THE CENTRALITY OF LEARNER SUPPORT FOR ENHANCED STUDENT PROGRESSION IN OPEN & DISTANCE LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

UNISA’s Academic Literacies provisioning over the past 9 years has served a disembodied interventionist role in learner support, despite the dire need for substantive support, given the Institution’s poor track record of student success. The absence of a clear vision to embed learner support in the mainstream curriculum is likely to relegate academic development practitioners as sub-contractors, further marginalising a vital support function which can be characterised as erratic and incoherent as staff providing this function are on short-term contracts. The paper argues that not only is this practice pedagogically unsound, but it contradicts UNISA’s declared aspiration to be among this country’s top universities, focusing more intently on the quality of teaching and learning (Senate Report, 2010:2). It argues that the need for academic development (AD), particularly for Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institutions is now more dire than ever before and is central to the university’s intention to improve its unsustainable throughput rates. By revisiting some of the theories supporting the need for explicit academic literacies support, the paper contends that rather than devalue its status, the academic development provisioning at UNISA should be significantly up-scaled and institutionalised for optimal impact.

Keywords: Academic literacies, academic development. Epistemological access, pedagogic distance

1. INTRODUCTION

In his address to Senate on 26 August 2006, the Principal of UNISA said, [We face] “even more dire challenges to our aspiration to become “the African university in the service of humanity.’ Our throughput rates are simply disgraceful” (P1). He cited the following drop-out statistics: BSc 80%-90%; BA (Social Science) 85% - 96%; BCom 77% - 87%, noting that “this, by any measure, is a shocking indictment on this university” (p5). He lamented that UNISA was “in danger of ruining whatever academic reputation this university has ever had” (p5). UNISA is therefore complicit in perpetuating the untenable situation where well under 5% of black youth are succeeding in any form of higher education. Seven years since this executive assessment, UNISA’s throughput rate remains intractably low and unsustainable. This paper argues that any prospect of improving this dismal record of student success is likely to be substantially diminished if students continue to be left to their own devices in ameliorating their own under-preparedness, especially in the context of structural inequities that characterise higher education in South Africa.

2. ODL FOR EQUITY AND ACCESS

Given the glaring inequalities in South African society, the high price tag of higher education in campus-based universities, coupled with exclusive admission criteria of most mainstream universities, UNISA has a critical role to play in providing access through its ODL programmes, to those students who would otherwise be excluded from accessing higher education opportunities by conditions beyond their control. However, as articulated by Vincent Tinto (2008), access without support is not opportunity. In the absence of substantive learner support, the country will continue to perpetuate access without success.

One of the key contributors to poor retention and graduation rates is that the systems and resources supporting ODL teaching and learning are premised on the assumption that the university serves the needs of mature adult working students who have the capacity to take responsibility for their learning; are capable of learning alone or in small groups; can learn at their own pace and in their own time; can learn from a variety of learning materials, are active rather than passive learners; need less frequent help from their teachers and
learn from people other than their teachers, (see Letseka & Pitsoe, 2012).

The reality is that the university has long outgrown this idealised caricature, and the demographics of its student population in 2013 are quite different from what they were barely a decade ago. Today, UNISA is attracting young school leavers who cannot secure admission into full-time, campus-based, contact tertiary institutions. The new generation of UNISA students who are typically not in full-time employment spend most of their time in university learning centres studying for their respective courses and modules or participating in class discussions. Given these changing realities, Letseka & Pitsoe, (2012) question whether UNISA understands this new clientele of students correctly and whether it is theoretically defensible to continue to regard this new generation as ODL students, in the purist sense. They note that part of meeting the demands of this new clientele of students, UNISA runs a series of Tutorials, Academic Literacies workshops and Peer Collaborative Learning sessions that can be described as quasi contact interactions (ibid). This means that the taken-for-granted ODL nature of the university poses a major conceptual challenge. While the initial focus of ODL was on distance constraints and approaches that bridge geographical barriers through organizational strategies such as mass production and delivery of learning packages, the changing landscape requires fundamental re-theorization of the ODL model currently on offer.

3. ODL AND PEDAGOGIC DISTANCE

The South African Council on Higher Education (CHE) commissioned study on “Access and Throughput in South African Higher Education: Three Case Studies (2010) advances 3 explanatory factors for unsatisfactory access and throughput. The case studies “examined everyday academic practices and relationships, institutional rules and languages and taken-for-granted assumptions about hegemonic cultural constructs (e.g. ‘race’) as fluid and tentative descriptors of an institutional culture” (P169). The findings generated from the cases may be summarised as follows:

Student-related factors: which include the notion of ‘underpreparedness’ or students not being academically 'strong enough'; issues of students’ prior learning and language skills; students’ approach to learning, and their attitude and expectations; a diminished learning culture or students taking less responsibility for their learning; and issues of the students’ life and other pressures such as personal, social, financial or family matters” (p30).

Staff-related factors: which include “outdated or simply different approaches to pedagogy; the attitudes of academic staff; the skills of academic staff in teaching and assessment practices (also referred to as staff ‘underpreparedness’); pressures on the time and energy of academic staff, and staff being demotivated by changes in the university” (p30).

Systemic factors: which include the “inherent difficulty of some course content; increasing student numbers; resource constraints; too little support for students making the transition from school; a lack of coordination and systematic assessment of various ‘solutions’ that have been attempted, and a lack of recognition for teaching and academic development work that discourages academic staff from putting energy into their teaching duties” (p31).

The CHE case study engages with the theory of “pedagogic distance” which explains the “gap between teaching expectations and learning achievements as a function of separateness or disconnectedness” (p98). It is argued that the distance is not confined to geographic or physical space, but evinces at least five dimensions: “emotional, political, pedagogical, linguistic and physical”, each of which is further explicated in the CHE paper. If pedagogic distance is a crucial feature of higher education in general, then it should be self-evident that the problem facing ODL institutions is, to say the least, profoundly complex requiring creative institutional responses.

It is true that UNISA has seen an unprecedented increase in enrolments, exceeding its targets by more than 13% to 308, 768 headcounts in 2010, and to 387, 656 in 2013 (DISA website) raising a crucial question that the university leadership must answer: In its attempt to provide physical (administrative) access to higher education, which the university should be commended for, is the university providing concomitant epistemological access? The graduation and throughput statistics indicates that the university is in fact failing to provide epistemological access, especially to black learners who continue to bear the bruises of dysfunctional schooling. Therefore, logically, more rather than less, needs to be done to mitigate the deficits of its burgeoning student population. In this context, it is difficult to comprehend why learner support, and in particular support for Academic Literacies development, is being considered a fiscal burden.
and relegated to an optional, marginal support function.

ACADEMIC DEVELOPMENT MITIGATES THE EFFECTS OF DYSFUNCTIONAL SCHOOLING

Academic development has a long history in this country and virtually all institutions invest heavily in mediating the effects of the articulation gap between secondary and higher education, particularly deficits in academic skills and literacies which accelerate dropout. The National Plan for Higher Education makes the point that the, “...role of academic development in improving the efficiency of the higher education system in terms of graduate output is critical” (DoE, 2001: 31). Universities now recognise Academic Development as a resource for institutional efficiency in relation to teaching and learning (see Boughey, 2012). Acknowledging the centrality of this function in improving retention and throughput rates, academic literacies practitioners, who previously held marginal positions, have been absorbed into the mainstream because of their demonstrated role in facilitating epistemological access. An examination of the attendance statistics at academic literacies workshops reveals that these services should be up-scaled rather than downgraded.

The challenges facing UNISA’s capacity to deliver adequate support to its increasing young student population is compounded by the allegations of grade inflation and score-fixing by critics sceptical of the unprecedented increase in overall performance of the Grade 12 national examinations. If these allegations are credible, it suggests that cohorts of matriculants will be further disadvantaged as their nominal scores belie their de-facto capabilities, compounding the continuing lack of equity of outcomes. The skewing in who is benefiting from higher education – along racial and social class lines - is contrary to social justice for individuals and communities, and may well lead to social protest and declining public support for higher education (see Scott, 2012). In the absence of substantive systemic support, the current situation will not serve the interests of students who are gaining administrative access to higher education but are being set up for failure. Invariably, those most likely to fail are black learners who already bear the burden of inadequate schooling.

ACADEMIC LITERACIES AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL ACCESS

Without exception, the literature on access to higher education is replete with research findings which point to the inescapable role of academic literacies in providing access to academic discourses which in turn promote or inhibit access. Using the frame of epistemological access, Mqgwashu (2012) identifies the multiple skill levels students require in reading academic texts, which include accessing textual details, making inferences and drawing conclusions from texts they read. Mqgwashu adds that in the context of higher education, “the expectation goes beyond just these abilities, but includes students’ ability to take a different position derived from values and attitudes related to what counts as knowledge, and how it can be known within various disciplinary discourses” (p 208 ). The problem is considerably more acute for quantitative literacy as is evidenced in the dismal student performance in Mathematics, Science and Technology. Entrusting the development of these crucial skills to subcontractors is another form of band-aid which will fail to heal the much deeper systemic maladies. For instance, Jacobs (2009) has consistently argued that the debates around the synergies between language and content in higher education need to be raised beyond understandings of language as a generic set of skills to be integrated across disciplines in higher education, or language as an instrument of communication; to understandings of language as Discourse and how language embodies and structures the conventions and philosophies of disciplines to provide epistemological access to students.

A critical function of academic literacies practitioners involves inducting students into the social practices, and the values and attitudes which underpin them, which characterize the university. For this to happen, those working within academic development environments must themselves master those social practices. This means that AD workers must be fully-fledged members of the academy who understand the ways knowledge is constructed through reading, writing and speaking (McKenna, 2012). Mainstream academics at ODL institutions have neither the means nor the opportunities to fulfil this lofty expectation, but AD practitioners do; and should be valued for their mastery of both generic and trans-disciplinary and discipline specific skills.

The inextricable link between access, equity, redress and quality has long been a key imperative of Higher Education transformation in South
Africa, requiring a synergy of creative strategies to ensure that

the reconciliation of access (or equity) and quality is a matter of purposive policy, and is something that has been achieved when countries take policy courses where debate and experimentation result in improvements in both access and quality. (Crouch and Vinjevold, 2006: 1 in Akojee & Nkomo, 2012).

That the imbalance between access and quality still exists, despite the obvious reasons for their interdependence is a function policy inertia, demonstrated clearly in the South African context, where unsatisfactory throughput and often considerable attrition and dropout rates has been addressed by the add-another-programme syndrome, with little substantive impact. There is little pedagogic merit in conceiving academic development as another add-on luxury that the university funds at its discretion. Universities have a moral responsibility to provide the conditions for student retention and success. If students fail, it should not be because the university has failed to support them to succeed.

There can be little doubt that the call for a pragmatic, responsive approach to academic literacies is an appropriate and prudent response to what is now widely regarded as a literacy crisis facing the country. The need for a differentiated approach to literacies resonates with the work of Cummins’ (1992) theoretical model in which he distinguishes between BICS (Basic Interpersonal Skills) and CALP (Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency) which we will explore briefly below. Whether or not we should focus “sequentially on reading and then writing” as discreet activities are open to debate. However, we will explore some of the literature that might serve to bear this out or to contradict it.

The call for pragmatism also underscores the need to reassess the reason détat of academic literacies at tertiary institutions which, traditionally, have been grounded in an autonomous view of literacy, resulting in a curriculum that is often generic, sometimes disembodied from disciplinary knowledge and usually de-contextualised from students’ actual needs. We now provide a brief philosophical and theoretical justification for the approach we propose in re-conceptualising academic literacies at UNISA. We will begin by situating the problem in its historical context; attempt to highlight our understanding of the underlying reasons for the crisis and examine some of the literature in the field wherein potential solutions may be explored. Needless to say, the problems we have inherited are multiple and complex and there are no silver-bullet solutions.

To add to this historical cauldron, we need to consider the impact of language teaching methods, in particular, the complete swing in the language teaching pendulum from the teaching of grammatical structures often with little or no link to communicative competence (characteristic of the period up to the nineteen eighties), to the constructivist period where the teaching of grammatical structure was frowned upon as archaic. The new buzzwords of the eighties were: fluency rather than accuracy. This unfortunate dichotomy which was essentially an oversimplification (obfuscation?) of the tenets of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) provided refuge for teachers who were themselves untrained and unprepared to teach effectively in a second language. This was followed by the era of Outcomes Based Education (OBE) which further entrenched the laissez faire approach to language teaching and learning. We now turn our attention briefly to explore the link between home language proficiency, cognitive development and additional language acquisition.

HOME LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY, COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT AND SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

Over the years, research has provided a substantial body of empirical evidence which suggests a causal link between language acquisition and cognitive development. Lemmer, (2001) synthesises Cummins as follows: Learners who have instruction from the beginning in a language they can understand are able to develop concepts and learn to read and write and calculate. When they enter an English-medium school, they are then able to transfer those abilities to the new situation. Second-language learners with no schooling in the first language may have difficulty with English instruction as they have missed out on important background knowledge, which the other group has received. Furthermore, learners who do not have a developed proficiency in first-language and whose first-language maintenance is not supported tend to lose proficiency in the former as they acquire an additional language. Moreover, their culture may be undermined. This is known as subtractive bilingualism. Conversely learners who are fluent in the first language and whose first language is respected and its maintenance supported acquire a second language while retaining home language and culture.
This view is endorsed (by inference) by proponents of “Language Transfer”; the Nativists conception of “Universal Grammar”; and Noam Chomsky’s theory of the Language Acquisition Device (LAD). Similarly, Eric Lenneberg (1964) advanced the Critical Period Hypothesis in which he suggests (somewhat controversially) that the critical period for language development and cognition ends at the onset of puberty. The theory has often been extended to a critical period for additional language acquisition, although this is much less widely accepted. What we do know is that older learners of a second language rarely achieve the native-like fluency that younger learners display, despite often progressing faster than children in the initial stages. If one hazards to extend the theory to adult learners, what we are witnessing in students is the accumulated deficits of inadequate exposure to and lack of proficiency in the home language as well as their second language. These are the deficits which language facilitators are required to remedy in a few contact sessions.

However, to paint the student body as monolithic and therefore requiring equal treatment (remedy) is the issue that invites us to explore critically. Lemmer (2001) reminds us that when language minority learners enter an English classroom, they bring with them a wealth of cognitive, social and linguistic skills which have been developed in their first language. However, lecturers are often under the impression that, if this prior knowledge is not stored in English, it does not exist at all. Frequently they perceive these learners as having no language and of suffering from impoverished thinking skills. This is simply not true. It is in fact the exclusive and exclusionary language policies of HE institutions (de-facto and de-jure) that cultivate deficits by promoting monolingual environments and not creating conditions for multilingual engagement. A nuanced understanding of this sociolinguistic complexity cannot be acquired from disembodied on-line textual interactions.

**THE CHALLENGE FOR ACADEMIC LITERACIES**

Let us turn our attention back to the challenge for academic literacies and the call for a differentiated approach. We draw attention back to the work of Jim Cummins’ 4 quadrants of proficiency represented in the graphic below:

*Figure 1: Cummins' Four quadrants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STUDENT SUPPORT SCHEMA</th>
<th>COGNITIVELY UNDEMANDING TASKS [BICS]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Multiplication</td>
<td>Following a class schedule</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Division</td>
<td>Getting an absence excuse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtraction</td>
<td>Telephone conversation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Addition</td>
<td>Written directions, instructions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[no diagrams or illustrations]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Oral presentation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Oral classroom directions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[no gestures or body language]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CONTEXT EMBEDDED</th>
<th>CONTEXT REDUCED</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrations</td>
<td>Standardized tests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science experiments</td>
<td>Math concepts and applications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basic math computations</td>
<td>Listening to a lecture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social studies lesson</td>
<td>Reading content class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[with visuals and graphics]</td>
<td>Textbooks [science, social studies, literature]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The 4 quadrants are based on two axes: the horizontal axis represents the cline: context embedded language and context-free language. This cline reflects linguistic complexity, the context-embedded being easiest for learners as it is linguistically less complex (use of everyday language, supported by gestures, interactions, visuals, syntactically elliptical language, lexis drawn from the colloquial). On the other end – context-free language is the opposite as it represents language that is academic, with specialist terminology, full blown syntax, discourse that is coherent and cohesive, messages that are explicit and appropriate to the genre, monological.

The vertical cline represents cognition, that is to say: the cognitive effort learners are required to make and their cognitive competence in doing so. The top end of the vertical axis, namely the context undemanding end, as it suggests, makes low level thinking demands on learners. An example is phatic conversation or small talk, ritualistic forms of talk like greetings, and a lot of everyday conversation. The lower end, ie cognitively demanding, is the effort to process knowledge through reasoning. It is not about language as such, but cognition.

Cummins separation of linguistic and cognitive complexity, I believe, represents an advance over his earlier BICS (Basic Interpersonal Skills) and CALP (Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency) emphasising that intervention should ultimately aim at achieving higher order thinking skills but that these facilitative pedagogies or ‘scaffolding’ in quadrant B, are central in providing the means for learners to achieve quadrant D – which requires demonstration of academic literacy and advanced reasoning to be manifest in writing of essays, and exams etc.

The 4 quadrants model allows us to assess students proficiency levels, quadrant D being the highest and the goal of education, quadrant A being the language proficiency of their first language that they acquire naturally in their homes and bring to schools as a resource. The 4 quadrants can also be used to examine classroom discourse: the language varieties used in interactions, the tasks / materials used and what linguistic and cognitive demands they make on the students, in other words: what kinds and levels of language proficiency are being developed in learners.

The 4 quadrants enable us to see language varieties in terms of use or function. It enables us to see the difference between the use of a non-standard variety used for lower order thinking – like conversation, and the same non-standard variety used for thinking/reasoning processes. It allows us to see whether for instance the African language is being used for reasoning processes but in context-embedded situations associated with oracy, and whether English is being used for cognitive and academic literacy purposes that fall into quadrant D. This has profound implications for facilitators’ attitudes to codeswitching and the value of codeswitching as a cognitive crutch for Additionally English L2 learners whose proficiency is limited to Quadrant B.

READING AND WRITING: SEQUENTIAL OR GENERATIVE?

What then are the implications for the two streams of intervention: the Critical (foundational) and the more advanced writing conventions (cognitively demanding): and what are the implications for teaching and writing? There is a multitude of reading strategies most of which focus on ways of optimising comprehension. These include prediction, inferential reading, annotation of the text, use of mind maps, the noting of key concepts, the use of sociograms and a host of others. We will not delve into them here, except to say that it is mandatory for reading to be taught as an active skill - even to competent additional Language users. The reason for our dogmatic position here is based on the premise that in many South African classrooms, reading was/is? a passive process. The teacher reads a given text from cover to end (including the publishers’ details and endnote citations). The student is required to listen while the teacher attempts to excavate the gospel from the Holy Grail with no prospect of alternative or contending meanings. The assumption behind this approach is that meaning resides in the text and the text alone.

This disembodied approach to reading has dire implications for multicultural societies where indigenous knowledges and socio-cultural influences mediate learning and learning outcomes. For instance, not admitting the role of the “spiritual” in mediating learners’ understandings of scientific concepts or the role of “ubuntu” in mediating their understanding of economic concepts is to negate the prospect that these essentially western constructions of knowledge are sometimes in conflict with learners’ intuitive knowledges. What does this mean for the selection of reading strategies and our approach to materials design?

Central to any selection is the acknowledgement that all human beings possess
categorical rules or scripts that they use to interpret the world. New information is processed according to how it fits into these rules, called schema. Schema Theory popularised by Carrell, Eisterhold, Driscoll and others remind us that information that does not fit into our schema may not be comprehended correctly, or may not be comprehended at all. The most important implication of schema theory is the role of prior knowledge in processing new content. Facilitators therefore need to be judicious in their choice of materials, texts, artefacts and other technologies of learning. Facilitators need to be acutely mindful of selecting materials that do not alienate students and undermine the schemata that form the building blocks of new knowledges.

We briefly ponder the question of whether reading and writing should be conceived as two parallel sequential streams. Bernstein (1990) sees reading as basic to the progression through the sequence. He suggests: “It is crucial to read early in order to acquire the written code, for beyond the book is the text book, which is the crucial pedagogic medium and social relation” (p.53). This links to Bernstein’s notions of access to the Elaborated Code which enable learners to move beyond their Restricted Code essential for academic success. This implies that in the early stages, students must be exposed to a variety of exemplary models to enrich students schema. This resonates with Stephen Krashen’s Monitor Hypothesis (Krashen: 1981) in which he proposes the provision of “Maximum Comprehensible Input” to remove affective filters that impede language acquisition. Bernstein’s early work which revolved around issues of deficit and difference earned him the label of a structuralist.

However, there is now consensus that reading and writing are dialectical processes which are deeply contextual and interdependent. We therefore subscribe to Bernstein’s view that students need exposure to exemplary models of writing on which students can model their own writing. However, these cannot be discreet or mutually exclusive activities. Writing is an iterative process that must be complemented and enriched by reading. We are therefore inclined towards the Genre Approach (GA) in which explicit teaching of the structural and linguistic conventions of different genres give a clear sense of audience, purpose and the way in which they are staged as well as the language patterns used to achieve that purpose effectively. GA uses methodology where the facilitator begins with several exemplar texts to demonstrate how the writer has organised the text and used language to achieve the purpose of the text. This is followed by active engagement with the text through a range of authentic activities in an attempt to activate students’ schemas and arouse the awareness that writers are not gifted or infallible.

The next stage involves the facilitator jointly constructing a text with the learners in the genre they are dealing with. This is accompanied by explicit guidelines on structure and negotiated criteria on what makes for effective writing. The facilitator supports students through their drafting stages by providing feedback based on the criteria.

The iterative dialogical processes identified above require substantive contact time with students in combinations of whole-class interactive sessions with small-class personalised support to embed these cognitively demanding skills.

CONCLUSION

The facilitation skills required to mediate the challenges above cannot be achieved by periodic ad-hoc on-line consultations. Neither can they be achieved by staff without deep socio and psycholinguistic teaching and learning skills. Relegating academic development practitioners to the level of casualised labour provided by independent contractors undermines the value of academic development work and is counter-intuitive to virtually all contemporary research which affirms the centrality of such work to successful access and success in higher education.

While UNISA, the largest university on the continent does indeed facilitate administrative access not least by affordable fees, and its recognition of prior learning (RPL) policy, it continues to face challenges of articulation, the challenges of learner support, and the challenge of throughput rate. Collectively these cast a shadow over its accomplishment and unless the challenge of throughput is fixed, “talk of access with success will only be like a fleeting illusion that is pursued, but never attained” (Letseka & Pitsoe, 2012).

The issue of poor schooling remains our biggest hurdle, but increasingly, academics are becoming aware of the futility of focusing on this (Scott et al, 2007, Scott 2009). The ethics of calling exclusively on the problem of poor schooling to justify low student throughput and retention in higher education is being brought into question and Scott cautions us against “a deterministic throwing up of our hands and pointing of fingers at the school system. It seems unlikely that there will be substantial change in the school sector in the short term (Scott et al 2007). We are therefore morally...
obliged to refrain from using the on-going problems in that sector as an excuse for retaining the flawed status quo in higher education. Instead, we need to take responsibility for the factors within the control of the higher education sector which can contribute to improved students success. Academic literacies is part of that solution, not the problem. Scott urges us to acknowledge “that valuable knowledge and experience have been gained through the development of alternative approaches to access, curriculum design and teaching, but, to serve the majority of students and the wider interests of the country, what has been alternative now needs to become mainstream” (Scott:2012).

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