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# Pedagogic responsiveness for academic depth

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## Abstract

In the aftermath of apartheid and apartheid education, South African universities are exploring ways in which they can make their curricula more responsive to the needs of under-prepared students. There are many possible kinds of ‘curriculum responsiveness’. This paper focuses on ‘curriculum responsiveness’ for epistemological access. It explores what it means to be responsive to both epistemological activities underpinning systematised forms of inquiry synonymous with academic practice and to the needs of under-prepared students in relation to these. The main focus of the paper is on the practices which constitute academic knowledge as fundamentally different from everyday-life ways of making meaning. This account entails an examination of the analytic logic of academic practice and the social conditions which underpin it. This account includes an analysis of the systematic inquiry through which university studies fulfil their necessary functions. The paper explores ways in which under-preparedness for such practices may be demonstrated, particularly in relation to “text-based practices” (Wertsch, 1991). It concludes with an examination of ways of initiating newcomers into these specialised activities of academic meaning making.

This paper is based upon, and developed from an earlier paper we wrote on ‘Curriculum Responsiveness’ commissioned by SAUVCA and published in H. Griesel (Ed.) *Curriculum Responsiveness: Case Studies in Higher Education*, 2004. Pretoria: South African Universities Vice-Chancellors Association. 2004.

A significant proportion of students currently entering South African universities today, are first generation university students who have had little access to social networks<sup>1</sup> with reservoirs of experiences of university study, and therefore have minimal support for apprehending the nature of university study, or the workings of the institutional culture of the university. This problem is compounded for students who were subjected to the worst knowledge practices of apartheid education. Such practices were highly

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<sup>1</sup> Pierre Bourdieu (1990a) refers to these networks and this knowledge as social and cultural capital respectively.

authoritarian and frequently unsystematic and were antithetical to the development of forms of learning, literacy, knowledge depth and independent thinking required in university study (Singh, 2000). In the late 1980s and early 1990s, researchers who were examining this problem were looking for ways in which the institutional culture of the university perpetuates this problem. Morrow (1992) coined the idea of ‘epistemological access’, which he believed was underestimated in the sea of research on formal access. Elaborating on the difficulties involved in epistemological access, Craig (1989) and Slonimsky (1994) argued that ‘disadvantage’ is a consequence of the relation between the familiar cultural context that a student has internalised (the individual), and the unfamiliar cultural and institutional context (the epistemic context of a university environment) which the student has not yet internalised. In an attempt to explain this relationship, Craig (2001) introduced the idea of ‘form’ in academic practice, the ways in which it specialises knowledge and the implications of different permutations of form and content for learning, particularly for historically disadvantaged students. Craig refers to authoritarian teaching in schools as a *form* that tends to focus on transmission privileged content of knowledge at the cost of textual engagement and forms of inquiry which traditionally prepare students for academic study. She argues that students who have met the formal requirements for access to university study, but are products of such authoritarian schooling, are under prepared for university study and have a far steeper learning curve at the level of the form of knowledge than their fellow students.

More recently, in an important paper that examines the idea of higher education ‘responsiveness’ to the difficulties experienced by ‘under-prepared’ students, Moll (2004) develops the notion of ‘curriculum responsiveness’ which he argues includes economic, cultural/institutional, disciplinary and learning responsiveness. Briefly, economic *responsiveness of the curriculum* denotes the extent to which the teaching and learning in a university meet the changing needs of employers by producing graduates that are innovative, skilful and competitive. The focal point of this kind of research is on how to “facilitate greater responsiveness between higher education and industry” (p.4). *Cultural responsiveness of the curriculum* entails that the curriculum accommodates diversity of socio-cultural realities of students, by developing a wider variety of instructional strategies and learning pathways. *Disciplinary responsiveness of the curriculum* entails a curriculum that is responsive to “the nature of its underlying knowledge discipline by ensuring a close coupling between the way in which knowledge is produced and the way students are educated and trained in the discipline area” (p.7). From the perspective of teaching, this requires socialization into academic inquiry of specialized knowledges. *Learning responsiveness of the curriculum* entails teaching and assessing students in ways that are accessible to them. This includes making available what is valued about the underlying discipline, how it is assessed,

and which evaluative criteria are of significance, but also adjusting the teaching to the rhythms, and the tensions and emotions of learning.

This paper continues with the theme of ‘curriculum responsiveness’ focusing in particular on the relationship between ‘disciplinary’ and ‘learning responsiveness’. In terms of Moll’s analysis and following from the previous studies of Slonimsky (1994) and Craig (1989, 2001), our analysis in this paper examines what it means to be responsive to both the epistemological activities underpinning a *systematised* form of inquiry synonymous with academic practice and the needs of ‘under-prepared’ students in relation to these. We believe that it is important to distinguish between authoritarian approaches to teaching which transmit well-structured knowledge (i.e. systematised), and authoritarian approaches which transmit a one-dimensional conception of knowledge. The former could still promote the development of depth, but the latter does not.

The paper is written from the perspective of our knowledge of the humanities and social sciences. Nevertheless we believe this paper may make some contribution to thinking about curriculum and pedagogy in other fields of academic practice. It is also important to note that our approach in this paper is conceptual rather than empirical. The paper is divided into seven sections. The first three sections of the paper examine the analytical logic of academic practices (their aim) and the social conditions that underpin an engagement with these. The main focus of this part of the paper is on the practices which constitute academic knowledge as a ‘text-based reality’ (Wertsch, 1991), as fundamentally different from everyday life ways of making meaning. This is an analysis of what Moll (2004, p. 6) calls the nature of disciplinary knowledge or the systematic inquiry through which university studies fulfil their *necessary functions*. The next three sections of the paper discuss and explain ways in which ‘under-preparedness’ for such practices is demonstrated. The aim of these sections is to elaborate on why it is not uncommon for under-prepared students to be prescriptive and judgemental when required to be descriptive or analytic. In the last section of the paper, we examine ways of initiating newcomers into these specialised activities of academic meaning making.

## Academic practices

At the most general level, a curriculum is a contextualised course of study aimed at enabling students to learn or master particular knowledge and practices. A curriculum brings context, students and ‘that which is to be learned’ into a relationship. Therefore, deliberations on curriculum responsiveness require a relational approach that takes into account both the nature of practices to be mastered, and the needs of socio-historically contextualised students in relation to these, before the issues of pedagogy and mediation can be addressed.

All social practices *have a point*, in other words, the complex of activities that constitute practices are oriented towards the achievement of particular goods or ends (MacIntyre, 1981). The *raison d’être* of universities is to promote academic practices, by which we mean coherent sets of activities oriented towards the development and dissemination of *knowledge*. Academic practices are premised on conscious reflection on the ends, objects and means of activity (Anderson, 1993) and involve forms of reasoning, analysis, modes of investigation and self reflection which enable the critical examination of established truths, taken-for-granted assumptions and knowledge handed down by tradition. Thus a truly responsive pedagogy must enable students to grasp the point of the practice and to develop the powers to work towards it.

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. There is no universal way of producing academic knowledge, nor a single conception of what counts as knowledge in academic practices. However, there are some orientations, conceptual tools and operations that are commonly used across geographical and historical contexts and across conceptual positions (e.g. modernist or post-modernist). These include rational argument (or at least some partitioning of the form and the content of assertions), the justification of claims, engagement with established knowledge (i.e. to refute it, extend it etc.), proof or defence of a position, principled and systematic analysis or investigation, validity and/or reliability claims, peer review and specialised forms of communications which can transcend temporal and spatial boundaries. Such conceptual operations promote a sensibility to the generative possibilities of principled knowledge, systematic inquiry and/or narratives for researching the known, developing new insights, and projecting other worlds and states of being.

Goal directed actions within academic practice and the cognitive operations with which to execute them involve formalising, systematising and/or organising the object of study – be it through a theory, a concept, new content

or data to be collected under research conditions. Academics impose ordering principles on the objects of investigation by framing and relating the objects of investigation through a principled or systematic gaze, developed on the basis of established knowledge and the object of study. They both engage with questions that have been refined in the history of the discipline or field and frame questions about new issues of concern. Questions must be sufficiently open to allow for exploration of the objects of inquiry, but sufficiently closed to enable some progress to be made towards answering them. Appropriate conceptual and material means must be recruited or developed for investigating the object of inquiry and collecting appropriate data. The processes and products of inquiry must be open to justification and peer review (Polanyi, 1958, 1978) and responsive to truth and/or coherence criteria, and thus be defensible as reliable and valid knowledge.

In summary, academic practices involve both disciplined and disciplinary activities, involving specialised actions and operations, which promote the development of knowledge. If students are to develop academic depth and become full members of academic communities, then it is imperative that course curricula and pedagogical practices within courses afford students access to the conditions of possibilities for such practices and hence to the full range of activities and the goals, actions and operations which generate them.

## Conditions of possibility for academic practices

*Scholé* or ‘leisure time’ is a key condition of possibility for these epistemic values and operations and for the movements between the taken-for-granted and critique, or between actual and possible worlds (Oakshott, 1986). Pierre Bourdieu (1990b) suggests that such ‘leisure’ should be understood as engagement in activities that are both temporally and spatially “freed from economic necessity and practically set apart from the press of day to day life”.<sup>2</sup> Although knowledge is the product of temporally and spatially contextualised activities, the enterprise of knowledge *development*<sup>3</sup> hinges on the dynamic interplay between past and present, local and global contexts. In order for knowledge to be an object of study within the bounds of the academy, it must be de-contextualised (Bernstein, 1991) or dis-embedded (Cummins, 1999) from the particular milieu or circumstance in which it is produced, and

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<sup>2</sup> This seems to be changing at a rapid pace with the press of market forces and managerialism creeping into universities on the one hand, and the increasing move to service learning on the other. However, it is too early to speculate what impact this may have on the *forms* of knowledge that will be developed in universities in the years to come.

<sup>3</sup> Development is by definition temporal.

materialised in symbolic form. Arguably one of the most significant conditions of possibility for de-contextualising knowledge from the sites in which it is produced, is through the materialisation and systematisation of knowledge in texts.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, a key condition of possibility for the knowledge practices of the academe is engagement in what James Wertsch (1991) calls “*text-based realities*”<sup>5</sup> by which he means activity spaces that are constituted through semiotic means alone.

Wertsch (1991) proposes that “text-based realities. . . have several significant properties – depersonalization, systemization and boundedness”, which together promote conscious reflection on the objects of study and on one’s own knowledge. We explore these briefly because they offer some understanding of the ways in which under-prepared students are under-prepared for university study.

- Texts are *depersonalised* because readers and writers are generally not present to each other at the time of writing, and more often than not, are not personally familiar to each other.

Writers therefore have to anticipate a range of possible readers who do not share their contexts or circumstantial milieu by making their ideas publicly accessible to a universe of hypothetical or *possible* readers in other temporal/spatial settings through the use of linguistic, logical and conceptual means which operate at a sufficient level of abstraction and generality to create a context for the ideas to be communicated. The correlative of this is that even when texts apparently make reference to phenomena which the reader is personally familiar with, the text is simultaneously invoking a class of phenomena which extend beyond the reader’s own subjective experience. The reader thus needs to be able to distinguish between general categories or ‘types’ and particular instances or ‘tokens’. The more abstracted the ideas to be communicated, the more depersonalised they tend to be and the more specialised the language.

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<sup>4</sup> Note that even the World Wide Web relies on text.

<sup>5</sup> We recognise that different disciplines and fields and different faculties work with texts in very different ways, but the circulation of academic knowledge occurs through journals and other publications as well as the delivery of ‘papers’ at conferences.

- Texts are *systematised* in so far as they have an internal structure and logic, comprised of parts which partially take their meaning from other parts of the text and, which taken together, constitute the sense of the text as a whole.

Such parts may be logical or linguistic, e.g. premises to conclusion, logical connectors, sentences to paragraphs, body to conclusion. In other words, they have a form over and above their content. Understanding that texts are systematised promotes sensitivity to the distinction between the form and content of knowledge (Craig, 2001) and to logical argument.

- The structure and content of the text creates a symbolically *bounded* semantic universe, which simultaneously opens a world of possible interpretations of the text but delimits what is outside of the boundaries of the text.

Though particular parts of the text could be taken to mean a range of things, some of these possibilities must be ruled out because they cannot be related to other parts of the text.

The *sense* of the text is framed through the three properties discussed above. However, the *meanings* of texts (i.e. interpretations) are generated through the content of texts coupled with these properties *and* the experiences and interpretative schemes that readers bring to the text. To truly participate in text-based realities, readers must *appropriate* them, that is, make them their own, by bringing them into a relation with their existing schemes of knowledge and understanding. Because the meanings of texts are to a large extent open but are also constrained by the above-mentioned properties, texts allow for ‘regulated’ rather than open interpretation.

All things being equal, these properties of text-based realities promote forms of knowledge that transcend particular contexts and experiences. They also promote objectivity (i.e. sensitivity to different perspectives on phenomena), which enables one to go beyond the boundaries of one’s own subjective or idiosyncratic experiences. They sensitise readers to a distinction and relation between the forms and content of knowledge, and to the logic of argument. Reading and writing are pivotal activities in university study because through reading one accesses the history and state of knowledge in the field, and through writing academics communicate their activities and the epistemic products of their activity beyond their local communities. *If students are to become full members of academic communities of practice, they must at the very least learn to work with these properties of text-based realities in both reading and in writing.*



## Strands of activity constitutive of academic practice

Academic practices involve several analytically distinguishable strands of activity, which we shall call *distantiation*, *appropriation*,<sup>6</sup> *research* and *articulation*. These strands underpin academic work at all levels within the academy, but are enacted at varying levels of complexity and sophistication in the path from novice to mastery. In the discussion below, we begin with the concept of distantiation and then turn to each of the others. We wish to emphasise that while these strands are analytically distinguishable, they are *practically intertwined* in the processes of knowledge development within the academy

### Distantiation

By distantiation we mean positioning one's object of inquiry in a wider and deeper body of knowledge, thereby moving beyond the "present and particular" (Bailey, 1984) and establishing some cognitive distance from one's own established knowledge and taken-for-granted assumptions. Distantiation is a key function in the development of knowledge because development by definition entails both continuity and transformation. If one is unaware of what has been established in the field, one cannot extend beyond it and hence one cannot claim to be contributing to the development of knowledge in the field.

Cognitively, distantiation is a key condition of possibility for the conscious reflection on, and systematic investigation of, established knowledge. Any encounters with new ways of thinking, seeing or experiencing may provoke investigations and inquiries, but it is exposure to disciplinary texts that afford inquirers the categories with which to create finer distinctions and their integration into a more sophisticated way of thinking, which ultimately paves the way for researching the boundaries of established disciplines (Messer-Davidov, Shumway and Sylvan, 1993). Distantiation rests largely on engagement with texts and lectures which expose academics to the reservoirs of knowledge established within the history of the discipline or field, as well as 'state of the art' positions, theories or concepts or methodological tools pertaining to the object of investigation. In other words, the knowledge developed by *others* becomes the *object of activity and inquiry*. Through distantiation and the gaze afforded by it, one learns to see distinctions between apparently identical objects or explanations. It is through distantiation that one

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<sup>6</sup> These terms 'distantiation and appropriation' are Paul Ricoeur's terms (see Ricoeur, 1981), however while he works with them to describe different moments in the act of reading, we are focusing on strands of activities within a practice.



learns to apprehend and appreciate the history of knowledge in the discipline or field.

Through distantiation, students learn to follow the *internal* logic and argument of the text. They learn to temporarily depersonalise or to work with the relations between statements, to appreciate the significance of concepts for particular theories, and to understand that adequate description, analysis or explanation rests on a web of concepts. They also learn to see that concepts are contested and subject to revision or supercession.

For novices, distantiation may involve learning and mastering key disciplinary concepts, theories and methodological assumptions within the discipline. Through these, novices begin to develop a disciplinary or principled gaze and to apprehend the types of problems and objects of inquiry addressed by the discipline, and the extant reservoir of epistemic and methodological resources available. For more experienced students it may involve the development of literature reviews. Literature reviews are an important means of distantiation because they enable academics to move beyond their own established knowledge and to construct a frame for new studies or to find significant questions in relation to the object of their inquiry. Another way in which novices may learn distantiation is by making statements, claims and arguments the object of inquiry and by analysing the form and content of knowledge claims and the relation between them. This may be done analytically through the analysis of argument, or more substantively through the analysis of the validity and reliability of method or evidence. Thus the ability to analyse arguments or methods in relation to an object of inquiry is a key means of distantiation.

In summary, distantiation calls upon students as well as more experienced academics to make the familiar or taken-for-granted strange.

## Appropriation

The obverse of distantiation is *appropriation*, in so far as it involves working with knowledge that is as yet outside of one's current knowledge base and positioning oneself and one's concerns in relation to it. Thus appropriation involves making the strange familiar. Constructivist theories of learning suggest that in order to learn, students must act on and work with concepts or material entities, and through these activities they adapt their existing knowledge (Miller, 1989). Appropriation imbues knowledge experienced through distantiation with significance. To appropriate knowledge is to integrate it into one's existing understanding, simultaneously transforming both the significance of the idea, and modifying one's existing ways of

construing things and thereby creating new conditions of possibility for knowledge

Appropriation involves processes of ordering and integrating conceptual resources derived from a broader body of work into one's own areas of concern, of understanding them in relation to what one already knows and making them one's own. Academics work with knowledge (concepts, theories, methods, content) they are encountering in texts, lectures and tutorials fitting knowledge into a "pattern of relations, a web of purpose and a *perspective of their own*" (emphasis in the original Anderson, 1993). In a sense they position themselves and their concerns testing the power, limits and applicability of particular concepts to one's own realities or areas of concern, as well as to other contexts and settings. It may also involve playing out the implications of particular concepts for other concepts or established knowledge, or applying principles to familiar objects. In this process of accommodation, both the conceptual resources one seeks to recruit and one's assumptions or ways of construing the object or means of inquiry are subject to modification.

We have noted that appropriation involves relating established knowledge to ways of knowing which are *outside* of one's established knowledge and hence challenges or extends it. Thus, distantiation and appropriation go hand in glove – students are required to both distantiate from their taken-for-granted assumptions and attempt to put the new conceptual resources to work on old or established questions, or on new questions or issues.<sup>7</sup>

## Research

Strictly speaking, research is a form of distantiation and appropriation since the move between the two necessarily demands that agents re-search both their existing knowledge and established concepts. However what is referred to as 'research' in academic institutions is usually more systematic, this is becoming more complex, extensive and sophisticated at higher levels of academia. It is more complex because it requires multiple interwoven operations, which include clarifying the object of inquiry, elaborating conceptual means for advancing the inquiry, choosing appropriate units for analysis, developing a set of instruments for collecting information and elaborating principled, analytic means for analysing, and formulating

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<sup>7</sup> Of course, very often lecturers start a course with a familiar issue or area of concern so as to raise students' interest. But once students' interest is aroused, they are given textual and conceptual resources in other media that require them to look away and to position themselves in it.

principled propositions on the basis of the findings. At each stage of the research the researchers must be able to justify their choices and methods to ultimately show that their findings are valid, reliable, warranted and justified. Hence justification is a key element of academic practice. Of course the complexity of the research process hinges both on the level of qualification of the researchers (novices are required to perform only some of the above functions), and on the scope and scale of the research.

The mark of research is that it requires academics to be self-conscious about the purpose of their study. Planning or designing research requires “systematic deliberation” (Anderson, 1993, p.4) purpose and methods of analysis or investigation.<sup>8</sup> Whether it is grounded in empirical or conceptual investigation, research must conform to established epistemic criteria and values including, amongst others: methodological or argument coherence, validity, reliability and ethical considerations. Cognitively, research demands integration between distantiation and appropriation. It enables academics to make the strange familiar and the familiar strange.

## Articulation

One of the key questions for universities is: what is reliable knowledge and what is not? (Messer-Davidow, Shumway and Sylvan, 1993; Anderson, 1993). The current view is that it is knowledge that has “been sustained through rigorous critical examination, according to the rules, procedures and methods of a community governed by critical and self-corrective methods” (p.63). In other words, the test of knowledge is whether it stands up to public scrutiny. Such processes of scrutiny cannot occur without forms of communication which enable academics to project their voice both within the bounds of the academy and into broader scholarly and other communities in which such knowledge has implications. Academics *articulate* or communicate their findings verbally or in writing such that their knowledge can become the *objects* and *means* of reflection and knowledge for others. It is by sharing knowledge with both proximal and projected audiences in other temporal and spatial settings that an academic’s knowledge becomes part of the tradition

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<sup>8</sup> It may involve a conscious intention to do at least one or more of the following:

- address particular problematics or problem-solving tasks;
- problematise or test established knowledge;
- systematically apply new knowledge to new objects of investigation and systemically evaluate their effects;
- critically reflect upon the implications of particular theories or use particular theories to critically reflect on other phenomena; and
- critique knowledge, processes or social relations.

and reservoir of knowledge for peers, lecturers and for wider local and global communities.<sup>9</sup>

In order to communicate their knowledge in writing, students learn to systematise their knowledge, to construct and sustain logical arguments, which are developed with appropriate logical connectors and as such, are cohesive. In this, students also need to ‘depersonalise’ their knowledge to a sufficient extent to enable a wide spectrum of projected readers who do not share the students’ circumstantial or experiential milieu to enter into the text. This implies some level of distantiating or ‘gaze on one’s own gaze’, and a retracing of inquiries for both kindred spirits and enemies who are not ‘there’, or are yet to come.<sup>10</sup>

## ‘Under-prepared’ students

Students who have matriculated, are generally expected to be highly practiced in working in text-based realities and creating text-based realities through writing. But a significant proportion of students enrolling in universities do not appear to have mastered these properties of text-based realities (Bradbury and Griesel, 1994; Bertram, 2006). Other studies as well as more informal accounts from a wide spectrum of lecturers, point to a pervasive pattern in the ways that students who were under-prepared for university studies by their schooling tend to approach texts and epistemic practices when they first engage in university study (Steinberg and Slonimsky, 2004; Shalem, 2004). These pertain to the parameters of structure, depersonalisation and boundedness respectively and include the following:

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<sup>9</sup> This is not to deny that there are other significant forces implicated in valorising knowledge and constituting hegemonic practices in the academy. However, historically those who have successfully challenged the canon, and introduced new values, means and areas of inquiry have all had to find ways of initially *arguing on the institution’s terms against the institution*. There is an apparent ‘access paradox’ at play here (see Lodge, 1997, and Josephand Ramani, 2004); initiating students into a dominant discourse may entrench its dominance, however a refusal to initiate students into the dominant discourse may entrench their marginalisation.

<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, the digital technology is currently revolutionising the ways in which knowledge in the academe is presented such that sound and image are becoming more integral to the articulation of knowledge. Nevertheless knowledge producers are still required to consciously reflect on and justify the objects and means of their investigation, to account for the significance and validity of their work.

- A tendency towards verbatim reproduction or plagiarism in essays.
- A tendency to describe rather than to analyse, and to offer tautologies in place of justification.
- A tendency to focus on examples (tokens) rather than on principles (types), and the relation between them. This includes offering anecdotes of personal experiences in place of formulations of general principles or relating principles and particulars, or claims to alignment without explanation why.
- A tendency to write from a highly subjective viewpoint without depersonalising, which frequently leads to solipsistic texts and some of the other patterns discussed above.
- A failure to pull out arguments in texts or cast them. This may include syncretic lifting of isolated facts which make no sense outside of the broader structure of argument in which they are presented, poor structuring and systematisation of ideas in writing; illogical arguments and claims or discussions marked by non sequiturs
- A tendency to include anecdotes as a justification for claims.
- A tendency to be prescriptive or normative when asked to be analytic.

At least some of these orientations to knowledge and texts are displayed in the work of many first year students; however they tend to occur more systematically, as a *structure d'ensemble* in the work of under-prepared students. These orientations to knowledge are patently antithetical to the forms of thinking and operations entailed in academic practices. Yet students *think* they are responding to the task demands appropriately. Constructivist approaches to learning<sup>11</sup> inform us that there is integrity to a student's activity at any point in time – students cannot do otherwise than to think and act on the basis of the structure and content of knowledge they bring to a task or situation, unless they receive some form of feedback to the contrary. So how can this *structure d'ensemble* be explained?

We believe there is a significant social logic underlying these orientations which are a product of the interplay between mind and society and society in mind and that an understanding of this interplay can illuminate both cognitive and social issues that need to be considered when developing responsive curricula and pedagogies.

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<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Piaget, 1966; Von Glaserfeld, 1988.

## Mind in society

Socio-cultural approaches to learning and development propose that there is a dialectical relationship between mind and society. Vygotsky (1978), proposed that all uniquely human or higher mental functions are transformed social relationships which emerge and are shaped in the course of joint activities with others (inter-psychological functioning). The student makes forms of social functioning her own by integrating them into her reservoir of knowledge (intra-psychological functions) and generating new thoughts and action on the basis of them.

There are three significant issues here:

1. Conceptual schemes, knowledge, goal directed action, operations and skills are developed on the basis of participation in social activities afforded by others who have some experience of the logic, goals and means of those activities. If there is no functional necessity to perform particular or specialised functions within the range of practices in which students participate, then they may not develop those forms of functioning. For example, in some parts of this country there is a strong oral tradition and a substantially weaker tradition of literacy, and hence insufficient mediation in text-based practices in some communities (Bradbury and Griesel, 1994; Craig and Kernoff, 1995). In response to these conditions, many teachers found it easier not to spend too much time reading or demanding extended writing from their learners.
2. Even if participation in a practice makes certain actions or operations functionally necessary, students may be unable to learn them if they are not afforded adequate mediation, i.e. adequate direction, regulation and support. So both the functional participation in a practice and the forms of mediation afforded to students have important implications for students' cognitive development. For example, learners schooled under Bantu Education were required to read and study in a language that was not their main language, so much energy in reading was spent on decoding parts of the text rather than working with the structural integrity of the whole text and its constituent parts. Many schools were textually under-resourced, which meant there was a limited range of texts available for reading.
3. We learn to act on the basis of the ways in which others act towards, and with us. If those with whom we interact are strongly prescriptive, we are likely to take on such orientations ourselves. During the apartheid era, the authoritarian approach to knowledge and teaching in many schools, tended to construct and transmit knowledge as a closed



system, in which there was a single privileged account of phenomena. Hence the form and content of knowledge were more or less fused. The authoritarian practices many students were exposed to tended to invoke the weight of personal authority or a single source (e.g. the truth is in the text book, the syllabus, or ‘because I say so’) rather than epistemic authority. These students experienced knowledge criteria as arbitrary, as lacking any clear logic or as not related to the knowledge practices at stake.

The *functional imperative* for learners was to reproduce but not question or critique privileged knowledge. Thus learners’ goal directed actions were oriented to reproducing information encountered in lessons and texts. Consequently, learners in that system became highly adept at reproducing knowledge but did not necessarily learn to differentiate between the form and content of knowledge, to cast arguments either verbally or in writing, or to analyse their validity, to defend or justify their thoughts. Yet, as Spurrett (2004) points out, these are essential operations in academic practices.

In sum, what people come to know, i.e. how they learn to learn, to think and to act in particular contexts are constituted in a relation between (a) their existing cognitive schemes, knowledge, skills and dispositions (b) the functional demands of the activities they participate in, and (c) the forms of mediation they are afforded in such activities. The corollary of this is, regardless of how much ‘potential’ someone may have, if they do not have opportunities to participate in activities that develop specialised forms of knowledge and functioning and/or are not afforded sufficient opportunities of mediation by others experienced in those activities, they are unlikely to develop such forms of functioning.

## Society in mind

Thus far we have focused on cognitive development and pointed to the importance of activities, which make particular actions and operations functionally necessary for the formation of specialised forms of knowledge and skills. However there is also a significant social logic underlying some of the epistemic orientations adopted by under-prepared students that, we believe, cannot be fully explained in terms of learners’ cognitive development.

All practices and institutions uphold criteria of appropriate conduct and actions within them. The form and content of activities and the social relations within institutions and practices transmit codes or messages to participants about what counts as knowledge, what forms of activity are appropriate and how one relates to others within particular institutional contexts and settings

(Bernstein, 1991). Constructivist theories of learning hold that we can only make sense of our experiences on the basis of our existing understanding, thus when we initiate action, we act in ways that we believe are appropriate. Codes acquired through participation in social practices become generative principles (Bourdieu, 1990a) for subsequent activities.<sup>12</sup> Consequently, students' actions in any practice are informed by highly internalised, tacit 'rules' about the context, what counts as knowledge within it, and requisite goal directed actions. Note that since we construct knowledge on an ongoing basis, the codes orient but never determine action, and hence our activities can be considered to be a form of 'regulated improvisation' (Bourdieu, 1990a).

The highly prescriptive approach to knowledge within apartheid schools, coupled with students' experiences of being judged within highly regulated practices and closed criteria, may explain why it is not uncommon for under-prepared students to be prescriptive and judgemental when required to be descriptive or analytic.<sup>13</sup> However we do not believe this a sufficient explanation for under-prepared students' inability to work with the depersonalisation and boundedness of text-based realities (i.e. solipsistic writing, an emphasis on examples rather than principles, justification through personal anecdotes rather than principled argument, prescription rather than analysis). We believe a deeper explanation might involve the experience of alienation. Under apartheid education students frequently felt alienated from the content they were learning at school and did not see its relevance. Furthermore, since there was little room for engagement or innovation, and students' own realities were not being addressed in the classroom, many students felt objectified and silenced.

There appear to be two predominant ways in which under-prepared students initially orient themselves to their university studies. They may impose the same knowledge codes they learned at school, or they may work from an assumption that there is a marked difference between privileged practices in their schools and at universities. For example, in a humanities or social science course they may be told "we don't want you to give us back what the book says, we want you to think", or "there is no right answer", or "the purpose of theory is to understand the world in which we live". This would open up *apparent* space for students to insert their life world, speak from their experience, address other personal subjects, play with knowledge and ideas etc. In other words, students may read explicit messages being transmitted by lecturers about the *openness* of knowledge as giving them licence to

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<sup>12</sup> Bourdieu (1990a.) calls this a 'habitus' because one learns ways of being which are attuned to the social habitats in which one functions.

<sup>13</sup> We have addressed this question in a previous paper; see Shalem and Slonimsky, 1999.

personalise and break boundaries. For these reasons, students may feel empowered by the apparent freedom within the academy to insert their own voices, interests and local realities.

Yet, as we argued above, the epistemic values and operations that underpin academic practice rest on disciplined knowledge, and an ability to engage in text-based realities. Furthermore, for knowledge to be valorised in the academy and to become part of the reservoir of knowledge or methods in the academy, it must be subject to peer review which assesses its conformity with the epistemic values of the institution, and it must be possible for the knowledge to be de-contextualised from its context of production. If students are not sufficiently initiated into disciplinary knowledge and text-based realities, they may never become *full* participants in academic practise – and thus their voices, experiences and knowledge may never be able to resonate or be projected beyond the ‘present and particular’ into other times, spaces and social realities.

## Academic practices and criteria

Earlier we noted that we can only act and make sense of our experiences on the basis of our existing knowledge, tacit rules or codes developed through participation in social practices. One implication of this is that when we enter into any new setting or practice we may *think or believe* we understand the criteria of the practice, but we may or may not in fact be *following* them. It is only when we receive some form of feedback to the effect that our understanding or actions are inappropriate, that we may attempt to adjust accordingly. Thus feedback is an essential part of learning what it means to participate in a practice.

However, since we tend to interpret language on the basis of our existing knowledge and ways of thinking, but academic practices are constituted through de-contextualised knowledge and dis-embedded language, it may be difficult for students to apprehend that they are not meeting desired criteria if they are merely told in words that they are not doing so. Thus it is particularly important to find ways of transmitting criteria which do not simply *tell* students what it is we do, but in fact give them access to some form of model or participation in joint activities with more experienced others which illuminate ‘how we do it’ and hopefully, ‘why we do it’. It must be borne in mind that if students knew *what* they were required to do, *why* they were required to do and *how* to do it, they would undoubtedly have done it. So simply telling them what they are not doing right is highly unlikely to promote

the required actions (Miller, 1989)<sup>14</sup>. Students may often come to realise that they have not met the criteria but may not know what it takes to meet them. For example, students often cannot apprehend *the point* of proper referencing, if they do not have a sense of the function and significance of references in research and in the transmission of knowledge over time. It is thus important for academics to communicate the ways in which academic standards and criteria advance the point of the practice, and also to offer adequate access to forms of mediation that promote the development of the necessary goal directed actions and operations.

Notwithstanding, the challenge for academic educators is how to transmit the texture and depth of understanding that insiders have as well as the kind of knowledge which is usually transmitted by social networks with a long history of participation in academic institutions. In a sense it demands a double act of reflection – academics need to become more conscious of what is involved in transmitting the ‘forms of life’ of academic practices, and they also have to organise their curricula and pedagogies to transmit these forms of life appropriately. In this paper we proposed four strands which we believe constitute the core of academic practice. We will end this discussion with a brief demonstration of a university course which in its design ensured that these pivotal activities and the actions and operations they entail are functionally necessary.

Our example is drawn from a recent paper by Joseph and Ramani (2004) which explores the idea of ‘curriculum responsiveness’ in a university course that connects between ‘language use’ and ‘language study’. In their study, Joseph and Ramani aim to show “how a dual-medium language degree can use multilingual content to achieve academic excellence” (p.241). Joseph and Ramani analyse a first year teaching and learning unit called ‘Small Talk’, which is located in a bilingual BA degree in Contemporary English Language Studies (CELS) and Multilingual Studies (MUST).<sup>15</sup> Before we turn to their example, it is important to note that our aim in this paper is to clarify

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<sup>14</sup> In Shalem and Slonimsky (1999) we provided more elaborated argument against ‘telling’ in transmission of criteria. Shalem (2004) provides examples of less and more successful reading of criteria by student teachers who needed to reflect on their own school experience in a school-based teacher education programme.

<sup>15</sup> Joseph and Ramani (2004) explain that the degree was introduced at the University of the North in 2003 in response to the South African Government’s commitment to the maintenance and promotion of African languages articulated in the constitution and to a recommendation of the language policy of for Higher education to develop South African languages as mediums of instruction alongside English and Afrikaans, and to promote the higher order cognition advocated by Outcomes Education (OBE) (p.237).

conditions of possibility for academic activity *as such*. We have therefore not explored the question of language of instruction, which is unquestionably a key issue in South Africa. The example drawn from Joseph and Ramani's considers and focuses on this dimension explicitly – students read academic sources in English but discuss the texts and write up their research findings in Sesotho sa Leboa. Thus their approach offers an empowering response to the 'access paradox'. Following our argument in this paper we believe that there is a substantive difference between ensembles of activity and forms of language in everyday and academic communities. Joseph and Ramani also explicitly acknowledge this.<sup>16</sup> We argue that while the language of instruction may be an important factor in promoting academic access, it is not sufficient. For us, the power of Joseph and Ramani's course is that it retains the integrity of the practice to be mastered, situates students in a deeper tradition of inquiry and a wider academic community, and makes it functionally engage in all four strands of activity. Finally, it both contributes to the development of knowledge and systematises and valorises local knowledge.

Briefly, the degree in which this course is located is a bilingual degree that offers two majors – one taught and assessed in English and the other in Sesotho sa Leboa. The exit level outcomes for the degree are organised around:

- a theoretical understanding of multilingual understanding of South Africa;
- researching multilingualism;
- creating resources in Sesotho sa Leboa and other African languages; and
- advocacy for multilingualism in various spheres of public life (Joseph and Ramani, 2004, p.240).

Joseph and Ramani emphasise that the central aim in promoting research into multilingualism in South Africa has been to increase understanding of African languages, to promote cognitive development, to promote increased multilingual proficiency for students and for the nation, through creation of resources in Sesotho sa Leboa and other African languages.

The MUST degree works with multilingualism on two interrelated levels – as the object of inquiry in the course as a whole and as knowledge base and conceptual means.

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<sup>16</sup> See their discussion of Cummins' (1996) model of language proficiency (Joseph and Ramani, pp.245-246)

The knowledge content of the degree is contemporary multilingualism, which has become a body of scholarship in its own right, drawing from established Applied Linguistics disciplines such as Sociolinguistics (including Language Policy and Planning), Psycholinguistics, Syntax, Pragmatics and Discourse Analysis, Critical Language Awareness and Language and Cognition. (Joseph and Ramani, 2004, p.239)

These disciplines are offered to students as conceptual resources and as a range of methodological means which constitute their linguistic practices and assumptions about language. Being offered as objects of inquiry and reflection, these conceptual resources provide the student with a functional necessity to *distantiate* from their taken for granted linguistics practices and assumptions about language. As a tool or resource, Joseph and Ramani explain:

... the degree aims to improve students' competence in English while simultaneously developing their knowledge and use of their own home language as a tool for higher order cognitive work. ... This is an alternative to accessing multilingual content through monolingual means. (Joseph and Ramani, 2004, p.240)

In a teaching and learning unit called 'Small Talk' (which is part of a first year module, MUST 102) the students are first introduced to scholarly studies on small talk, reading in class excerpts of scholarly research. They then are given a variety of oral genres in Sesotho sa Leboa – "traditional healer-patient discourse, small talk, exploratory talk, traditional language games and oral academic discourse" (p.242). Through the lens of modern tools of analysis, the students have to engage with what is commonly considered as 'low-prestige' and 'taken-for-granted genre of "small talk"'.<sup>17</sup> The idea here (which Joseph and Ramani borrowed from ethnographic studies) is that students need to see their taken-for-granted everyday practices "as exotic enough" (p.243) so that through participant observation and reading scholarly research, its significance is demonstrated all-be-it, analytically. So in this case the students take small talk in other languages (non-African), reflections of English teachers of their own tacit knowledge and through these they analyse their own tacit knowledge of Sesotho sa Leboa. This was done through the following sequence: students were exposed to scholarly studies of 'small talk', currently only available in English. The students read these in class. The excerpts were mediated in both English and Sesotho (*distantiation-for-appropriation*). Through group discussions, classroom individual presentations and consultations, the students planned a small research project, engaging with a preliminary *re-research* of

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It is notable that the object of study (local small talk) is not something that the students initially see as relevant. They tend to take it for granted. Yet through systematic study and research, it becomes valued and valorised knowledge.



their taken-for-granted assumptions. At this stage of the course the students were writing up drafts of research, editing and re-editing their drafts, and discussing it with experienced academic and peers. They then conducted interviews and wrote a draft research essay. The whole process was mediated by a Sesotho speaking tutor and resulted in students substantially revising their work. The process ended with the students producing a final written version, *articulating* their findings in oral presentations to their peers who then provided feedback. In Joseph and Ramani's description of the process the social logic of this process begins with 'context embedded language' (Sangoma healer-patient discourse), progresses through the use of 'context-embedded but cognitively demanded talk' – by means of scaffold research tasks which were designed to give students an opportunity for exploratory talk, and through mediations such as consultations and peer feedback students are taken through to the last stage of 'context-reduced', cognitively demanding practices, whereby students consolidate their appropriations into an articulated research .

The challenge of this unit was to develop tasks such that the integrity of the practice, in this case, the study of multilingualism, is retained. The tasks which were selected for mastery were authentic and situated. The tasks instantiated the kinds of problematics addressed by experienced academics and professionals in the discipline (in this case, the study of 'small talk' by Malinowski, Dell Hymes and others in the field of Ethnography of Communication). Using the core principles of this field of study, the course retained the integrity of the logic and point of the practice as a whole, whilst designing a learning path for novices into an academic object of inquiry (the study of an African language), using their own language practices as conceptual means, and mediating these through both students' familiar context (Sethoto) and the to-be-acquired language (academic writing in Sesotho sa Leboa).

In sum, the analysis of the way this course builds epistemic access successfully shows how academic depth can be promoted by taking students through the four strands of activity in a range of different ways and at different levels of engagement. In the process Joseph and Ramani (a) make local knowledge and experience a legitimate object of inquiry, (b) position the inquiry and analysis in a broader and deeper tradition of knowledge and offer learners conceptual lenses which enable them to re-search taken-for-granted knowledge, (c) extend an established field of knowledge, and (d) promote research and articulation which preserve local knowledge, deepen disciplinary knowledge, and inform the development of epistemic resources and linguistic means for future students.

## Conclusion

Insiders to a practice tend to develop such an embodied and practised sense of their actions, activities, and forms of relation within it, (they feel it in their bones, so to speak) that they may cease to consider or reflect on that which informs, underpins and generates their activities, i.e. the form of their practice. This, as we have argued, is precisely one of the functions of academic practice – to promote conscious reflection on that which we know. Our explicit emphasis here has been on the form of activities and knowledge processes in the university. We have not raised questions about the local relevance of knowledge taught or research or the medium of instruction. Although these are important issues in current debates on the idea of the university, our analysis suggests that no matter what content we offer to our students, if we do not deal with the complexity involved in learning through a text-based reality, we believe, that a critical aspect of what we do at the university will continue to remain opaque and thus inaccessible. Our paper has alluded to one way in which research can be oriented to local problems and issues, one that is focussed on the move between the four core strands of academic practice.

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