Teaching Political Science to first-year university students: Challenging 'taxi-rank analysis'

PENELOPE NIVEN
Rhodes University

This paper explores the situated nature of the epistemological values of a social science discipline as it finds expression in a particular department. Although it explores Becher and Trowler's anthropological conception of disciplinary 'territories' and 'tribes' ([1989]/2001) it finds deeper resonances in Trowler's more recent notion of 'teaching and learning regimes' (2009). It begins to identify some of the regimes that characterise one Political Science department but discovers that these are unstable and diverse, suggesting that, in practice, there are very few unifying 'tribal' values or uncontested 'territorial' practices at work in this context.

The study offers these observations on the basis of an ethnographic account of one intellectual community doing the work of inducting first-year students into a new discipline. It has a particular focus on lecturers' perceptions of the resources and capabilities of beginning students, describing some of the lecturers' frustrations with early students' literacy practices. These are metaphorically represented by the idea of 'taxi rank analysis', that is, many new students' tendency to emotive opinions based in experiential, local knowledge rather than the more guarded, grounded analyses of academic Political Science. Finally, the study considers some of the implications these descriptions could have for more responsive teaching and learning regimes in the social sciences. Some examples are offered in the departmental narratives recorded in this study.

Keywords: Academic literacies; epistemology; disciplinary tribes and territories; teaching and learning regimes; teaching the social sciences

Introduction

Students entering universities for the first time encounter the phenomenon of disciplinarity in a much stronger form than they have experienced at school. While they may have been aware of the varying literacy expectations of different school 'subjects' these were probably neither articulated nor understood as significant. Yet the values and practices of different disciplines in universities are widely divergent and many beginner students need help in making sense of these variations. In Humanities faculties, students meet 'new' disciplines (such as Psychology, Philosophy or Political Science) for which they often have only the most reductionist or populist notions. Little in their school experiences can have prepared them for the specialised ways of knowing, thinking or practising that they encounter in disciplines such as these. This paper addresses this issue in relation to Political Science.

I will argue that many novice students' predilection for 'taxi rank analysis' can set up *both* opportunities *and* constraints in the induction phases of this particular discipline: it is not an entirely negative student attribute. This paper uses this term metaphorically to represent the kinds of emotive language based in everyday experience that students in the social sciences tend to bring to the study of newly encountered disciplines. The term was coined by one of the Political Science lecturers in this study, and he used it to refer to entrenched, unsubstantiated views about current political issues or events often passionately shared in casual community contexts, such as when travelling in a taxi or waiting at taxi ranks. In South Africa the taxi is the major means of public transport for many working-class people but every social group has its own version of such discourses based, for example, around the pub, the gym, the village pump or the Sunday 'braai'.

As a researcher in the field of Academic Development, I am an 'outsider' in the discipline of Politics but with a professional interest in what happens on the 'inside' of the teaching and learning of various Humanities disciplines (Jacobs, 2005). For some years I was the coordinator of an Extended Studies programme which facilitated novice students' access to various disciplines in the Humanities. This role generated a series of small-scale, action research-based projects of which this paper is the most recent. These research papers have now been incorporated into a PhD study which explores the meta-theoretical orientations of those, like me, who conduct close-up research into the teaching, learning and assessment (TLA) of beginner students and how such orientations have influenced the nature and impact of the knowledge claims that we can make.

The data for this study were mostly collected during 2009 for a study that was to explore the conflict of epistemological values between students and their lecturers in a first-level Political Science module. In practice, however, I soon discovered that I could not do justice to both communities in a single paper and therefore focused my attention on the students alone and wrote 'Intersecting epistemologies: First-year students' knowledge discourses in a Political Science module' (Niven, 2011). This earlier paper identified elements in a group of students' social epistemologies and argued that it is in the intersection of social and disciplinary ways of knowing that student access to academic discourses can be lost or gained. I turn now to the data that concern the *teaching* and *teachers* of Political Science in an attempt to understand how lecturers conceptualise the epistemology of their discipline, whether they share common values or approaches to TLA, how they view the learning resources of new students, and how these ideas, often unconsciously held, play out in particular kinds of curricular decisions and pedagogies.

Using another concept from anthropology, in this paper I understand myself as 'studying up' (Nader, 1972). This means that *the researched* have considerably more 'social' and 'symbolic capital' (Bourdieu, 1986) than *the researcher* in a given research environment. Nader (1972:283) writes: "There is a certain urgency to the kind of anthropology that is concerned with power, for the quality of ... our lives may depend on the extent to which [we] understand those who shape attitudes and control institutional structures". Students need to be able to decode and articulate the implicit knowledge assumptions underlying new disciplines and their experts. I understand one of the roles of Academic Development researchers as initiating this process of articulation on behalf of those who seek access to the social and symbolic capital of disciplinary membership.

Anthropological understandings of university literacies

The central purpose of this paper, therefore, is to develop rich, ethnographic descriptions of a community of political scientists who are inducting newcomers into the cultural ways of knowing that inform their discipline, thereby drawing some insights into the complex processes of 'epistemological access' (Morrow, 1993:3). In an attempt to unpack the nature of a disciplinary culture, I started out by using Becher's ideas of 'academic territories' (the content areas of disciplines) inhabited by 'tribes' (the practitioners within the disciplines) (Becher and Trowler, [1989]/2001). However, Trowler's later work has advanced these conceptions and avoided the potential for 'epistemological essentialism' (2009) which is implied in Becher's ([1989]/2001) earlier analyses of the knowledge characteristics of disciplines along two axes – 'hard/pure' 'soft/pure' or 'hard/applied' and 'soft/applied'. Instead Trowler (2009) has advanced the more nuanced idea of Teaching and Learning Regimes (TLRs) to represent the complexity and range of underlying values and assumptions that are at work in disciplinary environments. These regimes include eight dynamic and interrelated aspects[1]: tacit assumptions; implicit theories (of TLA); recurrent practices; conventions of appropriateness; codes of signification; discursive repertoires; subjectivities in interaction and power relations. TLRs enable an analysis of the unique configurations of approaches that are contingent on particular disciplinary or departmental environments.

An academic literacies understanding of learning in higher education also has an anthropological bias because it understands literacies as cultural phenomena (e.g., Street, 1993; Baynham, 1995; Barton, 2000). Ways of using reading and writing are particular to socio-cultural communities – including disciplinary communities. Thus, 'academic literacy', far from being a generic phenomenon, needs to be understood as

"complex, contested, specific and ... contextualised" (Haggis, 2003:100). It is not a single, unitary concept but each discipline has its own "… peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding and arguing that define the discourse of [the] community" (Bartholomae, 1985:134). So teaching any discipline, especially in the early phases, involves being explicit about the values, knowledge frameworks and normative practices that carry these specialised ways of knowing. Yet there are also *community* or *social* ways of knowing that accompany students as they enter the academy and lecturers need to be aware of these as well. They need to be conscious of potential areas of tension or conflict between different kinds of epistemologies, both social and disciplinary.

In an Academic Literacies Model, learning is 'an apprenticeship'; it needs "a number of years to develop"; "new forms of expression will need to be explicitly modelled and explored" and this can only occur "within the teaching of the subject" (Haggis, 2003:101). Lecturers are *experts* who induct *novices* – the undergraduate students. So the literacy expectations of disciplines cannot be prepared beforehand at schools, or on Access or Foundation courses through the teaching of generic, transferable skills. They are best taught by the 'tribal' specialists *in situ* and in practice, from within disciplinary 'territories'.

Northedge and McArthur (2009:113) have extended the idea of learning as situated apprenticeship. They explain that "[t]he route to construing unfamiliar meaning is not through formal, logical steps but through experience of participating in the flow of meaning making within relevant discursive contexts" (2009:113). It is about "becoming immersed in the ways of thinking and knowing of a knowledge community" and "learning to partake in its trade in knowledge" (*ibid*). They avoid the much-used metaphor of 'scaffolding' learning for students, seeing it as an 'arm's length' concept (2009:124). Rather they see learning as students and teachers "diving into the turbulent waters of the disciplinary discourse community together" (*ibid*) and entering into "acts of shared meaning making" (2009:113). Furthermore, Northedge and McArthur understand learning in higher education as essentially comprising both 'outer aspects' (the intellectual-cognitive dimension that privileges the discipline and its discourses) and 'inner aspects' (which emphasise personal-social conceptions of learning – a more constructivist notion) (2009:107). They argue that *both* aspects are necessary for successful learning.

Collecting and analysing the data

I gathered data from a range of different sources during 2009 and into early 2010. First, I conducted extended, semi-structured conversations with five of the lecturers involved in the curriculum design and/or practical teaching of first-year Political Science, including an interview with the head of department. I taped and later transcribed all five conversations. I also collected a number of documents: the 'Introduction to Political Science' tutorial book that assigns readings and short written assignments; copies of the first and second essay assignments for the semester; a copy of one lecturer's teaching portfolio in which she sets out her teaching philosophy; a record of an email conversation between a lecturer and the subject librarian responsible for Political Science; finally, a departmental flyer that introduces the discipline to newcomers. I will represent the lecturers as follows: 'G' is the head of department – The General; 'M' is a senior lecturer – The Mother; 'DS 1' and 'DS 2' were PhD/doctoral students who also teach in the department, and 'NL' was a young, junior lecturer – New Lecturer – who assumed the running of the first-semester modules during 2009.

I analysed the data with regard to the theories and models briefly outlined in the section above. So I sought out evidence for the territorial or tribal nature of this discipline and department (Becher & Trowler, [1989]/2001); I attempted to identify particular TRLs in the department (Trowler, 2009); I adopted an academic literacies perspective on learning as situated apprenticeship (Haggis, 2003; Northedge & McArthur, 2009) and observed the lecturers adopting their expert roles. I mapped their approaches against Northedge and McArthur's (2009:110) analysis of teaching in HE as emphasising either *outer* or *inner* aspects of learning.

The lecturers in the study have checked and responded to transcripts of their interviews and read earlier versions of this paper, some responding fully to claims or observations that I have made. I have

incorporated their ideas and comments into the final version of this paper and they have kindly provided written permission for me to offer this paper for publication.

The 'territory' of Politics 101

The course to which this study refers is Politics 101, a module specifically designed during the mid-1990s as an introduction to the discipline. The 'territory' is, firstly, some of the *basic ideas, concepts, institutions and processes in Political Science* (Department of Politics [DP] Flyer, 2009) in which the students are introduced to concepts such as 'government', 'democracy', 'constitution', 'legitimacy' or 'ideology'. This is followed by four country case studies – India, South Africa, Nigeria and Britain – in which basic forms of government of each are compared and contrasted. The traditional expectation during this first semester is that the students write two essays of about 1 500 words each, and three shorter tutorial assignments each of about 500 words. The tutorial assignments are based on full-length academic articles which analyse the political structures of the four countries above. The longer essays are expected to refer to between six to eight reputable academic sources, all of which need to be located by the students, although in 2009 some recommended texts were on 'short loan' in the library. The first essay is 'guided' in the sense that it is broken down into three sections: *1. Define and discuss the concept of democracy; 2. Distinguish between liberal and social models of democracy and 3. Appraise the problems of democracy in any one African country (excluding Nigeria, South Africa and Zimbabwe) since 1990* (DP, 2009:Essay 1). The second essay asked students to *Critically assess the challenges to federalism and democracy in India* or *Critically examine the contributions of civil society organisations and the mass media to the restoration of electoral democracy in 1999 in Nigeria and the role they have played in democratic consolidation since then* (DP, 2009: Essay 2).

Roughly, this was the curriculum in 2009. However, this territory is shifting. During 2009 the first essay was being replaced by a Multiple Choice Question (MCQ) test and much shorter, mediated pieces of writing. The new, young lecturer in the department (NL) was challenging the values and content of this curriculum, believing that it should have a stronger theoretical and philosophical base. He claimed that *[The current course] doesn't ground [the students] enough – we need to look at classic readings and figures – like Plato, Machiavelli, JS Mill, Rousseau. This course emphasises democracy, although this is not explicit.* My impression was that he understood the curriculum he had inherited as a rather tired, idealistic model developed during the period of the newly established democracy in South Africa. He claims that students are now *smarter, better prepared, have better English and have more political knowledge ... the ways of learning have changed, and we need to adapt.* So at the beginning of 2012 the department was discussing the redesign of the curriculum to give it a stronger theoretical orientation and the modes of assessment were being reconceived too.

Northedge and McArthur (2009) describe a traditional 'Oxbridge' model of teaching and learning which assumes that students will 'read' subjects for themselves. Students are assumed to have enough background knowledge in the discipline to acquire new content knowledge they encounter: university teachers can assume their students' independence. Similarly, an 'implicit assumption' (Trowler, 2009) of this department appears to be that students are competent enough, firstly, to locate suitable reading materials for their essays, then to understand and appropriate the readings, to use them in arguments and, finally, to be able to critique or appraise the value of such sources.

Yet the quietly desperate tone of the following email conversation in March 2009 between the subject librarian and DS 1 shows that the above is probably an unrealistic assumption. The librarian writes: *Your students are dribbling into our offices in the library – many of them don't know where to even begin with the essay .... Can we not arrange a session to teach them how to find journal articles, newspaper articles and books?* The lecturer replies: *We have 315 students in this class, with 17 groups of 15–17 students per group. I suppose organising [library] sessions for them will be a logistical nightmare. If we decide to run a session for each group, we will have to do it 17 times. I am not sure how to go about this. Any ideas?* The librarian responds: *The problem is the essay deadline which is sometime next week ...* . Nevertheless they organised classes on basic information searches for 315 students during the course of a week, showing

remarkable professional dedication. However, this does appear to be an 'ad hoc' response to the realities of students' actual capabilities at least in the use of information resources.

The political scientists: The 'tribes'

As I came to study this department, my initial response was to problematise Becher's original concept of 'academic tribes'. This community of lecturers brought such a variety of language and cultural backgrounds, life histories, prior educational and teaching experiences, ages, political views and approaches to the teaching of Politics that there appeared to be no characteristic 'tribal culture' that I could identify. Pace (2009:96) claims that "a host of personal factors mediate between the patterns of a discipline and their expression in a particular situation". However, Pace's claim was challenged by one of the lecturers in this study: a department sets parameters within which lecturers operate regardless of their personal views or backgrounds: *There is an institutional and procedural ethos to which we defer* (DS 2). Thus, my observations regarding the inherent diversity of this 'tribe' of disciplinary experts remains an open, unresolved question. This lecturer is claiming that whatever his personal inclinations or individual history might be, these would be set aside in deference to an 'institutional ethos'.

The head of department is a middle-aged, West African man most of whose tertiary education had been in 'ivy league' American universities. He has held the post of head of department since the mid 1990s and his position of leadership and strong personality exert a powerful influence on the departmental culture. The students and junior departmental members seem in awe of him and his nickname is 'The General' (G) and although this is respectful and affectionate, it is suggestive of hierarchical 'power relationships' in this context.

The curriculum territory of the module was mostly designed and taught for many years by a white, Zimbabwean woman, now in her late 50s, and although she no longer teaches it, it bears her imprint. She was an undergraduate at a South African university in the 1970s and her postgraduate studies and early academic teaching experience occurred in an embattled, crisis-ridden ex-Rhodesia where she was taken on by the local university as a 'temporary teaching assistant'. She later taught Politics in the United Kingdom and was appointed to her current post in South Africa in the mid-1990s. I have quoted from her teaching portfolio in this study. She is represented as 'mothering' the students. As a feminist it is perhaps surprisingly that she is tolerant of the label: *If the students are comfortable with that label, if it is enabling ... then there is nothing wrong with it ... We are caught up in a gendered matrix ... Students turn things into a family situation and [they] need fathers and mothers ... [I] leave it as it is ... You have 'The General' at one end of the system and 'The Mother' at the other – I guess we balance each other out. It's important that staff operate together ... the system works.* Since she accepts this construction, and understands it as enabling, I will refer to her as M.

Two PhD students from a West African country were responsible for the teaching of the Politics 101 curriculum in 2009. Both were graduates of universities in their home countries but had come to South Africa to complete their doctoral studies. Their sensitivity towards the institutional culture of a South African university, highlighted by the comparisons they were able to make with their home universities, provided illuminating perspectives. I will refer to them as DS 1 and DS 2 (Doctoral Students 1 and 2). DS 1 coined the term 'taxi-rank analysis'. He explains: *Everyone ... has an opinion about virtually every political issue ... even one who has never been to school. Whether they can substantiate their views or offer coherent/logical/factual premises to support such views is a different question. They make arguments from the heart (characterised by emotion) rather than the head (characterised by a reasoned approach). I paint a scenario of a taxi rank ... where one might find people arguing and holding on to entrenched opinions but they are not thinking carefully and close their minds to alternative, perhaps valid, explanations. I do not use this analogy to stifle personal views ... In fact I encourage students to contribute to class discussions but I follow any views with the 'why' question ... .*[2]

In mid-2009 a new member of the department (NL) was appointed and he took over the teaching of Politics 101 in 2010. He is a young, black South African man in the first years of his academic career, but all his post- and undergraduate studies were in the university department and institution in which he is

now employed. His school and family background had not prepared him for university study. He explained that *I knew no one who had been to a university, absolutely no one, not even the teachers ... I was a 'walk-in' student. I walked in to the university and said I wanted to come.* His reflections on the introductory curriculum as the lecturer in 2010 and as a novice student himself in 2001 also provided another set of fascinating perspectives.

The roles of both metaphorical 'Generals' and 'Mothers' in inducting new members into a learning community align with Northedge and McArthur's model of teaching as fundamentally focused on either outer (discipline-centred) or inner (learner-centred) aspects of learning. These approaches initially appeared to be incompatible and inherently contradictory and I speculated on how early students might make sense of such divergence. Yet Northedge and McArthur argue that *both* aspects are necessary for effective learning. For example, lecturers need to be a primary source of disciplinary knowledge – an outer aspect – but, at the same time, hold back, to provide students with spaces to learn in their own ways – an inner aspect. Similarly, lecturers need to gain insights into the minds and lives of their students – an inner aspect – but they also need to keep up with recent developments in their discipline – an outer aspect. Again, they need to set the necessary disciplinary standards while, at the same time, encourage students in their own interim understandings and connections. So the students need to acquire "*a disciplinary voice* ... but also retain and develop their own voices" (Northedge & McArthur, 2009:119).

Thus, I began to conceive of the department as sustaining the interplay of inner and outer aspects of learning, albeit in a delicate balance represented by two senior departmental figures in this case. Each were privileging different aspects of the learning process but there seemed to be a fundamental complementarity along the lines of a traditional family system. New students may well have an intuitive grasp of this system, easily transferring it into a learning domain, and it is possible that they did not experience it as confusing or contradictory at all.

Teaching and Learning Regimes

There seemed to be various 'tacit theories' (Trowler, 2009) about the nature of new students and their resources for learning or gathering information. G's theory, however, was not at all tacit (and indeed not uncommon): *Students have been socialised like kindergarten children. They have no understanding of what it would take to make them successful. I blame the schools. They come with certain behaviours that are in conflict with university learning ... they don't know how to behave appropriately.* DS 1 contrasted new South African students with his own student experiences in West Africa in the late 1990s: *You could have power cuts for days so no access to computers, no up-to-date journals. We had to rely on books, sometimes outdated. We didn't have tutors or mentors that supported us ... they didn't listen to our stories. There was no 'spoon-feeding'. We had to exert ourselves to survive the system.* [However] ... *There were surprisingly few drop-outs ... The environment was so competitive that getting a place at university was a privilege. The social life was nil, zero, we buried ourselves in work.* Set against this account, South African students present as dependent, disempowered, unsure of how to participate in the "flow of meaning making" or how to "dive in to the turbulent waters of a new discipline" (Northedge & McArthur, 2009) – nor how, even, they might 'compete' or 'bury themselves in work' in the new context.

One example was seen in students' use of consultation times – a formal, well-established 'recurrent practice' in this department. New students tend to misuse this practice, understanding these times as sites for *querying assignment marks even when they have not taken time to read the formative feedback provided on their marked assignments* (DS 1). Regarding students' office visits, G says: *They come to consult me ... but don't write anything down. They ask for clarification two or three times but don't write – they come without pen or paper.* Thus, the students and lecturers find themselves in conflict with departmental 'conventions of appropriateness' (Trowler 2009). Boughey (2006) records a similar frustration: a student knocks tentatively on her office door, requesting a personal, face-to-face explanation for instructions already clearly written down on a notice board outside. She interprets this in terms of an orientation to oral learning grounded in prior educational experiences.

However, the earlier paper in which I explore beginner students' epistemological values (Niven, 2011) suggests that there is very little in many students' prior learning experiences that can prepare them for the appropriate conventions at work in university settings – even in such issues as the proper uses or meanings of consultation times or notice boards which may have served rather different purposes in school contexts. When lecturers are strained by students' violations of the conventions, they reach for resources in their own 'discursive repertoires': students must not be *spoon-fed ... we must not spoil them ... or they will not develop the necessary coping skills* (NL).

Yet an alternative construction of new students is expressed by M. She claims in her teaching portfolio that one of the controlling ideas of her professional practice is the idea of the teacher as *primus inter pares*[3]. She writes: *It has been my experience that I can learn as much from my students as they can learn from me,* and *I make approachability one of the top priorities as a teacher*. G wants to *unscramble* or *tease* students' knowledge, almost suggesting a necessary destabilisation of first-year students' ways of knowing possibly in the Vygotskian sense of removing "fossils of old learning" (Miller, 1989:158). But M's discourse is different: *If I look at my course evaluations and I see responses that speak of discomfort or alienation I feel I have failed.* One feels that discomfort is part of the learning process while the other thinks that students must feel comfortable if they are to learn successfully.

Although M agrees that new students are bad at *ordinary hard work* and *unwilling to put in the necessary effort* as a Marxist she interprets these behaviours in terms of a capitalist ethos. *Competition is necessary to survive and many students are not yet in a position where they can compete ... Competition implies hard work which is a scary thing to do because it invites you to fail if you come from a disadvantaged background. The project is just too overwhelming ... they are despairing ... and then they find ways around it such as plagiarising from Wikipedia. It's not just laziness or inherent ineptitude.* M's interpretation of students' 'subjectivities in interaction' (Trowler, 2009) also emanates from her Marxist outlook: *The objective factor is always class ... not race. Race is subjective, temporary, short-term, abnormal. In the post-apartheid era class kicks in but students hang on to their subjectivities – race.* In Marxist terms, she suggests, black students *belong to two broad class categories – those who have been to either private or ex-Model C schools and those who have been through historically disadvantaged schools – but they are still bound together by the subjectivity of race. Students from rural backgrounds try and recreate their cultural ground in inappropriate settings.* [Yet] *... from any culture there are some very enabling, knowledge-grasping elements, as well as the opposite, so when you know what you are dealing with you know what to appeal to.*

Thus, her disciplinary training in Marxism helps her make sense of why novice students present as they do. The final comment in M's analysis above suggests a pedagogical way forward: *Lecturers need to identify and use the epistemological resources that students' various class and cultural backgrounds can yield and make deliberate use of these as resources for building new kinds of cultural networks and values that more closely resemble those of the academic territory of Political Science.*

Knowledge-grasping elements

I turn now to identifying some of the *knowledge-grasping elements* that are available to beginner students in Political Science. For example, the lecturers generally agreed that many students are willing to *vocalise ... they have got good oral skills*. They *challenge what you are saying. [Their claims] might not be well-grounded ... and be based on something they have read in the papers, or something someone told them once. We have heated debates ... I see some strongly entrenched positions, they get emotional, they use ideas from their communities or townships.* But, in a particularly important comment, I observed that DS 1 was deliberately working with these discourses to introduce a new epistemological stance: *I tell [the students] if you proceed on the basis of assumptions you have already got, it doesn't make you any different from the man at the taxi rank who has [also] got an opinion about something. But I don't want taxi rank analysis. We do have ways of testing what we say. You need to change your opinions when reason demands that you do so.* So rather than mocking 'taxi-rank analysis' he uses its creative potential as a *knowledge-grasping element.* M describes this as *the tricky part of teaching Political Science. We*

have to take what they think they know, for example, about political parties ... and reconfigure it in the language of political analysis rather in the language of ordinary conversation. Undergraduate lecturers need to consciously model the ways in which this could be done: how students' everyday experiences of the political and social world can be reconfigured into the formal discourses of a social science. But such a complex reconfiguration needs time, opportunities for practice, frequent immersion, comfort and encouragement as well as discomfort and challenge.

Another area in which this reconfiguration is required is in the links students tend to make between the academic discipline of Political Science and urgent issues of practical social justice. This can also be frustrating for lecturers: *Students think that Politics is to do with corruption ... or parliament, or elected officials, or elections, or about us all having jobs ... no, no, no!* (NL). Yet, ironically, I observed the lecturers themselves making similar links at times. DS 1 explained, for example: *I want them [the students] to link the concepts we teach with real-life events ... If they can go home and explain to the little ones, 'this is an election', 'we have parties, proportional representation', 'this is our system in South Africa ... we did this in our Politics class' ... that is what I want them to be able to do.* G too affirms Political Science's links with the practice of ethical citizenship: *I want them to be engaged, they can be part of a citizenship of the world – not to be great peacemakers, but their lives can contribute. They need to understand each other as human beings, engage with foreign students, respect refugees.* So the moral content and humanitarian implications of practical 'politics' cannot, it seems, be entirely separable from academic 'Political Science'. But this too could work advantageously in the teaching of the discipline: just as 'taxi rank analysis' need not be learning constraint, so a personal passion for justice and equity could be gradually reconfigured into discourses of rational, independent critique.

Concluding remarks

Teaching Political Science is a subtle balance between a range of competing discursive regimes – a complex array of those of students, the lecturers and of the discipline itself and none of these, in themselves, is uncontested or predictable. In this study I have observed lecturers making some wise and fruitful links across these discursive boundaries thereby facilitating beginners' access into new disciplinary territory. The toughness of the disciplinary expectations were, at times, mediated by discourses of support and nurture and there was often explicit help for acquisition of new kinds of literacies or values. The students were not always understood as hopelessly underprepared – there were other, competing discourses at work in the department in which the students were conceived as bearing certain kinds of capital that could be generative during the long processes of disciplinary induction.

This department was certainly not a 'tribe': there were dramatic divergences of approach, attitudes and values. I could not observe an agreed disciplinary 'territory' nor a clear, unitary epistemic order. In fact, these issues seemed to be in flux: the divergences sometimes worked harmoniously, sometimes conflictually. To make sense of current students and their learning resources, lecturers reached for the perspectives of their own learning histories, but although these offered useful insights, they were not always helpful – the lecturers' learning worlds had been substantially different. Others used their own theoretical training in Political Science to interpret students' learning behaviours. So the application of Marxist frames of class and capital provided a humane interpretation of students' apparent maladjustment to university learning.

The conscious identification of 'knowledge grasping elements' from within students' existing resources was particularly helpful. Thus, 'taxi-rank analysis' was understood as a useful point of departure into the discipline, as was the notion of Political Science's links with issues of practical social justice – although, of course, both ideas needed careful, conscious re-configuring in the context of academic study. Other prior literacies were recognised: students' orientations to oral learning were acknowledged and deemed useful.

Yet, as a disciplinary outsider, I would suggest that lecturers were unrealistic about the students' preparedness for academic reading. Most students, whatever their class or background, come into universities underprepared in this regard and require explicit guidance in the location and appropriate use

of academic reading materials. It was not, in my view, 'spoon-feeding' or 'spoiling' them to offer help with libraries and online searches as in the training offered to the students in 2009: it was excellent, necessary pedagogy and would need to be a part of any effective first-level curriculum.

New students need disciplinary experts who dive into turbulent disciplinary waters alongside them, demonstrating and explaining the particular ways of knowing and being in Political Science. They need many opportunities to observe and practice these 'strange' new ways of reading, speaking, arguing or writing. With this kind of help, they will be granted access to powerful disciplinary membership, but without engaged, expert guidance their dialogues will degenerate into superficial, generic 'chatter' and opportunities for growing personal confidence in new disciplinary identities could be lost to unchallenged 'taxi-rank analysis'.

Endnotes

1 Trowler terms these eight aspects of a disciplinary culture 'moments' (2009) probably to signify their provisional, unstable character.

2 This explanation was provided by the lecturer after he read an earlier draft of this paper. He felt it needed a fuller, more nuanced account of the notion of 'taxi rank analysis'.

3 "The first among equals".

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