to be successful as students – these include the kinds of dispositions students are inclined to use or avoid to achieve success (this could refer to the hard work needed to be invested in their studies, focus on studying in the field, and the time and attention needed for subjects): (2) *Literacy* in this study comprises a variety of discourses; ways of thinking and behaving with their own sets of rules and values for meaning-making, which should be acquired implicitly or explicitly (McKenna, 2010, p. 16). We divided the theme of literacy into two subsections: *general university literacy* and *discipline-specific literacy.* The former focuses on skills such as reading, summary writing, more general writing and referencing; discipline-specific literacy refers to the specific ways of thinking and behaving in the discipline and keeping abreast of current research and events, as well as the scientific writing and presentation of knowledge required of students, critical thought, problem-solving and laboratory skills; (3) *Knowledge for the course* refers to the basic concepts of biology and knowledge of biology that are required in the field. It also refers to any other subject content knowledge that students engage with for the purpose of completing a National Diploma in Nature Conservation; and (4) *Understanding of the field* refers to the characteristics that students and lecturers feel are necessary for pursuing a career in Nature Conservation.

Once themes were identified, it was possible to analyse differences across the themes.

Differences across the themes were not uniform; in some themes, the data indicated relatively small differences, whereas in others the data indicated the gap more strongly. For example, under *knowledge for the course,* students understood that there was an expectation that they needed a foundation in biology and that there was an element of memorization involved in being in the programme, and staff gave similar responses; these issues were not explored further as the focus was the "gap."

There were significant mismatches in the *attitudes to learning*, *understanding of the field* and the *literacy skills* that lecturers expected students to display. Even though students conveyed some understanding of these themes, it was not the same understanding that lecturers expected from them. What follows is a brief summary of the findings of differences under the themes: *attitude to learning*, *literacy* and *understanding of the field*.

Table 1: Patterns and themes of student and staff understanding of Nature Conservation

Questions	Lecturer patterns	Themes	Student patterns
What is learning in Nature Conservation?	Enthusiasm and passion/Desires to be in the field/Is curious/ Takes responsibility/ Persistent/Resilient/Goal driven/Ability to work in groups/Committed/Inquisitive/ Assertive/Takes initiative/ Works independently	Attitude to learning	Focus on studying in the field and resisting peer pressure/Need time and special attention on subjects/Independent learning/Unwillingness to engage discuss in class/Learning can be alienating
	Ability to draw/Express themselves orally or in writing/ Write and listen at the same time/Take notes even though they are given certain notes/Numeric proficiency/Basic comprehension and interest in reading/Writing skills/ Computer literate/Read widely/Expand on knowledge received/Express themselves/Make arguments/Ability to discuss things and communicate/Ability to defend their point of view/Need to engage with their work	General university literacy	Read and understand notes/ Note taking/ Summary writing/Reading/Referencing
	Have own opinion on topics/Scientifically minded (analyse, be accurate, be able to discern between things, subtle differences/ observant)/Interpretation of knowledge/Understand the world around them, a kind of ecological awareness/Should be aware of the linkages between different things/Apply it in their own context (does it make sense in their world?)/Initiative to immerse themselves in the field (volunteering)	Discipline-specific literacy	Act like a scientist/Different way of thinking/ Research and observe/Scientific and formal writing/Specific presentation of knowledge/ Critical thinking/Knowledge of scientific concepts/Live what you study
	Good grounding in biology/Rote learning in first year (basic concepts and terms that need to be learnt) necessary to use field guide book	Knowledge for the course	Knowledge of history, law, etc./Laboratory skills/Knowledge of basics/Strong biology foundation/Keep up with current research and events
What is Nature Conservation?	Conservation and protection of natural resources: flora, fauna, soil, water/Management of people and natural resources/ Office based/Hard, manual labour	Understanding of the field	Love of animals/Love of the outdoors/Love of science/Curiosity/Desire to learn more/ Discover new things/Easy to grasp/Easy to understand/Make a difference/Protect animals/ Nature is important/significant/Educating others/Protect environment/Desire to work with community/Be somebody

A comparison of attitude to learning

The lecturers' expectation was to have students who were active, participated, negotiated and learnt practices; however, this was possibly not made overtly clear to students. Lecturers expected students to read beyond what they had been instructed to read in lectures and contended that students needed to construct a deeper understanding of academic knowledge and skills by themselves. Lecturers further elaborated on this point:

> They need to be interested – you know in what is happening around them … if they look out they can see an animal or plant whatever it is and understand. They need to have that curious eye for what's happening ... enquiring … be independent … open to arguing without quarrelling … have a can-do-attitude … be persistent … resilient and be assertive. (Lecturer 2)

> [They should] be curious, learn independently … should have a love of the outdoors as their job requirements would require them to be outdoors. (Lecturer 3)

These were dispositions (enquiring and open to argument) and qualities (independent, resilient, assertive, can-do attitude) that lecturers wanted students to have. Students, on the other hand, generally took a more technical view of "working hard". For example, one student believed that working hard meant to "do all your assignments and work". Furthermore, students expressed the belief that "resisting peer pressure" and "taking time and special attention on subjects" were necessary attitudes for successful learning.

A comparison of general university literacy

Students generally understand that they are required to take notes while in class and that they are also expected to go over their notes:

> She just gave us work the first day, lots of notes and we took it, she said you must study your work, you must study your work and then she gave us an introduction to the course it was fine ... (Student 2)

The lecturers' views on notes are somewhat different. There is an expectation that even though students need to pay attention and listen during lectures, they need to make additional notes, even though the lecturer might not indicate this. Students entering higher education may not have previously dealt with taking additional notes and therefore may be at a considerable loss in the new educational setting. Without proper instruction in ways of behaving, such as note taking, but also regular re-reading and review, students may lag behind in their learning. At the same time, lecturers may view this difficulty as something students should just know and their inability to exhibit it as a deficiency:

> … take additional notes – which – by the way, I've noticed – students can't do anymore – generally – they cannot listen and write at the same time ... not just read through the notes but someone who goes to the library, picks out some relevant books, which we have given them the titles of – and does some further reading ... (Lecturer 1)

A comparison of discipline-specific literacy

Students understood that the course involved reading, although they struggled with the scientific concepts specific to the programme. Students also noted that even though these are issues that they struggle with, they are still expected to work on their own and develop opinions on the topics:

> It is a very hard course to study especially if you don't like reading too much ... the language and some subjects are difficult … because you don't actually understand; you must do it by yourself and use your own opinion so that they can know that you understand the work. (Student 2)

The issue of forming opinions about reading material could pose a problem to students, as the topics that they are required to read about on their own are topics that may be unfamiliar to them. The fact that they are reading these topics on their own may not allow for links to be made or the relevance to be gathered. Lecturers may not realise that they need to familiarise students with reading practices and also show them the relevance of the topic, and that this needs to be done in a structured manner.

Lecturer 1 elaborates that the reading that she requires from students goes beyond notes, textbooks, or recommended reading provided by academics, as it requires students to read in the field to keep abreast of current events and research. Although this lecturer would make overt the expectations that she had of students, there is also the expectation that students, once shown, would then carry on independently. She also shows that not only does she require students to explore their field further via reading, but also to develop ways of thinking about the topic and positioning themselves with regard to the topic. Lecturer 1 had tried inducting students into developing an appropriate reading practice, but at the same time she felt that once students were shown this, she expected them to do this independently, as illustrated here:

> … get them to actually read … I used to make them find newspaper articles on environmentally related topics of their choice, and they would then have to summarise it and give their opinions ... I would like a student to actually have his or her own opinion about an environmental topic – but to have your own opinion, you have to have some knowledge and therefore you have to read – you can't formulate it … (Lecturer 1)

Furthermore, it appears that even though students may be given guidance in the form of, for example, handouts, they are not always aware of what the field involves:

> ... our lecturers will tell us, ok, this is how you are supposed to do it and they give us handouts, guidelines to follow ... With that kind of subject, it is kind of vague really, we never really get the whole this is what's expected from the subject (Student 2).

A comparison of understanding of the field

Lecturers were asked to explain their perceptions of Nature Conservation to gauge whether students' choice to pursue studies in the programme were concomitant with what the occupation entailed. They highlighted the fact that the field of Nature Conservation could be divided into conservation, management and specific work practices. The lecturers felt that students were not clear on what the field of study entailed.

Some students expressed a desire to pursue studies in this field because of their "love of animals and plants" and "love of the outdoors". They also expressed a curiosity and desire to learn and discover new things, as well as a love for science. They also felt a sense of social responsibility as they commented on wanting to contribute to the world by developing themselves through studying in the field, as providing a platform to make a change. This was also displayed through a particular understanding of environmental responsibility, for example a desire to "look after plants and animals". However, this is not necessarily what the programme is about, since the role of a nature conservation officer is, according to lecturers, often more concerned with management in order to control animal and plant populations, as well as the impact of human activity on the natural environment:

> Nature Conservation is sustainable use. It's not preserving plants and animals. It is sustainable use, i.e. careful use and also conservation. Now preservation means in the strict sense of the word that you don't use it and we definitely use fauna and flora, soil and water for all mankind but also for the good of nature. So, it's not abuse or overuse or exploitation. It's sustainable use. But it goes beyond fauna and flora because it's also soil and water. One can put air in as well, then you have the five components. (Lecturer 3)

Lecturers felt that students did not have a proper understanding of what the programme entailed and only discovered this much later when out in the field. This is perhaps what lecturers need to acknowledge and directly share and engagingly teach to students from the outset.

Discussion

Boughey (2013) has outlined that the concept of discourse is very similar to what has become known as literacy in South Africa, as both concepts cover socially constructed formations of knowledge. Furthermore, discourses are necessarily different between school and higher education institutions as these are different institutions. This is apparent from the mismatches revealed in this study. According to Clark and Linder (2006), students newly entering higher education are often only familiar with an institutional discourse that they have acquired through school and, as such, may feel that replicating previous behaviour and thought in the new discourse is correct.

The areas in which there were more apparent mismatches were across the themes of *literacy*, *attitude to learning*, and *understanding of the field*. In terms of literacy, students knew that they had to display aspects of the literacy practices in higher education, but they did not display them as well as lecturers expected. Lecturers focused on the fact that students

did not read enough or lacked a desire to read in the field, especially when it did not form part of lecturers' instruction, which was necessary in order to keep updated about the field. Students stated that taking notes is important but lecturers feel that students do not know how to take notes properly. It may be suggested that students adopt a literacy skills model (Lea & Street, 2006) rather than enculturation to the field of study, which is what lecturers appear to want.

The theme of attitude to learning revealed that students and lecturers had completely different viewpoints. Lecturers were clear on the characteristics they wished students would display, while students were more focused on the fact that higher education required them to commit more of their time to their studies. Lecturers felt that students need to take "initiative" for their own learning or development and, significantly not be overtly passive but take positions and offer opinions. Lecturers felt that students need to be more independent as they would have to work independently in the field. Students were thus expected by lecturers to be more assertive and committed, while students generally felt that having a good attitude to learning meant resisting peer pressure and a focus on studying.

In terms of knowledge of the field, students mainly attached emotive reasons for studying nature conservation whereas lecturers felt that the role of nature conservation involved more than having affinities for flora and fauna, and that students did not fully comprehend what their studies entailed.

Concluding remarks

Addressing the issue of improving the throughput of disadvantaged students involves addressing some of the gaps between students' understandings of university learning and what the university requires of them. Doing this could involve attention from academics to the enculturation model for literacy, in which university and programme practices are understood as distinct from students' prior experiences.

One interesting example of how to teach university discourses overtly in ECP science involves students in conducting home-based experiments with familiar materials and settings, but with a strong focus on scientific methodology, reasoning and argument (Ellery, 2011). Through doing these experiments in a structured and guided manner, Ellery claims that students can be effectively supported in moving between already held discourses to science-based ways of thinking that are appropriate for university study.

However, there are differences, too, in what was referred to as attitudes and knowledge of the field. These may also, in part, fit well with Lea and Street's (2006) enculturation model for literacy and speak to issues of identity as a Nature Conservationist and making meaning within the field of study, or what the authors refer to as academic literacy. The latter can particularly be seen where lecturers expect students to give opinions on conservation issues, a point that students also recognise but are not necessarily able to undertake.

In the more vocational field of Nature Conservation, an example of a task that could support the development of academic literacy can be related to the important course outcome to "demonstrate and apply knowledge of human influence on the ecosystem". Students could, for example, assess how residents in their area affect the ecosystem, whether

it is the dumping of waste or even the beneficial impact that recycling initiatives could have. Tasks such as these would be familiar and relevant to students and encourage them to engage with the disciplinary practices of Nature Conservation while, at the same time, being supported by lecturers. Furthermore, such tasks would involve students in making meaning, giving opinions, and even the exercise of authority (such local situations would not necessarily be known by lecturers); such tasks would constitute the appropriate representation of disciplinary knowledge within an academic literacies model.

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