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EDITORIAL

Tutoring and Mentoring for Student Development

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This guest-edited issue of *JSAA* focuses on tutoring and mentoring and draws in parts on papers that were presented at the 2016 joint conference of the International Consortium for Educational Development (ICED) and the Higher Education Learning and Teaching Association of Southern Africa (HELTASA). Well-planned and implemented tutoring and mentoring programmes provide an effective means to support students to successfully navigate their academic, co- and extra-curricular lives. In the higher education context, tutoring can be defined as curricular and supplemental assistance provided to students by more senior students, academic development practitioners and other learning facilitators, to gain proficiency in basic and more advanced academic skills as well as learning support in relation to specific discipline-related learning materials and learning and assessment tasks. It typically involves breaking up large classes into smaller groups, which enhances the potential of effective participation of students, closer peer relations and staff-student relations, deep learning and student engagement.

Mentoring, in turn, traditionally involves a one-to-one relationship, but it may also take place within a group context, or within cohort mentoring situations, between a more senior mentor and a younger student mentee, whereby the role of the mentor is to provide individualised guidance and support, even if this occurs within a group or cohort setting. Scholarly literature on tutoring and mentoring indicates the various cognitive and affective benefits that tutoring and mentoring have particularly for students from academically disadvantaged backgrounds (Powell, 1997). Thus, the methodologies of tutoring and mentoring are not only important programmatic interventions into students' academic, personal and social development; they also provide successful models for student development even in the core functions of Student Affairs.

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Mentoring programmes are part of core functions of Student Affairs and the diversity of models and varity of programmes are linked to the kind of outcomes and goals set for the context. Mentoring is a staple and core function of Student Affairs, and has recently been used in a more non-traditional way, for instance as a framework for cohort supervision, for student leadership support as well as for advancing excellence, thus expanding notions of mentoring.

Tutoring and mentoring literature and research has not yet adequately explored some of the concerns around tutoring and mentoring approaches being premised on the maintenance and reproduction of culture and status quo. When seniors induct juniors into a context, explicitly or implicitly held assumptions, attitudes and practices are reproduced, often without critique or examination. These are some of the areas that require further exploration and deeper research and some of the articles in this guest-edited issue explore these critical issues – either by presenting original research into tutoring and mentoring, or by way of critically reflecting on their practice thereof.

In addition to the guest-edited articles on tutoring and mentoring, this issue of *JSAA* includes an article by Henry Mason that discusses results from a qualitative study on stress and coping. His study reveals surprising results on students' understanding of stress and it shows that students consider stress as part of their "journey to and through higher education". Furthermore, we publish Elisa Brewis' review of the book *Fairness in Access to Higher Education in a Global Perspective: Reconciling Excellence, Efficiency, and Justice* (2013, edited by Meyer, St. John, Chankseliani and Uribe). The book presents a unique collection of chapters that discuss access to higher education in a range of contexts and higher education systems. Collectively, the chapters propose an alternative approach to higher education access; an approach that offers sustainable and enabling pathways to HE.

For 2018, we are planning that volume 6 of the journal will focus on three main themes: student communities and residence life; the first-year student experience; and the politics of space, language and identity in African higher education. In addition, there is a proposal for a guest-edited issue on diversity and polarisation on campuses, which is highly topical in our context as well as globally. Notwithstanding this thematic orientation, open submissions on any topic are always well received, and will be vetted, reviewed and if possible accepted and published as soon as they are ready, even if they do not fall within the theme of a specific issue. In this respect, it is also important to note that in the course of 2016/17 we have received an increasing number of manuscripts, including manuscripts that do not strictly fall within the scope of the journal. We have therefore decided to focus more on 'student affairs proper'. We also plead with authors to adhere to the basic author guidelines for manuscript submission, and understand that a journal that is only published twice a year will have a lead time from submission to publication of up to six months, of which at least three months are typically taken up by 'quality control processes' such as vetting, peer reviews, and resubmission, and another three to four months by the publishing process per se, involving professional proof-reading, layout and type-setting, and eventually uploading and indexing on our various e-platforms and printing.

Finally, we would like to thank an outstanding scholar and higher education leader, Prof. Akilagba Sawyerr, for his service to the journal. Prof. Sawyerr has served for almost

two years on the *JSAA* Editorial Executive and has recently tendered his resignation from the Executive. His expertise is, however, not entirely lost to the journal. Prof. Sawyerr will continue on the *JSAA* International Advisory Board to provide advice on the general direction and development of the journal, and as peer reviewer for articles that fall within his area of expertise.

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Guest editorial

Tutoring and Mentoring

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South African institutions of higher education (HE) have increasingly come under pressure to broaden access to historically under-represented groups who are often underprepared for tertiary education as a result of apartheid-era secondary schooling (White Paper, 2013). This has resulted in student enrolments becoming increasingly diverse with respect to racial, cultural, socio-economic and linguistic backgrounds (Underhill & McDonald, 2010). In an attempt to address these issues and promote increased throughput rates, institutions of HE have increasingly begun to introduce tutoring, including supplemental instruction (SI) and peer-assisted learning (PAL) and mentoring programmes. In so doing, they have begun to recognise that tutoring and mentoring are not just nice to haves but can provide significant opportunities for engaged teaching and learning, and access to the epistemological discourse of the academy.

However, the value of tutoring and mentoring programmes lies in how effectively they are planned and implemented. Well-developed programmes provide the ideal opportunity for students to actively engage with study content, build relationships within a supportive peer-led environment, and become socially inducted into the institution (Kuh & Pike, 2005). Stakeholders involved with these programmes should have a general understanding of the goals, establishment and maintenance of these programmes in order to maximise their effectiveness (Clarence, 2016). In light of this, tutoring and mentoring programmes require ongoing collaboration between academic staff, tutors/mentors and staff development professionals, in order to create and sustain effective teaching and learning environments for students (Clarence, 2016). Furthermore, students who serve in these positions must receive the necessary training and support to fulfil these roles effectively. Training is critical for developing the capabilities and skills required for peer-led activities (Keup, 2012). Intentional and ongoing training is a prerequisite for any successful tutorial and mentoring programme (Latino & Ashcraft, 2012). Lastly, opportunities should be created for stakeholders to evaluate, reflect and improve practice on an ongoing basis to ensure that these programmes remain effective and responsive to student needs (Underhill, Clarence-Fincham & Petersen, 2014).

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This special issue of the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* (*JSAA*) has encouraged contributors to rethink and re-imagine the pedagogies that underpin tutoring and mentoring practices within the South African HE landscape. The issue offers an exciting diversity of approaches to tutoring and mentoring. Some articles focus on the role of tutoring (including SI and PAL) to promote student engagement, multilingualism, collaborative and cooperative learning, to enhance student learning and to promote quality assessment. Other articles offer a systematic review of student support programmes to highlight effective support practices and guidelines for implementing programmes that promote social integration. Then, at the other end of the continuum, there are articles focusing on online mentoring to promote critical and reflexive thinking and the perceived impact of mentoring programmes on student performance. Lastly, this *JSAA* issue ends with an article that provides an initial national snapshot of the development and experiences of peer leaders at six South African institutions of higher education. The wide variety of topics should offer something of interest to all who have been involved in tutoring and mentoring programmes, and allow organisers and facilitators to share ideas.

Acknowledgements

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This *JSAA* issue, which was driven and guest edited by Nelia Frade, assisted by Najwa Norodien-Fataar, is intended as a vehicle to focus attention on tutoring and mentoring in South African higher education institutions. As part of the TDG grant project, it provides a forum for publishing some of the resulting research as well as that of participants involved in tutoring and mentoring from the wider academic community. Some of the research in this issue benefited from association with and debate at the joint conference of the International Consortium for Educational Development (ICED) and HELTASA in November 2016. It is hoped that the contributions to this issue serve to strengthen debate and exploration of this important component of the higher education landscape.

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Research article

Considering the Role of Tutoring in Student Engagement: Reflections from a South African University

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Abstract

Student engagement has been defined as the extent to which students are engaged in activities that higher education research has shown to be linked with high-quality learning outcomes. The ubiquitous influence of the term 'student engagement' has been felt throughout the higher education landscape. This is especially true for South African higher education where student success has been poor. South African universities have been tasked to improve the student learning experience as a component of improving success. Some of the innovative teaching and learning practices often highlighted by research which are thought to improve student engagement include: having students adopt teaching roles such as peer assessment, tutoring and mentoring. These practices are thought to promote student engagement, leading to greater student academic success. Tutoring can therefore be seen as one of the key strategies to facilitate student engagement in order to achieve academic success. The following paper considers the role of tutoring in student engagement while reflecting on strategies used at a South African university to address the challenges associated with student success.

Keywords

student engagement; tutoring; tutor; higher education; reflections; key strategies; South African universities

Background

South African higher education faces a number of challenges. These include: low pass rates, very high first year dropout rates, low participation rates from previously excluded groups as well as low degree completion rates (Strydom & Mentz, 2010; Wilson-Strydom, 2010; Scott, 2009). In the year 2000, 30% of first year students dropped out in their first year of study while only 22% of first years eventually went on to graduate (Council on Higher Education, 2010). Thus, the preceding decade of South African higher education already demonstrated a number of significant challenges which hamper student success. An impactful and relevant response is therefore needed to address these challenges. Any response to the challenges of student success needs to be based on a student development model that is culturally sensitive, promotes social justice and which recognises the needs of all students (Bourne-Bowie, 2000). The response to the challenges of student success in South Africa has therefore been focused on empirically sound approaches such as student

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engagement (Strydom & Mentz, 2010). Engagement is uniquely poised to address such challenges, especially given its association with achievement, retention as well as social and psychological well-being (Markes, 2000; Crick & Goldspink, 2014).

The Role of Tutoring and Tutors in Higher Education

In South Africa, as well as other countries such as the United States and Canada, postgraduate student tutors are given important roles to play in facilitating student engagement and learning in higher education (Clarence, 2016). Among their duties, assisting in assessment or evaluation of student work, such as assignments or tests, is included as well as consulting with students outside of tutorials. Despite the valuable role tutors play in higher education, there is disparity in the kinds of professional or educational support, training and development offered to them by their universities or the lecturers in whose courses they tutor (Clarence, 2016). Furthermore, the use of tutoring as a strategy to achieve and/or maximise engagement for the purpose of student development and success is hardly a new topic (Topping, 1996; Hock et al., 2001; De Smet et al., 2010).

In higher education, particularly at universities, tutoring has long been a historical model for enhancing students' engagement based on a close student-teacher relationship (Lee, Hong & Choi, 2016). Tutoring programmes form an important part of academic institutions yet are but one way of facilitating student engagement. Tutoring forms an integral part of a university's teaching-learning process and can be characterised as a basic strategy for improving students' academic success and professional goals (Morillas & Garrido, 2014). There is also agreement that high-quality tutoring enhances retention and facilitates advancement throughout the higher education pipeline, whilst positively impacting all students who attend (Girves, Zepeda & Gwathmey, 2005).

The importance of tutoring in higher education can also be seen in its value for students who are at risk of dropping out, and for gender equality and the integration of minorities and/or previously excluded groups (Girves, Zepeda & Gwathmey, 2005; Burrell, 2013). By promoting equal opportunities to learn, equal access to educational resources and social cohesion tutoring has a role to play in redressing inequalities. Tutoring can therefore serve as a vehicle through which to tackle complex social problems. According to Betts and Burrell (2014) complex social problems such as social inclusion should be tackled by processes and strategies which already exist in higher education. One such strategy may therefore be tutoring as a tool for engagement. Thus, the role of tutoring is multifaceted and implicit in teaching and learning, thereby fulfilling an invaluable role in student, graduate and professional development as well as in promoting student engagement.

Student Engagement, Student Success and Tutoring

There is little agreement on a definition of student engagement, although there is strong evidence to support the benefits of student engagement in student success. While a definition of student engagement remains difficult to articulate, it may nevertheless be necessary. For the purpose of this discussion more than one definition may prove useful to consider. Hu and Kuh (2001) defined engagement as the quality of effort that students themselves devote to educationally purposeful activities that contribute directly to desired

educational outcomes. Furthermore, engagement has also been described as "a broad construct intended to encompass salient academic as well as certain non-academic aspects of the student experience" (Coates, 2007, p. 122). These aspects, Coates (2007) held, are: active and collaborative learning; participation in challenging academic activities; formative communication with academic staff; involvement in enriching educational experiences; feeling legitimated and supported by university learning communities. Finally, and more popularly, student engagement has been defined as both the time and effort that students devote to activities that are empirically linked to desired outcomes of college and what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities (Kuh, 2009, p. 683). For the purpose of Kuh's (2009) definition, students' involvement in curricular and co-curricular activities may translate into involvement in their own learning. In addition, students' participation in their institutions may assist them to actively engage in peer learning with faculty staff which may drive student success (Axelson & Flick, 2011; Van Dijk, 2013). Student engagement therefore plays a central role in student success.

Globally, a large body of literature supports the hypothesis that high levels of student engagement yield positive outcomes for the characteristics that promote student success (Astin, 1984, 1993; Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005; Goodsell, Maher & Tinto, 1992; Berger & Milem, 1999; Kuh, 1995; Kuh & Vesper, 1997; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh & Whitt, 2005; Kuh, 2013; Lodge, 2012). These characteristics include: student development, academic achievement as well as social engagement. Student engagement is a critical component needed to ensure student success (Webber, Bauer, Krylow & Zhang, 2013). The overarching conclusion seems to be that students who are most engaged at both a curricular and co-curricular level will achieve better student success.

The Case of the University of the Western Cape

The University of the Western Cape (UWC) is a public university situated in the northern suburbs of the Western Cape province of South Africa. It has a student enrolment of approximately 20 000 students. It was established in 1959 by an Act of Parliament as an ethnic college. The university opened its doors in 1960 and has since been home to very diverse student populations. Since then, it has transformed itself from a small apartheid educational institution to an internationally recognised university with a reputation for excellence in teaching, learning and research (UWC Corporate Guidelines, 2010). It is ranked 7th in Africa and 5th in the country (Times Higher Education, 2015). UWC, much like other South African universities, has tutoring as part of almost all its curricula. My role at UWC has, among others, been that of tutorial coordinator in the Department of Psychology, which forms part of UWC's Faculty of Community and Health Sciences (FCHS).

Student engagement is not new to the university. Various interventions have been used to achieve and pursue ongoing student success. In FCHS, the Student Success project has been a notable vehicle used to investigate and address challenges associated with engagement. Results from the South African Survey on Student Engagement (SASSE, 2015) revealed that on average UWC first- and senior-year students measured markedly similar to their peers (in the SASSE comparison group) on the majority of the engagement indicators. Recent research conducted on student engagement at the UWC has also

highlighted a number of factors which play a role in student engagement. Schreiber and Yu's (2016) study examining student engagement at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) found that engagement patterns are different across race and gender while highly correlated to academic performance. The authors were able to generalise these results onto the South African higher education system (Schreiber & Yu, 2016). Like other South African universities, UWC has also struggled with student retention and throughput. Tutoring has been identified as one of the key strategies to facilitate student engagement and promote student success. Keeping these attempts to measure engagement in mind, as well as considering their results, provides UWC with opportunities to capitalise on engagement in order to improve student success. Tutoring therefore presents as an already present tool and strategy that can be used to improve student success.

Psychology Tutorials

This study is located in the Department of Psychology at the UWC. Psychology tutorials in the department are conducted with the following aims and objectives in mind:

- to practically address the lack of academic support beyond the traditional lecture setting;
- to increase pass and retention rates of modules which include but are not limited to high-impact modules;
- to contribute towards dropout prevention;
- to motivate students to learn; and
- to promote student engagement, thereby increasing student success.

The psychology department has the largest tutorial classes in the Community and Health Sciences faculty. Tutorials are tracked (using registers) and evaluated at the end of each semester. In addition, under the guidance of lecturers, tutors have consultations with students. Tutors are also required to attend compulsory training, consultation with lecturers and support meetings with the tutorial programme coordinator. Tutors fulfil various roles which, broadly speaking, includes; face-to-face tutorials, online tutorials, as well as assisting with tutorial, assignment and test administration. Tutorials are conducted across Psychology undergraduate year levels. Through tutorials, students are able to access more knowledgeable peers, and share diverse solutions to shared challenges. This allows students to build knowledge commons where student engagement is promoted. As part of pursuing student success, the department, with its large undergraduate student numbers, has employed a number of strategies to improve the quality of tutorials while promoting student engagement.

Strategies employed include:

1. the use of postgraduate tutor teams;
2. conducting pedagogically driven content and student-centred tutorials;
3. continuous-simultaneous training and evaluation; and
4. the use of Information Communication Tools (ICTs).

These will be discussed in more detail and in relation to relevant literature, below.

Postgraduate Tutor Teams and their Role in Pedagogically Driven Content, Student-Centred Tutorials

The Department of Psychology at UWC serves large undergraduate classes. Tutorial attendance varies from 10 to 120 students per tutorial. Tutor teams are utilised to facilitate large groups, and senior tutors (typically Masters students who have had previous experience as a tutor), assist first-time and less experienced tutors. Only Psychology Honours, Post-Honours, Masters and PhD students are eligible for tutoring positions. Senior tutors serve as valuable support resources to novice tutors and are available for consultations as well as offering assistance during tutorials and training.

Tutorials follow lectures on a week-by-week basis to ensure close alignment of content with the course curriculum. Exercises and group activities are included in course materials as well as content from lectures which together make up formal tutorial content. Additionally, lecturers and tutors collaborate to deliver quizzes and audio-visual materials. Lecturers guide tutorial content based on the perceived needs of students. The tutorial coordinator presents the results of student evaluations to tutors, who then reflect on these to tailor the format of tutorials.

In the face of challenges such as increasingly large class sizes, recent research points to the need for new pedagogical strategies such as those involving faculty tutor teams (Bond, Czernkowski & Wells, 2012; Crowe, Ceresola & Silva, 2014). Postgraduate psychology tutors in the department are paired with lecturers who teach the respective modules that they will tutor. According to Gucciardi, Mach and Mo (2016) this kind of collaborative approach, while new, holds benefits for lecturers, tutors and students including a much more integrated approach to learning.

While the approach perpetuated in the literature closely resembles that used in the psychology department at UWC, there are slight deviations. One such deviation is that of in-class feedback which in the literature is obtained directly from students (Cook-Sather, 2013; Troisi, 2014; Crowe, Ceresola & Silva, 2014; Gucciardi, Mach & Mo, 2016). In the psychology department at UWC, feedback is obtained from both student evaluations as well as from the literature which informs tutor training.

While the programme's overall structure aligns quite closely to that described in recent literature, at its core, it seems to lack a guiding theoretical framework. Though it may not be wise to rely on a single guiding theoretical framework, a framework remains necessary. The literature on peer tutoring in higher learning seems to recognise Vygotsky's (1962, 1986) social constructivism as a popular guiding pedagogical framework (Asghar, 2010; Stigmar, 2016). Using Asghar's (as cited in Gucciardi, Mach & Mo, 2016) logic, identifying a guiding framework/s might not be as simple as it sounds; "the interaction between peers allows students to enter the zone of proximal development where a less able peer is able to enter a new area of potential development through problem-solving with someone more able" (p. 406). In other words while one might hold a predisposition toward a particular theory for tutorials, another might emerge in practice. Simply put, even in the absence of a guiding theory, psychology lecturers, students and tutors create knowledge and meaning from their interactions, thereby constructing new knowledge. This, after all, is at the very core of social constructivism.

Tutorials require consistent monitoring as a means of ensuring that quality teaching and learning take place. Without a lens (guiding pedagogical framework) through which to monitor tutorials, the very act of monitoring might become futile, especially in the context of academia. The department would therefore need to make clear its guiding theory/theories to avoid redundancy. However, both the former and the latter points remain debatable in light of the core tenets of social constructivism.

Tutors, Training and Evaluation

The different roles that tutors are required to fulfil in the psychology department mean that continuous and, at times, simultaneous training and evaluation is required. It is for these reasons that training is conducted throughout the academic terms. Training topics include: contextual issues, academic skills such as writing, psychosocial topics such diversity, social and personal well-being, train the trainer (which includes tutor and student learning strategies) and e-tools (ICT training). Training occurs in-house (the academic department) as well as at faculty and, recently, at institutional level (university-wide). This, while both time-consuming and labour-intensive, might still not be enough to ensure high-quality tutors who facilitate high-quality student engagement. Tutors, on the other hand, seem to exhibit a generally positive attitude toward training as well as recognise the need for training. The 2016 tutor cohort, when asked whether they would recommend tutor training to a colleague or peer, provided the following comments:

Participant 1: *"Yes, I think training is important for tutors to receive standardised training."*
Participant 3: *"Yes, it puts you at ease."*
Participant 7: *"Yes, it is very helpful especially for the fact that there was time to ask questions."*
Participant 4: *"It is something we can learn from to become better students."*

Continuous training and support of tutors is an important strategy geared toward assisting tutors to develop more holistically (Underhill & McDonald, 2010; Layton, 2013). While the literature on training and support of tutors highlight that there has been improvement in the recognition and development of tutors, it also makes clear that more research-driven approaches may contribute to this end. By implication, these shortcomings illustrate that disciplinary knowledge is not enough to ensure high-quality tutoring, nor does it maximise or promote student engagement. Much like Gucciardi, Mach & Mo (2016), Clarence (2016) makes a strong case for tutors as teaching and learning partners which may be a starting point for building tutoring capacity in higher education. In this way, tutors will share in evaluation feedback, and be more involved in scheduling learning activities and clarifying procedural rules such as registration, deadlines and course requirements (Haggers & Donald, 2013). At UWC, this is already a reality, given the extent of the training provided to tutors, especially considering the way in which evaluations are being optimally used to inform tutoring.

Furthermore, Clarence (2016) identifies the following strategies which can be used to create and sustain teaching and learning environments that are better able to facilitate student engagement through tutorials. These include:

(a) providing tutors with opportunities to develop both their contextual and/or disciplinary knowledge;
(b) endorsing facilitation, assessment and feedback-giving practices that are relevant to their kind and level of tutoring work;
(c) providing guidance and ongoing contact with the lecturers to create a responsive learning environment;
(d) critically re-examining academic departments' support, training and development of tutor capacity; and
(e) re-imagining tutor development and support in structured, research-led and cumulative rather than ad hoc ways.

The latter two strategies seem to be more applicable to tutoring in the psychology department. At UWC, however, strategy (d) might also be extended to include the broader institution. This means that critically re-examining academic departments' support, training and development of tutor capacity ought to be an institutional endeavour rather than a departmental one. Finally, and perhaps more importantly, is strategy (e) which seems to directly address the psychology department's lack of compulsory tutorials. This lack of integration of Psychology tutorials into the curriculum of undergraduate students means that these essential tools/spaces for engagement remain under-utilised and run the risk of taking away rather than adding to student success. Perhaps opening up tutorials for more than continuous and simultaneous training and evaluation, and pursuing more research endeavours in these spaces will yield better engagement, thereby doubling up on student success. With this in mind, research endeavours ought therefore to not only be limited to inform training material. Research conducted in tutorial spaces might also serve to legitimise the need and relevance for tutorials as tools for student engagement within its relevant context.

Information Communication Tools (ICTs)

The activities that tutors undertake in order to deliver content in the UWC psychology department are perhaps evidence of their changing role in higher education. In addition to traditional roles, tutors have recently taken on a more organisational role which has come to include scheduling learning activities and tasks and clarifying procedural rules such as, registration, deadlines and course requirements (Haggers & Donald, 2013). This role of tutors as organisers of educational content and activities has become more apparent in the face of a higher education landscape which relies heavily on ICT infrastructure. Online learning has become increasingly common throughout higher education (Lee, Hong & Choi, 2016). With this reality, tutors have been compelled to take on a more technical support role in addition to their more traditional roles. At the psychology department at UWC, the university's institutional online learning platform is used for online tutorials, thereby facilitating online engagement. Tutors and students form online discussion groups where content is broken down into chunks, queries are addressed and course-related issues are discussed. In conjunction with lecturers, tutors also include: weekly videos, podcasts,

small-group activities, debates and mini panel discussions. Electronic content such as videos and podcasts are vetted by lecturers. The strategies employed by tutors receive overwhelmingly positive responses from students. From this it is apparent that tutors use creative ways to deliver content to students. The timing of these interactive tutorials is also key as most took place shortly before assessment preparation was due to start. It is also during these sessions that attendance spikes dramatically. Students seem to respond well to audio-visual tools. ICTs do therefore have a role to play in engagement.

The nature of higher education institutions has necessitated technology-based learning environments which demand immediate technical support and which are critical in order to maintain student interest and the flow of learning (Wade, Hodgkinson, Smith & Arfield, 2013; Lee, Hong & Choi, 2016). The use of ICTs in the psychology department has therefore expanded student engagement beyond the traditional tutorial space. ICTs such as institutional learning platforms breach traditional barriers, thereby enabling student engagement across vast distances. Even though it may be hard to deny the need for ICTs, its mastery by academics may pose an issue as it includes supporting students by providing technical guidance, direction and feedback on technical problems and ensuring that students harness technical systems to stimulate interactive learning and promote engagement (Denis, Watland, Pirotte & Verday, 2004; Wade, Hodgkinson, Smith & Arfield, 2013; Lee, Hong & Choi, 2016). ICTs therefore necessitate greater commitment from tutors and staff. In addition, ICTs do not come without logistical challenges.

The use of ICTs for tutoring in the psychology department has been plagued by the problem of access. While the online learning environment holds tremendous promise for student engagement, students are often unable to access online platforms. This is largely the result of the large numbers of students enrolled but, perhaps more problematic, is access to the technical resources. The large numbers enrolled far exceeds what the department's and university's computer labs can consistently accommodate. This presents numerous issues and slows the pace at which online learning environments for engagement can be accessed. In the psychology department this has triggered low online attendance rates for e-tutorials.

The logistical challenges of ITCs coupled with the changes to the role of tutors have resulted in lecturers having to adopt additional roles. This places additional pressure on lecturers since they are responsible for guiding tutors as far as module content and assessment-related preparation is concerned. Added to this is that tutorials in the psychology department are not compulsory, yet a clear need for this kind of support exists. The lack of compulsory tutorials means that not all students feel compelled to attend sessions, which results in lecturers having to repeat lecture content during individual student consultations, especially with struggling students. Here, institutions have a broader role to play. Commitment from the institution toward tutorial programmes is critical for student engagement, social integration and ultimately student success (Braxton, Hirschy & McCledon, 2004). Institutions of higher learning must take decisive steps to ensure both human resources as well as infrastructure are available and sufficiently suited to accommodate staff, students and tutors. The role of the higher education institutions in student engagement has been discussed at length across the literature on tutoring.

Van Dijk (2013) maintains that higher education institutions should focus on how they shape their students' academic, interpersonal and curricular activities to promote or enhance student engagement. At UWC, this would entail a greater devotion to ensuring structured, well-funded, and adequately human-resourced tutorial programmes which operate within equally accommodating ICT infrastructure.

Considerations from the Literature

Developing tutorials and tutors as a response to student disengagement

From the literature, it appears that tutoring has a well-defined role to play in student success, especially in the South African context. Thus, a primary consideration may be to develop tutorials and train tutors in order to address disengagement and achieve and maximise student success. Several theorists (Hart, 1992; Hughes, Zhang & Hill, 2006; Ritter & Covic, 2006) suggest that one way in which to promote student engagement is through appropriate and empathic responses to students as individuals. Martinez and Munday's (1998) study of student drop-out rates found that two of the factors for success were students' awareness of their own learning process as well as lecturers' responses to the varied learning needs of the group. Any successful tutorial programmes would therefore need to incorporate careful consideration of the factors highlighted by Martinez and Munday's (1998) study. This awareness suggests that students need to become metacognitively aware of their learning (Gijselaers, 1996). This could lead to greater levels of intrinsically motivated learners rather than mere passive learners (Dube, Kane & Lear, 2012; Lucariello et al., 2016; Brunner, 1990). For the psychology department this may mean that approaches to tutoring need to emphasise learning as an active, constructive as well as integrated process which occurs in the context of relevant social and contextual factors. A social-constructivist guiding pedagogy therefore seems particularly well suited for tutoring in this department.

However, it may also be true that an array of different tutoring approaches and practices exist which could possibly foster student engagement. Strategies such as assignment-assisted tutoring, strategic tutoring, one-on-one tutoring, training-related academic tutoring and peer tutoring, have all been shown to foster student engagement (Topping, 1996; Hock et al., 2001; De Smet et al., 2010). In addition to the strategies mentioned above, the literature on tutoring identifies more coordinated and structured guidelines to achieve student success in tutoring. These include:

(a) tutors must receive training instructional (teaching) strategies;
(b) a tutoring programme should be specifically tailored for each students' needs by making use of a developmental template;
(c) the students' progress should be tracked by the tutor to adjust the strategies and for the improvement of tutoring sessions;
(d) tutors need to work in collaboration with the students' lecturers to improve effectiveness; and
(e) principles of learning should guide tutoring programmes (Gordon, 2009; Gordon et al., 2004).

Given the support throughout the literature, it may be useful to consider how or if the guidelines above can be utilised to improve tutoring and/or thereby maximise engagement within the psychology department. The use of evaluations to inform tutoring as well as the extensive training conducted by the psychology department seem to find agreement in the literature. The concept of tutors as teaching and learning partners and student faculty teams aligns with a number of strategies discussed throughout the literature on effective tutorial programmes and tutoring. This strategy holds a lot of promise for practitioners in and beyond the Department of Psychology at UWC.

Maton (2015) argues that to better facilitate student engagement through tutorials the following is needed: support and development programmes that are coherent, guided and underpinned by contextually relevant theory and research which may over time adequately build tutors' knowledge and skills in relation to tutoring. These considerations are especially valuable for the psychology department's tutoring programme. Firstly, Maton's (2015) argument asserts the importance of pedagogy and its role in tutoring practice. The recommendations discussed above also allow for the creation of a criterion of tutor competency and best practice. Secondly, research focusing on student needs can guide tutor development to ensure relevant tutor competencies, skills and attributes.

Conclusion

The literature on student engagement and tutoring provides a number of key strategies which can be used to address the challenges faced in higher education globally and in South Africa. Tutoring is a key strategy which promotes and can drive engagement in both traditional classroom settings and online learning environments. Strengthening tutorial programmes and the capacity of staff can serve higher education institutions well, especially when improvements and development efforts are based on research and rooted in context. Maximising and promoting student engagement through tutorials is crucial if South African universities are to responsively address the challenges of high dropout rates and student success. Additionally, ICTs can be viewed as useful in engaging students in meaningful ways and responding to students' needs and interests. Finally, within the scope of this paper and the literature discussed, the UWC Department of Psychology's tutorial programme has some valuable contributions to offer.

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Research article

Peer-Assisted Learning Programme: Supporting Students in High-Risk Subjects at the Mechanical Engineering Department at Walter Sisulu University

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Abstract

The majority of the students who enroll at the Walter Sisulu University (WSU) in South Africa are not equipped with the necessary academic/learning skills to cope with the university environment, especially in Mechanical Engineering. The Department of Higher Education and Training (2013, p. 17), further states that "students' support is crucial to ensure that students adapt to the demands of college life and that they can meet the demands of college programmes". Particularly in South Africa, the school environment might also contribute to poor student performance as a result of insufficient student support, and a lack of facilities and resources.

In order to address this gap, a Peer-Assisted Learning (PAL) programme was implemented to provide support targeting high-risk subjects for at-risk students in Mechanical Engineering at WSU. The programme therefore is pro-active and student-driven in that senior students assist junior students with their academic work and learning processes. The programme is designed to encourage collaborative and cooperative learning approaches during group sessions and active student engagement to support student learning (Laal & Laal, 2012). The programme requires substantial resources and time commitments. It is important from an operational, learning, and student perspective to understand in what ways the PAL programme assists students (if at all). Eliciting the experiences of students also helps the department to design interventions from a student-centred perspective using the lens of learning theories.

This qualitative case study explores the student experience of the Peer-Assisted Learning (PAL) programme. Open-ended questionnaires/survey from 20 first-year students elicited their perceptions and experiences of the PAL programme. Responses were analysed thematically. Findings indicated that the students had useful insights that may contribute to revising the programme. Aspects mentioned were improved study skills, improved time management, and improved communication, problem-solving and presentation skills. The study suggests that the PAL programme also creates a safe (where students of the same age come together to discuss concepts of the subject under the guidance of the senior student as an experienced student), comfortable and conducive environment for first-year students' learning. However, the gender dynamics within the programme point to revisions needed in the programme to address the gap on the gender balance as only six out of the twenty participants in this study were female.

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The study contributes to our understanding of aspects of PAL for first-year Mechanical Engineering students at WSU, as it affords students the opportunity to interpret, integrate and apply information/knowledge acquired during lectures and to interact effectively in small-group sessions.

Keywords

peer-assisted learning; peer-assisted learning leaders; at-risk students; mechanical engineering; university of technology

Introduction

Arising from the transformation of higher education (HE) in South Africa and the diverse groups of students enrolling at Walter Sisulu University (WSU), the institution had to find and adopt diverse means to accommodate first-year Mechanical Engineering students, particularly those from educationally disadvantaged groups. According to Horsthemke (2009, p. 3), "there has been a strong drive towards democratising education at all levels: primary, secondary and tertiary, following the first democratic election in South Africa in 1994". After 1994, the education system should have been revised in democratising education for all students in all levels as noted above, to ensure that student learning programmes accommodated underprepared students for HE. Seven years later Horsthemke (2009) points out that the strong drive towards democratising education is still ongoing in the universities. Many first-year students are under-prepared for HE and thus innovative learning and peer-to-peer intervention strategies are needed for these students to succeed (Brownlee, Walker, Lennox, Exley & Pearce, 2009; Jamelske 2009; Kuh, 2001; Morosanu, Handley & O'Donovan, 2010; Pike & Kuh, 2005; Schrader & Brown, 2008, cited by Ginty & Harding, 2014). It is important that institutions note the issue of underpreparedness of first-generation students. In institutions where many first-year students are under-prepared, intervention measures are needed, and student academic support such as PAL programmes have been found to promote success in Australia (Devine & Jolly, 2011, p. 219). The extent to which our PAL programme meets students' needs is yet unknown.

The focus at WSU is on learning policies and programmes which enhance learning, based on a philosophy that all learners can learn (Eiselen & Geyser, 2003). It is important to note that all students can engage in increased learning when learning systems are in place. Learning is enhanced when learners have supportive learning programmes, feel a sense of ownership, have control over their learning processes, and are able to learn from each other in a safe and trusting learning environment (Glynn, MacFarlane, Kelly, Cantillon & Murphy 2006). In light of this, the Mechanical Engineering Department at WSU has identified first-year high-risk courses with low pass rates every semester/year. For high-risk courses, the Centre for Learning and Teaching Development (CLTD) unit has introduced a PAL programme to foster cross-year support between students on the same course. The PAL programme, based on work done by Capstick and Fleming (2004) encourages students to support each other and to learn cooperatively under the guidance of trained senior students, called PAL leaders (PALLs).

Context of the PAL Programme at WSU

As the former PAL coordinator and the observer of the research presented here, the context of the programme at WSU and some of the structural hurdles that have been reported in the PAL departmental contact persons' meetings, which were usually hosted three to four times a year, will now be discussed. The aim was for the departments (chosen lecturer/s as PAL departmental contact person/s) to report on how they perceived the underprepared student problem.[1] If one subject or course was identified as "high risk", its students were enrolled for a PAL intervention. A high-risk subject/course was identified when, over a three-year period, that subject had an average pass rate below the institutional and departmental percentage (Centre for Learning and Teaching Development, 2010, p. i). In light of this, all the students in that particular course are then regarded as at-risk and the PAL programme is then compulsory for these students.

Some of the difficulties of running the programme extend to staff and management and are mentioned below to situate the context of the study.

Researcher Observations during PAL Operation

Lecturers themselves feel threatened when their subjects are identified for PAL intervention. They sometimes oppose their second year students' (PALLs) involvement in assisting, facilitating learning and mentoring on the course. Heads of departments (HODs) do not understand why there is a need for PAL interventions even if they see that performance in some subjects is not satisfactory. Some lecturers are not keen on helping their PAL leaders with the information (learning materials) required for the programme before the PAL leader conducts the PAL session. In these instances, HODs have to insist that their staff members cooperate in the programme; however some HODs instead "protect" their staff members from giving time to the programme. This is in spite of the WSU PAL procedure manual that subject lecturers should support their PAL leaders as it is part of their role as subject lecturers. This suggests that more departmental awareness of the PAL programme is imperative.

In the following section I discuss the meanings of "at-risk students"; explore reports of various peer-assisted learning programmes; and show how three learning theories inform the PAL programme at WSU.

Literature Review

At-risk students in higher education institutions

Although PAL is meant for high-risk subjects/courses at WSU, it is noticeable that all first-year students are at-risk because of these high-risk subjects and, of course, at-risk students need to be considered for the PAL programme to retain them in higher education as part of the retention strategy of the university. At WSU at-risk students are not stigmatised by identifying them specifically, as they are told that all students with high-risk subjects should attend PAL programme sessions.

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[1] A number of these issues are also mentioned in the data collected in this case study.

According to Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) (2001, cited by Eiselen & Geyser, 2003, p. 118), at-risk students are described as those who, "because of limited English proficiency, poverty, race, geographic location, or economic disadvantage, face a greater risk of low educational achievement". Students are more likely to drop out during the first two years of study, with the highest percentage dropping out during the first year. McGrath and Braunstein (1997, cited by Eiselen & Geyser, 2003) note that attrition during the first year of study remains a problem despite extensive research having been conducted and intervention programmes implemented.

Students who are disadvantaged educationally, socially and financially are at greater risk of failure and withdrawal. Institutions of HE have a responsibility to provide the necessary learning environment for the engagement of all students including those deemed "at-risk" (Coates, 2005, cited by Pearson & Naug, 2013). Pearson and Naug (2013) further declare that these students are in need of extra assistance and guidance to succeed in HE. According to Bitzer (2005, p. 172), "for many years in South African higher education it was believed that only those who 'fit' higher education would eventually be successful". "At-risk" students are more likely to blame outside sources (circumstances, people or things), for example, parental interference in choice of study direction, as reasons why they and other students like them are unsuccessful. These students, therefore, need special attention, and higher education institutions should accommodate "at-risk" students (Pearson & Naug, 2013). Findings of this study will assist in identifying aspects of the programme that are effective and those that require attention as PAL is seen as one of the potentially important intervention strategies for student academic support at the tertiary level (Van der Meer & Scott, 2009; Kieran & O'Neill, 2009; Allen & Court, 2009; Cheng & Walters, 2009; Couchman, 2009, in Devine & Jolly, 2011).

Intervention: Peer-Assisted Learning programme

According to Topping and Ehly (1998, p. 1, cited by Wadoodi & Crosby, 2002, p. 241), PAL is defined as "the acquisition of knowledge and skill through active help and support among status equals or matched companions". PAL essentially is about peer learning and individual development. Glynn, MacFarlane, Kelly, Cantillon and Murphy (2006, p. 2) claim that "pairing junior and senior undergraduate students provides psychological support and aids professional and personal development". This enhances knowledge and skills of individuals during PAL sessions. Capstick, Fleming and Hurne (2004, p. 3) from Bournemouth University (U.K.) "confirm that PAL sessions are intended to offer a safe, friendly place to help students adjust to university life faster, improve their study habits, acquire a clear view of course direction and clear expectations, and enhance their understandings of the subject matter of their course through group discussion and interaction". Capstick et al. (2004) posit that PAL may be defined as a scheme for learning support and enhancement that enables students to work cooperatively under the guidance of senior students in their second year.

The environment in the WSU PAL sessions looks conducive for all students in the programme as Capstick et al. (2004) describe above. Most usually, second-year students, called peer-assisted learning leaders (PALLs), facilitate weekly study support sessions for groups of first-year students after undergoing training. Dymoke and Harrison (2008, p. 11) concretise the idea of PAL sessions when they assert: "Much informal learning takes place outside the formal educational setting". In most of these studies the notion of learning is used generically; in this study learning is explored through a combination of learning theories.

PAL is conducted in an informal education setting which is linked to the understanding that PAL sessions consist of active, collaborative and cooperative learning. An additional advantage of PAL is alluded to by Speirs (2013), that during PAL many senior students exchange learning habits and strategies while working with junior students. In the next section, I synthesise the key features across three relevant learning theories in relation to the PAL programme.

Theories and relations guiding Peer-Assisted Learning (PAL)

Figure 1 illustrates how the PAL programme design draws on three compatible learning theories for the benefit of integrated learning. Active, collaborative and cooperative learning are discussed further below.

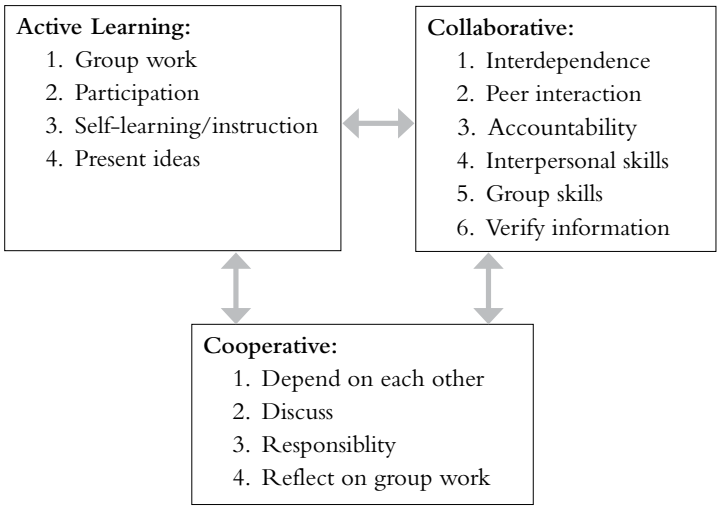

Figure 1: Learning theories

Active learning

In PAL, students are engaged in active learning. Active learning is defined as any instructional method that engages students in the learning process (Pinheiro & Simoes, 2012). According to Gunga and Ricketts (2007, cited by Ceza, 2012), students construct

their knowledge and solve problems as they view topics from multiple perspectives. Learners become autonomous managers of their learning and in the process even work out questions for which they will seek answers from other sources and the internet.

Pundak, Herscovitz, Shacham, and Wiser-Biton (2009) mention *domains* of active learning perceptions that should be addressed by teacher training developers. These are;

(i) investigate various ways to activate students in a large class, particularly by means of group work;
(ii) encourage student participation in classes in order to ensure that they understand the study material and are successful in the course;
(iii) give students the opportunity to learn by themselves topics from the syllabus, following proper guidelines given by the instructor; and
(iv) involve students in assignments that encourage them to present ideas, new critical arguments and ideas by themselves.

These recommendations were used in the design of the PAL programme.

Collaborative learning (CL)

The second box in Figure 1, Collaborative Learning (CL), links very well with active learning and is the second key pedagogical aspect of the programme.

In PAL, the intention is for students to "collaborate to supply missing information or attempt solutions to problems as they help each other and thinking skills and knowledge and understanding of course subject matter may develop within the cooperative environment of the PAL session" (Congos & Schoeps, 1998, p. 5, cited by Capstick & Fleming, 2004, pp. 2–3). In this regard, CL is an educational approach that involves groups of learners working together to solve a problem, complete a task, or create a product (Laal & Laal, 2011). Laal and Laal (2011) further assert that CL occurs when small groups of students help each other to learn. In our programme these groups consisted of senior students and junior students, where they discuss the subject matter after the lecture outside of lecture time.

Arendale (2016) supports these opinions, stating that CL refers to a wide range of formal and informal activities that include any form of peer-student interaction. CL adheres to these principles:

(i) positive interdependence is established in the group through adoption of different roles that support the group moving to complete a goal;
(ii) peers interact with one another;
(iii) activities are structured to establish individual accountability and personal responsibility;
(iv) development of interpersonal and small-group skills; and
(v) group processing of small-group activities through verification of verify information accuracy (Cuseo, 2002; Johnson, Johnson, Holubec & Roy, 1984, cited by Arendale, 2016, p. 4).

Cooperative learning

The third approach guiding the programme is cooperative learning, where students work together as a group to achieve the same learning goal, such as mastering and assimilating the same learning content.

Donelan (1999, cited by Capstick & Fleming, 2004) presents some research evidence to suggest that PAL is able to effect positive outcomes through the consolidation of knowledge through *participation*; *cooperative, informal learning through discussion*; and *enabling social integration of students.*

Lundeberg and Moch (1995, cited by Capstick & Fleming, 2004) also suggest that the personal, cooperative approach of PAL influences the cognition of students in positive ways, including enhancing the ability to apply abstract ideas. According to Johnson and Johnson (1989, cited by Chapstick & Fleming, 2004), cooperative learning consistently produces higher achievement than either competitive or individual effort.

Johnson and Johnson (1994, cited by Killen, 2010, p. 215) mention five basic elements that need to be present in small-group work to be considered cooperative, namely:

(i) students must depend on one another by working together to achieve a specific goal, which means interdependence (as per Figure 1);
(ii) there must be continuous, direct interactions where students have discussions and exchange ideas on tasks. They are aware that each member of the group is responsible and that they will only be successful if their partners are successful: this leads to accountability towards each other (see Figure 1);
(iii) each member of the group is responsible for a part of the learning and accountable for the success of each member of the group, and is thus responsible for their learning;
(iv) every member of the group must apply interpersonal skills such as listening to other members, asking questions to eliminate uncertainties, discussing, negotiating and constructively solving problems and differences: this means collaboration is fostered (see Figure 1); and
(v) groups must reflect on the outcomes and how they function as a group, to digest information learnt and reflect on information and understanding of the subject.

It is interesting to note the common features of each of the three frameworks. Figure 1 has been organised to highlight these overlaps. For example in point 1: "Group work; Depend on each other; Interdependence" all point to a collegial rather than competitive/individual way of working.

Background: PAL at Walter Sisulu University

PAL has been introduced at WSU as an academic intervention programme to contribute to the throughput rate of the university. Senior students called PAL leaders (PALLs) are tasked with helping first-year students with their academic work. The features of PAL include: the training of PAL leaders by the PAL coordinator in study techniques, group management and facilitation skills, as well as how to conduct the PAL sessions. Training runs for a period

of two full days. PAL leaders are shown different ways to manage a PAL session. They are also expected to demostrate what they have learnt (skills) during the last hours of the second day of training. PAL departmental contact persons are involved in the training to introduce/share their departmental expectations. Sessions on customer care and pastoral care are included as they will deal with diverse groups of students.

During the training, we demonstrate how PAL sessions should be conducted: ideally, the group session must be made up of at least 45–50 students per PAL leader. This is as per the general PAL procedure manual of the university. For Mechanical Engineering, only 40 students registered and 20 participated as per this study, with the following gender ratio: 14 (70%) males and 6 (30%) females (see Table 2). Sessions consist of students meeting with the PALLs for two hours each day throughout the week, as per the WSU student employment policy, which states that undergraduate student assistants should only work 10 hours per week (CLTD, 2008, p. 8).

PAL leader/lecturer relationship

PAL leaders and lecturers meet for one hour every week for PAL session preparation, which is essential as PAL leaders are also students and not subject specialists or experts. Lecturers have to equip them with their learning materials and topics to cover during PAL sessions. The material/topics should have been covered first by the lecturer during his/her lecture; the PAL leader addresses the gaps in understanding which students might have.

The lecturer and PAL leader provide weekly feedback to each other regarding student cooperation in the session, performance during the lecture and performance on the task/tests and assignment writing. The lecturer is expected to encourage the PAL leader and reflect on his/her performance/conduct when required by the PAL office.

PAL leaders' role at WSU: To facilitate two-hour daily of PAL sessions; circulate attendance register per session; report to PAL coordinator weekly/monthly; and meet with the subject lecturer one hour per week (Centre for Learning and Teaching Development, PAL procedure manual 2010).

Intended benefits of the PAL to students: Access to more student academic support; help on assignment writing; and study skills techniques.

Benefits of PAL to PAL leaders: PAL leaders are paid an hourly rate for 40 hours of work done per month; get opportunities to meet and converse with the subject lecturer; are recognised by the entire department based on their performances and are often employed as junior lecturers within the institution. They sometimes deviate from their intended field/discipline and move into the academic field because of their experience as PAL leaders.

PAL session attendance: PAL sessions are compulsory; all students taking high-risk modules are expected to attend PAL sessions; and the coordinator observes the PAL sessions daily.

PAL coordinator's role: To supervise the PAL sessions daily; oversee PAL programme activities including administrative work; update the PAL manual and procedure manual yearly; and evaluate the PAL programme's progress quarterly/annually.

WSU models its PAL programme on the Peer-Led Team Learning (PLTL) process developed at the City University of New York (CUNY) (Arendale, 2016, pp. 9–10) with a few differences elaborated on below. WSU also conducts weekly PAL sessions, two hours per day, where PAL leaders meet with their PAL students for PAL sessions.

Guiding principles for PLTL at City University of New York include the following:

(i) The programme is integral to the course, and two hours of workshop time is required weekly. At WSU two hours of session time per day (Centre for Learning and Teaching Development, student employment policy, 2008:8);
(ii) Peer leaders are trained in group leadership and course content; activities and materials are challenging yet accessible. In addition, at WSU, PLLs are trained in study skills, customer service (taking care of assisted peers during and after sessions) and leadership;
(iii) Academic staff members are deeply involved in the programme. At WSU, the academic participant is called the PAL contact person or liaising person and lecturer (Centre for Learning and Teaching Development, 2010:3);
(iv) Physical space and environments are conducive to discussion and learning. At WSU, space (venue) is a problem; and
(v) The programme has strong support from the institution (Arendale, 2016:39). At WSU we are still in the process of getting buy-in from some resistant faculties, although the majority of faculties do support the programme.

Methods

This paper is part of a larger study. For this aspect, a qualitative research methodology was applied. The following research questions were investigated:

1. What constitutes an effective PAL programme for Mechanical Engineering students?
2. What are first-year Mechanical Engineering students' perceptions regarding the existing PAL programme?

The researcher administered a qualitative survey to 20 of the 40 first-year students (PAL students) in the Mechanical Engineering Department.

Purposeful sampling was used because I wanted to use participants who were deeply involved in the PAL programme. I assumed that these participants would provide rich information about students' perceptions. Students chosen were those who most frequently attended PAL sessions. As much as the PAL programme is compulsory, the gender of participants was not intentional, as the sample was drawn on the basis of participants who had participated in the PAL programme. However, as engaged students, they were able to provide useful insights into the PAL which will inform future interventions. It must be acknowledged that more negative perceptions, or different perceptions could have emerged from those who did not attend many sessions. This may be an important aspect for further investigation.

Data collected from the questionnaires were analysed and themes identified. Open-ended questionnaires were used to collect data from first-year students in order to elicit their perceptions and experiences of the programme. These questionnaires were administered in a lecture venue as distributed hard copies, and the researcher was present to guide the process. The questionnaires consisted of 22 questions.

Findings

The survey was administered to 20 first-year students in the PAL programme. Their biographical data were collected in order to establish the demographic profile of the participants, such as their age, gender and level of study, as part of section A in the questionnaire. The demographic background of the participants is provided in Tables 1 and 2 below.

Table 1: Age of the students in the PAL programme (n = 20)

Age	16-18	19-22	23-25	Total
PAL students	2 (10%)	17 (85%)	1 (5%)	20 (100%)

Seventeen (85%) of the respondents were between the ages of 19-22 years, two respondents (10%) between the ages of 16-18 and one respondent (5%) was in the 23-25 age group. This indicates that the majority of the participants were between 19 and 22 years of age for the first-year students.

The gender/sex of the respondents in the PAL programme is shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Gender of the students in the PAL programme

Gender	Males	Females	Total
PAL students	14 (70%)	6 (30%)	20 (100%)

Table 2 indicates that 14 participants (70%) were male and 6 participants (30%) were female. Yet in the whole class the student gender consisted of ±25 males and ±15 females, which is probably related to the perception that females do not take engineering courses in numbers and continue to be under-represented in the engineering profession (Kaspura, 2012). All the PALLs were male. When advertisements were placed for female PALLs to apply, no female students applied to become PALLs. This gender bias requires further investigation and remediation.

In the course of analysis, the following themes pertaining to programme effectiveness emerged. These themes were also covered in the literature review.

Identified themes:

(a) Safe and friendly space
(b) Adjust to unversity life
(c) Study habits
(d) Venues problematic
(e) Institutional support needed

Figure 2: Themes on programme effectiveness

The themes identified are understood as follows:

(a) **Safe and friendly space** arises as illustrated in these participants' responses:

"I feel safe and comfortable during PAL sessions because our PAL leaders treat us like brothers and sisters."

"Even if you have questions about their methods, they only shed light and do not take it personal like some lecturers I know."

"This PAL session is like you are with your family where you feel safe and free and my mind is peaceful when in PAL sessions."

"I feel safe because during PAL sessions we are all students."

"Even if you have questions about their methods, they only shed light and do not take it personal like some lecturers I know."

These responses suggest that the environment during PAL sessions is safe, friendly and comfortable for them to learn, as compared to that of their lecture/class time.

(b) **Adjusting to university life:**

Eighteen of the 20 respondents agreed that PAL had played a big role in their adjusting quicker to university life.

"If it was not for PAL I would not be doing S2 by now."

"When it comes to academic records of any individual of this university the help was a lot."

"They did the most important thing to me."

The adjustment to university life would contribute to first-year students adjusting academically in the university.

(c) **Study habits:**

"My study skills have improved ever since I attended PAL sessions and before I was just studying as a high school leaner, but now I got skills."

(This is confirmed by Keenan (2014: 3), as one of the aims of PAL viz. "to develop independent learning and study skills to meet the requirements of higher education".)

"PAL helped me to practise before I write the test."

"They make the assignment easier for us."

"They taught me of preparedness for test."

(d) **Venues problematic:**

Lack of venues was a serious problem for these students. As indicated, lack of venues may have caused them to miss some PAL sessions because it was difficult to get venues. There was a feeling that if the PAL sessions could have specific venues allocated for them, it would mean more regular attendance of the PAL programme. Timetabling of PAL sessions was also a problem as it was not possible to timetable the sessions when venues were limited. Lack of venues may have contributed to the poor timetabling of PAL sessions.

"I think they should draft timetable so that we all [are] aware about our PAL sessions."

"There's a lack of venues."

(e) **Institutional support needed:**

"I think they should draft timetable so that we all [are] aware about our PAL sessions."

More issues were highlighted that are detrimental to the PAL sessions such as the lack of venues, poor time management by PAL students, and PAL sessions not being timetabled; these issues were highlighted as aspects least liked of the PAL programme.

Discussion

The aim of the research was to establish how students experienced the PAL programme by analysing a sample of students' perceptions. Their perceptions contribute to understanding features of an effective programme. Hence the second research question states: *"What are first-year Mechanical Engineering students' perceptions regarding the existing PAL programme?"* The perceptions of the students who attended the PAL programme were obtained by means of several questions asked about the skills they gained, how they benefited from attending the PAL programme, their opinions about the PAL leaders, and what they liked most and least about PAL.

The results indicated that PAL students benefited from the PAL programme, that it helped them with course direction and expectations, and that it also helped them with their assignments and tests. Improved performance in the assignments and tests further helped them to pass almost all their subjects. The general sentiment is that the first-year students involved are satisfied with the PAL programme in their department. Learning skills gained by the PAL students were indicated as improved study skills and problem-solving skills, the ability to cope with assignments, tests and the course as a subject/module, improved self-esteem and confidence gained by first-year students. PAL students indicated improvement in their understanding of the subject matter and improved academic performance from attending PAL sessions. They also gained confidence on how to ask and answer questions during PAL, which they did not have during lectures. The purpose of learning became clearer. They also learnt the importance of managing time for their studies.

Conclusion

The data suggests that PAL benefited the students. However, issues were also identified such as lack of allocated venues and the need for timetabling specific slots for PAL sessions. Nevertheless, PAL has helped at-risk students academically and socially, as respondents indicated that they had managed to pass tests and complete assignments, and that they adjusted more easily to university life. They claimed that their study habits improved, as some managed to proceed to the next level because of the assistance in PAL sessions.

The PAL sessions were viewed as safe, friendly, comfortable and informal and at-risk students received sufficient help from PAL leaders. It seems that the deliberately designed structure using Active, Collaborative, and Cooperative learning is a beneficial pedagogical approach for such PAL support programmes. Glynn, MacFarlane, Kelly, Cantillon and Murphy (2006, p. 2) claim that "pairing junior and senior undergraduate students provides psychological support and aids professional and personal development". Eiselen and Geyser (2003) further declare that at-risk/first-year students feel more insecure, and that they

have a greater need for personal attention, assistance and guidance than other students. The results of this study seem to confirm these findings for our group of underprepared South African students.

Limitations in the Study

It was noticed that some students did not attend the PAL sessions regularly. Therefore, acknowledgement of more negative perceptions, or different perceptions could have emerged from those who did not attend many sessions. This may be an important aspect for further investigation. In addition, when advertisements were placed for female PALLs to apply, no female students applied to become PALLs. This gender bias requires further investigation and remediation.

Recommendations Suggested to Address the Concerns

- Sufficient venues for PAL sessions must be allocated by the university;
- An academic staff member must coordinate PAL session activities in the department;
- A timetable for PAL sessions should be drafted without delay when venues have been secured; and
- Subject lecturers to take note of the imperative to be approachable to their students in class.

While these recommendations may not seem far-reaching, they do point to the need for structure and institutional support for such programmes. The beneficial aspects of relationship, collegiality and peer mentoring are confirmed.

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Research article

From Inky Pinky Ponky to Improving Student Understanding in Assessment: Exploring the Value of Supplemental Instruction in a Large First-Year Class

Mianda Erasmus*

Abstract

Large classes are a reality in many tertiary programmes in the South African context and this involves several challenges. One of these is the assessment process, including the provision of meaningful feedback and implementing strategies to support struggling students. Due to large student numbers, multiple-choice questions (MCQs) are often used in tests, even though researchers have found possible negative consequences of using MCQs. Giving appropriate feedback has been identified as a strategy to remedy some of these negative consequences. This paper reports on action research in which an intervention strategy was implemented in a large first year Psychology class where Supplemental Instructors (SIs) were used to give detailed feedback to students after assessments. The lecturer first modelled how to give feedback by discussing the MCQs in detail with the SIs and identifying possible errors in their reasoning and meta-cognitive processes. The SIs subsequently repeated this feedback process in their small-group sessions. After each assessment, students who performed poorly were advised to attend a certain number of SI sessions before the next test, and their attendance, even though voluntary, was monitored to determine the effectiveness of the intervention.

Students' performance in subsequent tests was compared and the results seem to indicate that attending SI sessions was mostly associated with improved test results. This strategy also appears to encourage attendance of SI sessions. In addition, students' responses in a feedback survey indicate an overall positive perception of this practice. These results can inform other lecturers teaching large classes and contribute to quality enhancement in assessment and better support for students.

Keywords

supplemental instruction; assessment; MCQs; feedback; modelling

Introduction

Tertiary education plays an important role in the development of South Africa (DHET, 2013). The South African Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) aims to improve quality in universities, and the White Paper for Post-School Education and Training published in 2013 indicated the envisaged increase of enrolment numbers from 17.3% to 25% (DHET, 2013). However, at the same time, funding is reduced, leading to

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an increase in the number of large classes, possibly negatively influencing the quality of education (Hornsby, Osman & De Matos-Ala, 2013; Hornsby & Osman, 2014).

What constitutes a large class depends on the discipline and the learning environment, but large classes are a reality in many tertiary programmes in the South African context and this involves several challenges, especially in terms of the quality of education (Hornsby, Osman & De Matos-Ala, 2013). One of the challenges is the assessment process, including the provision of meaningful feedback and implementing strategies to support struggling students (Mulryan-Kyne, 2010). Due to large student numbers, multiple-choice questions (MCQs) are often used in tests. Although researchers have found possible negative consequences of using MCQs, giving appropriate feedback has been identified as a strategy to remedy some of these negative consequences (Butler & Roediger, 2008).

Supplemental Instruction (SI) is a model focusing on high-risk courses, designed to support and assist students academically by using collaborative learning in peer-facilitated sessions (Arendale, 1994). A lot of research has been undertaken on the use of Supplemental Instruction to support students both globally (Blanc, DeBuhr & Martin, 1983; Congos & Schoeps, 1998; Etter, Burmeister & Elder, 2001; Hensen & Shelley, 2003; Huang, Roche, Kennedy & Brocato, 2017; Kochenour, Jolley, Kaup & Patrick, 1997; Lindsay, Boaz, Carlsen-Landy & Marshall, 2017; Martin & Arendale, 1992; McCarthy, Smuts & Cosser, 1997; Ning & Downing, 2010; Summers, Acee & Ryser, 2015) and in South Africa (Harding, Engelbrecht & Verwey, 2011; Harding, 2012; Paideya & Sookrajh, 2010; Paideya & Sookrajh, 2014; Zerger, Clark-Unite & Smith, 2006; Zulu, 2003) and these studies clearly show the value of SI on different levels and its effectiveness in terms of improved student performance. However, fewer studies have explored the specific role that SI can play in the assessment process, or more specifically, in the feedback after assessment, using a quantitative methodology. The value of this study therefore lies in this niche area.

This paper reports on the first cycle of an action research project in which I implemented an intervention strategy in my large first year Psychology class. I write this paper as lecturer, who identified a problem, but also as researcher who subsequently looked for a solution to this problem and assessed the effectiveness of the intervention. The feedback strategy involved Supplemental Instruction leaders (SIs) and the use of modelling. Using SI principles such as integrating skills and content, metacognition of learning, cooperative learning and modelling (Arendale, 1993, 1994) I modelled to the SIs how to give detailed feedback to students after assessments, how to facilitate these sessions in order to help students to identify the errors they made, to understand the work better and to prepare for the following assessment. SIs subsequently repeated this process in their SI sessions. Students who performed poorly in tests were tracked to determine if the intervention helped them to improve their marks. By using a t-test, their marks before and after the intervention were compared. Students also shared their perceptions of SI and the intervention in an online survey. The main purpose of this article is to explore the value of SI in improving the assessment process in a large class.

The outline of this article will follow the process as the action research unfolded, namely: identification of the problem, planning to act, action, evaluation, reflection and

finally improvement for the next cycle. Firstly, the specific context of this research will be described, then the challenge that was experienced in this teaching and learning environment will be explained, followed by a short literature review that helped to inform the intervention strategy. The next section will explain what the intervention strategy entailed and how it was implemented. This will lead to the research questions in terms of evaluating the intervention, the research that was conducted, the results and discussion, and a reflective section on the limitations and what will be considered for the second cycle.

Background

Context of the study

The context of this research is a first year psychology class of about 600 students taught by one lecturer (me). As a result of venue size restrictions, the students are divided into two groups. The first semester module is 'Introduction to Psychology', which covers a broad span of topics, including a lot of new concepts and theories which students often find quite overwhelming and challenging. In the second semester the module is 'Social and Community Psychology'. Since these students are first years, the academic programme is structured in such a way as to assist them in the adaptation from high school. Many different assessment opportunities are provided to encourage students to study the material in small chunks. To check their understanding, there is an online MCQ quiz after every chapter. They also write four class tests, a semester test, have a group assignment and some other activities before they write the exam.

Due to the large numbers and limited resources, multiple choice questions (MCQs) are used – both in the continuous assessment in the form of online quizzes, as well as in the more formal class and semester tests. Preparing high-quality MCQs which are at the correct cognitive level and consisting of a good question (stem) and plausible choices (distractors) (Tarrant, Ware & Mohammed, 2009) allows me to assess knowledge and understanding of the theories, as well as include application-type questions by using scenarios. This method makes it possible to give prompt feedback with the marks available either immediately (in the case of online quizzes) or within a few hours after a test has been written.

Each context has its own challenges and it is important to keep the student profiles in mind (Scott, 2015; Van Rooy & Coetzee-Van Rooy, 2015). Many of the students in this particular context are first-generation students and most of them do not have English as a mother tongue, but as second or even third language. They often come from poor backgrounds and dysfunctional secondary schools, making them underprepared for university and putting them at a disadvantage, especially as far as academic literacy skills in English are concerned (Cross & Carpentier, 2009; Krugel & Fourie, 2014; Mhlongo, 2014). Since a MCQ consists of a stem (the question or scenario/case study) and then at least four distractors (the possible answers) (Jennings, 2012), this type of test often involves a lot of reading, which can be challenging for some of these students (Bharuthram, 2012; Paxton, 2007, 2009). Especially with the use of scenarios in order to include application questions, a 50-question test can easily be between eight and ten pages long. It also requires careful

reading in order to identify the correct response, and if English is not a first language, this might prove to be quite difficult (Butler & Van Dyk, 2004; Scott, 2015; Van Wyk, 2014).

At our institution, modules with large classes are considered high-risk modules and therefore support is made available in the form of Supplemental Instruction (SI). The SI leaders are senior students who did well in the module and who I select through an interview process. There are usually between six and eight SIs per semester. They attend my classes, meet with me weekly and each one conducts two to three sessions (with a maximum of 25 students) per week. The SI sessions are voluntary and open to any student to attend.

Challenge

As part of the feedback after a test, I used to make the test memo available for students on the learning management system (LMS). This allowed students to reflect on their test and identify the mistakes they made. Or rather, that was the aim with making the memo available. However, in repeating some questions in subsequent tests, I realised that students tended to study the questions by heart from the memo, without deeper understanding of the content. In repeating the question, the options would be placed in a different order, but there was a trend that students would repeat whatever happened to have been the correct response in the previous test (B for example), instead of reading and understanding the question before choosing the appropriate answer. This had an influence on their performance and contributed to a lower pass rate.

Research shows that more detailed, quality feedback can remedy this situation (Guo, Palmer-Brown, Lee & Cai, 2014; Iahad, Dafoulas, Kalaitzakis & Macaulay, 2004; Malau-Aduli & Zimitat, 2012). Due to the heavy work load, it is impossible to use class time to go through the test in order to give detailed feedback and explanations of how to approach the questions. As outlined in the context above, the limited resources do not allow for the possibility of using different types of assessment instead of MCQs. So the complex dilemma is: What can be done to improve the assessment process? How can quality feedback be provided to students in the current situation? How can students be assisted to develop test-taking skills and improve their reasoning patterns when it comes to answering a MCQ, but also understand the content better? How can we replace the "inky, pinky, ponky" strategy when doing MCQs with a true understanding of A, B and C? How can the pass rate be improved without lowering the standard? A literature review was subsequently done to explore and determine possible interventions that could be developed.

Literature Review

Large classes

Quality education is a key element in developing countries and plays a vital role in economic growth (Hornsby, Osman & De Matos-Ala, 2013). Having said this, with the enrolment numbers increasing, and limited resources, classes are increasingly becoming

larger (Ehrenberg, Brewer, Gamoran & Willms, 2001). This is often associated with lower student performance (Hornsby & Osman, 2014). However, student learning is not necessarily determined by the class size, but rather by the skills and expertise of the lecturer as well as by the use of the appropriate teaching approaches and active participation of students (Mulryan-Kyne, 2010). It is therefore important that large classes are not given to the most junior lecturer with the least experience, but rather that senior, experienced academics take this responsibility and mentor junior staff in the process (Jawitz, 2013).

Although large classes can pose a number of challenges, with innovative teaching methods it is possible to overcome these challenges and literature on large class pedagogy in higher education is increasing (Hornsby & Osman, 2014). Large classes are not necessarily "bad", since the diversity and energy can be used to incorporate interactive class activities and offer a high-quality learning experience, as long as the strengths and limitations are well understood (Jawitz, 2013).

Assessment

Assessment can be particularly challenging in large classes, especially if resources are limited and there is not extra help with marking available. Assessment can have a feed-out function, indicating performance, or it can have a feedback function, aimed at providing information that will assist in continuous learning (Knight, 2002). In addition, it is crucial that the assessment aligns directly with the module outcomes.

Different assessment strategies should be used in order to cater for the different student learning styles (Brady, 2005). Assessment should allow students to receive feedback on their learning and also give guidance to further learning (Carless, Salter, Yang & Lam, 2011; Knight, 2002) and here MCQ assessments can be valuable.

Multiple-choice questions and feedback

There are numerous advantages to using MCQs, for example, that they are more objective, more time-efficient in terms of writing and marking, and they offer the possibility to cover a wider range of the work (Higgins & Shelley, 2003). However, there are also several limitations and potential disadvantages linked to the use of MCQs.

One of the biggest questions is whether MCQs allow for higher-order cognitive skills assessment or simply factual recall, especially since critical thinking is important in higher education (Brady, 2005; Jennings, 2012). MCQs are often seen as "easy" and as testing superficial, factual knowledge only (Palmer & Devitt, 2007). However, this depends greatly on how the question is asked and whether functional, plausible distractors are given (Tarrant et al., 2009). A MCQ can be structured in such a way as to assess the higher cognitive levels of comprehension or application and therefore be versatile if designed appropriately (Brady, 2005; Yonker, 2011). In an application question, for example, a case study can be used, requiring comprehension and application skills and much more than factual, surface knowledge. In their study, Leung, Mok and Wong (2008) found that some students placed

more emphasis on understanding in preparation for a MCQ assessment and that scenario-based MCQs were perceived to help them in developing critical thinking skills.

Another problem concerns the fact that students can potentially guess the right answer (Delaere & Everaert, 2011). Students might joke saying that if in doubt with a MCQ, you can always resort to a rhyme like "inky, pinky, ponky" or "eeny, meeny, miney, moe" to help you make a choice. Although it is possible to guess, there are also ways in which guessing can be discouraged, like negative marking (Scharf & Baldwin, 2007).

Brady (2005) postulates that there are many disadvantages if MCQs are poorly designed and these can cause under-performance or over-performance which are not related to the students' ability. For example, if the distracters are not plausible, it's easier to eliminate them, even without much knowledge (Tarrant et al., 2009). On the other hand, if the distracters are not well written, they can confuse students, even though they know the theory. Since MCQs allow for assessing detail, obscure knowledge is sometimes asked instead of sticking to the module outcomes (Brady, 2005).

Setting and designing efficient, objective and high quality MCQs on the appropriate level is a skill, is time-consuming and requires commitment (Jennings, 2012). So although time is saved in the marking process, a lot of effort goes into compiling these assessments.

Research has shown that effective, quality feedback is very important in enhancing students' understanding of the questions (Lizzio & Wilson, 2008; Nicol, 2009). However, students should receive more than simply the correct answer. It is vital that they understand why they chose the wrong answer and not only where they made the wrong choice. Students need to understand and be able to explain the reason behind their choice and where they faulted in their reasoning. However, writing this type of feedback for every distracter of every question can be very time consuming.

Feedback is a pedagogical practice that supports learning, but quality feedback is often not readily available for undergraduate students (Taras, 2006). Due to the nature and format of the MCQ, students are exposed to correct and incorrect information, which could lead to confusion and negative effects. In their study, Butler and Roediger (2008) found that giving feedback after a multiple-choice test improved performance on subsequent tests, probably due to the fact that it allows the student to correct previous mistakes. They focused specifically on MCQ assessments and explored the role of feedback in increasing the positive effects and decreasing the negative effects of MCQs. By comparing different groups, either having no feedback, immediate feedback or delayed feedback, they concluded that giving students' feedback after the test is vital and that it also allowed them to have more clarity on what they knew and what they did not know (Butler & Roediger, 2008).

These findings are echoed by a more recent study by Guo et al. (2014) where feedback on MCQ assessments was given online by means of analysing the students' responses with the help of the snap-drift neural network approach. Tinto (2014) also recommends the use of technology and predictive analytics in the feedback process, which can help to reduce the workload.

Supplemental Instruction model

The SI model was founded in the early 70s at the University of Missouri in Kansas City where there was a very high dropout rate (Arendale, 1993). It was decided to move away from the traditional medical model approach of supporting students who had been identified as having a problem or being at risk, and rather implementing a non-traditional approach where the focus was on difficult or high-risk modules and where assistance was available for everyone from the start of the module (Martin & Arendale, 1992). Supporting this principle, research has also found that SI sessions are beneficial to all students, regardless of their performance, although it has more impact on struggling students (Wilson, Waggenspack, Steele & Gegenheimer, 2016).

The purpose of the SI programme is to increase academic performance and retention by providing opportunities for students to be involved in collaborative learning in peer-facilitated sessions. Sessions are open to all students and attendance is voluntary (Arendale, 1994).

Prospective SIs are expected to meet certain criteria before being considered as a possible candidate. They are students who have completed the module before, preferably with the same lecturer, and who have performed well. The SIs act as "model" students by showing the students how successful students think about the module and process the module content. After they have been selected, they receive training in collaborative learning techniques which assist the students in knowing "how" to learn (transferable academic skills), as well as "what" to learn (content) (Arendale, 1994; McGuire, 2006).

The theoretical framework in which the SI model is embedded, includes a wide variety of important learning theories including Piaget's constructivism, Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, Tinto's Model of Student Retention, Weinstein's metacognition, Collaborative learning (Dewey and Bruner), Keimig's Hierarchy of Learning and Improvement Programs and Dale's Cone of Experience (Arendale, 1993). Social learning theory and the concept of modelling also play an important role, especially in the intervention discussed in this paper. It is of vital importance to train SIs well in the theories underpinning the SI model so that they can implement it successfully in the sessions (Jacobs, Hurley & Unite, 2008).

There have been many studies focusing on the effectiveness of SI (Coletti et al., 2014; Fayowski & MacMillan, 2008; Kilpatrick, Savage & Wilburn, 2013; Latino & Unite, 2012; Malm, Bryngfors & Mörner, 2012; Okun, Berlin, Hanrahan, Lewis & Johnson, 2015; Summers et al., 2015; Terrion & Daoust, 2011). In a systematic review of the relevant literature between 2001 and 2010, Dawson, Van der Meer, Skalicky and Cowley (2014) found that SI participation is correlated with improved performance as well as lower failure and withdrawal rates. These studies did not only look at effectiveness from an academic performance perspective, but also included overall graduation rates, the impact on the development of academic skills as well as the effect on general well-being, social relationships and engagement.

These results are also reflected in more recent studies (Malm, Bryngfors & Mörner, 2015; Paloyo, Rogan & Siminski, 2016; Ribera, BrckaLorenz & Ribera, 2012; Wilson & Rossig, 2014). SI improves students' long-term retention of the module content (Price, Lumpkin, Seemann & Bell, 2012), helps them to be more engaged in their learning while getting a deep understanding of the work (Paideya & Sookrajh, 2010, 2014) and also contributes to their sense of belonging (Summers et al., 2015). With the influence of technology, a recent study (Hizer, Schultz & Bray, 2017) explored the effectiveness of offering SI sessions online and found that it had similar effects to the face-to-face model.

Methodology

The intervention

The intervention that was implemented is a discipline-specific strategy that took place within the first year psychology modules, with a very close collaboration between the SIs and the lecturer of these modules.

As I have already indicated, research has emphasised the importance of effective, quality feedback in enhancing students' understanding of questions in a MCQ assessment. Although feedback can be given in a written format, students might still not fully understand or might not take the time to read it.

The fact that the SI model is based on, among other things, modelling by senior students and the development of skills (not only a focus on content), prompted me to take this modelling a step further. The intervention is based on allowing the students to get quality feedback on the tests, in small groups, via the SIs. However, it was important to ensure that the SIs were empowered with the necessary skills to be able to give this feedback.

Instead of making the test memos available to the students on the LMS, I made it available through the SIs. After every test, the SIs were required to attend a meeting with me to which each one had to bring a memo for the test that they had worked out themselves. This ensured that they went through the test thoroughly and had a similar experience to the students in considering all the options in the process of deciding which option they considered the correct answer. During the meeting, I modelled the feedback process, illustrating how the feedback should be given to allow for better understanding and deeper learning. Based on what the SI leaders chose as answers, each question and distracter was discussed in detail, allowing me to identify possible errors in the SIs' reasoning and understanding while illustrating how to address these errors.

With the correct memo, the SIs subsequently took this discussion to the small-group sessions where they repeated the feedback process with the students. The fact that this was the only way students got access to the memo aimed to encourage students to attend these sessions.

After each assessment students who performed poorly were advised to attend a certain number of SI sessions before the next test. This number differed, depending on the available time before the next test. Attending SI sessions remained voluntary, but in order to determine the effectiveness of the intervention, students' attendance was monitored.

It is important to emphasise that the sessions were still open to *everyone* and that the attendees consisted of good, average and struggling students. In line with the SI design, this is not a remedial programme and the sessions are not focused on or exclusively for students who performed poorly. In addition, it is often the interaction between fellow students that promotes a conducive learning environment.

Assessing the intervention

In assessing the effectiveness of the intervention as well as the value of SI from the students' point of view, the following questions guided the enquiry:

1. What are students' perceptions of the value of SI, in particular in assessment?
2. What effect does the intervention have in improving students' performance?

Action Research

In this study, action research was used as it allowed me to focus on a practical problem in the teaching and learning environment and enabled me to look for a practical solution in my specific context. Action research is cyclical in nature (Maree, 2007). The current paper reports on the first cycle of this research.

As previously explained, certain aspects of my teaching practices needed attention, and action, in the form of an intervention, to improve practice. After identifying the challenge, a scan of literature informed the planning and implementation of the intervention. Assessment of the intervention had to be done to determine whether practice was indeed improved (McNiff, 2013). The final step was to reflect and amend or improve the practice for the second cycle (Laycock & Long, 2009). The reflection also allowed for my professional development, as the lecturer (Kayaoglu, 2015; Ryan, 2013), for practices to change (Kemmis, 2009) and for enhancement of the scholarly approach to teaching and learning.

Action research is often a multi-method approach, using a holistic perspective to solve the problem at hand (Maree, 2007). In this study, in addition to the reflection and literature review to develop the intervention strategy, a survey was used to acquire students' feedback on the strategy and students' marks were monitored to determine whether the strategy improved their academic performance.

Data collected

In the Feedback survey, students were asked questions about SI in general (whether they attended, the value of SI sessions) and also more specifically about the intervention strategy (whether it encouraged them to attend SI sessions and whether it helped them to improve academically). A Likert scale was used for most of the questions in collecting quantitative data. The last question was an open-ended question where students could give feedback in their own words regarding the role SI played in their journey as first years.

The students who underperformed in a test were tracked after the test and in subsequent tests. Pre-intervention and post-intervention test performance scores were used for students who were part of the intervention strategy, to determine whether their performance improved.

Population

The population in this study constituted 219 of the approximately 600 first-year psychology students at the Mafikeng campus of the North-West University. Participation in the study and being part of the intervention strategy was voluntary. For ethical reasons, students completed the feedback survey anonymously and no names were used at any point.

A total of 219 students completed the feedback survey electronically. The number of students who attended the SI sessions where the intervention strategy was put in place, varied from test to test.

Results

In what follows, the results of the first stage of the action research will be given. These results were obtained from the feedback survey that was done electronically on eFundi (a Sakai LMS) at the end of the semester, as well as from the students' performance, for which the t-test results will be given.

1. What are students' perceptions of the value of SI, in particular in assessment?

With the aim of validating the responses received in the survey, the students who completed the online survey were asked whether they actually attended SI sessions and how often. Only 15% of the students who responded in this survey had never attended SI sessions. A total of 85% of the respondents did attend the sessions, even though some attended more often than others. It can therefore be concluded that the results from this survey reflect students' perceptions accurately.

In gauging the students' perceptions of SI, they were asked to indicate to what extent they think they would make use of the SI services in the future. Their responses are shown in the chart that follows.

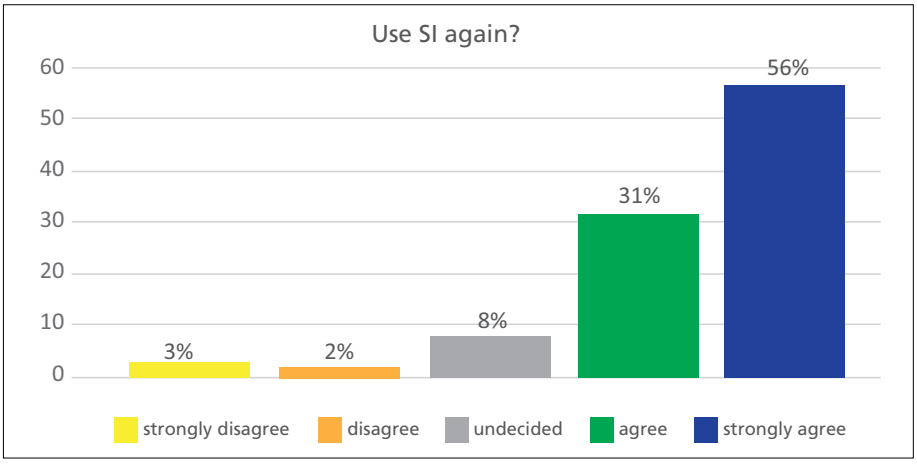

Figure 1: Future use of SI service

Their experience of SI as first years encouraged 87% of the respondents to indicate that they will continue to make use of this service.

In order to get a better idea of how the students were helped by attending SI sessions, they were given a list of possible areas and could select as many options as they thought applicable in terms of their personal experience. The following shows the percentage of respondents who selected each option.

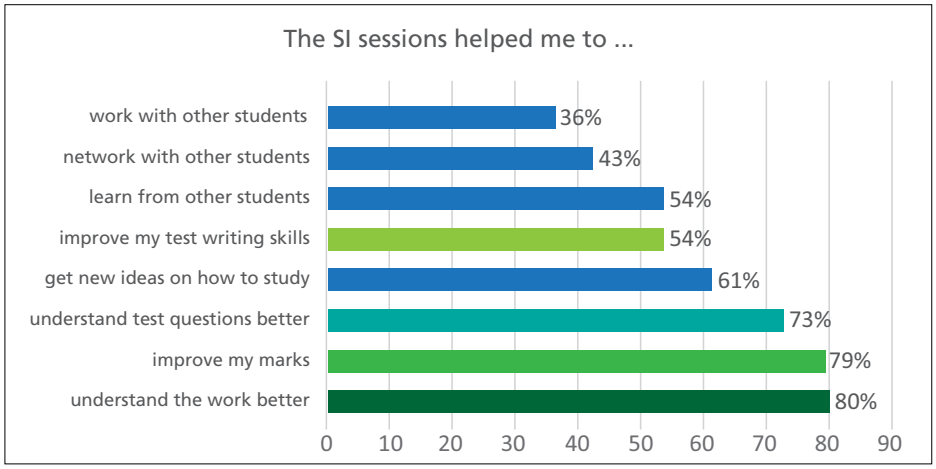

Figure 2: The value of SI sessions as perceived by students

This graph gives a clear picture of the variety of areas in which students feel they were assisted by attending SI sessions. In terms of the specific feedback strategy under investigation in this study, it is evident that the test feedback made a difference. Students indicated that the SI sessions helped them to improve their test writing skills (54%), their understanding of test questions (73%) and their overall understanding of the work (80%) which also resulted in better performance (79%). These results concur with previous research that found that quality feedback can have a positive influence (Butler & Roediger, 2008; Lizzio & Wilson, 2008). It also indicated that the use of SIs in providing feedback in the assessment process, helped students move away from the random guessing associated with MCQs (inky, pinky or ponky?) to understanding the questions and the different possibilities (A, B and C) as they developed test-taking skills.

The survey also included two separate questions that dealt with this particular feedback intervention. After every test, I posted a list of student numbers of the students in need, who were advised to attend SI sessions before the next test. Students were asked to indicate whether this practice encouraged them to attend sessions and whether attendance helped them to improve their marks. The graph below shows the results.

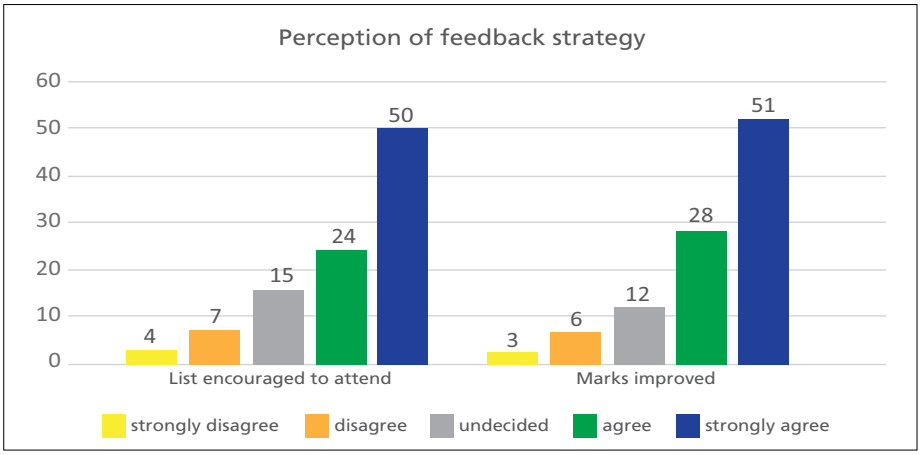

Figure 3: Students' perceptions of feedback strategy

Being in a position of need after a test and receiving the directive and advice to attend sessions did encourage students and helped them to consequently improve their marks.

The last question in the online survey asked students to give feedback on how the SI sessions helped them in their journey as first year students. The themes that emerged from these responses support the results of the preceding questions, and also give some more insight and possible avenues to explore in future research.

In terms of the specific intervention which is the focus in this article, the following themes were identified:

- Improvement in test-writing skills
- Better performance in tests
- Enhanced understanding of content and questions
- Increased confidence in approaching MCQ tests

To illustrate the perception that the SI assistance was valuable in assessment and in improving marks, here are a few quotes from students:

> *"My SI always made it easy and normal for us to participate in sessions without being ashamed. My marks improved drastically, I went from 46% to 48% then from 48% to 64% and then I got a distinction on my last test 88%."*

> *"The SI helped me to improve from zero to hero."*

> *"SI sessions are very informative and guide you on test writing skills and what to actually look at when preparing for tests and exams."*

> *"The SI helped on how to tackle the multiple-choice questions, how to prepare for the test and also to be able to understand the questions on the test."*

> *"It helped me understand how to interpret questions and understand them to choose correct answers during my tests."*

"SI helped me to have better understanding about this module. At first I failed, and again I failed second test. After that I was advised and convinced to attend the SI. Since I started attending SI I was doing well with my tests and I started to love psychology.

Thematic analysis of the students' responses on the question: 'How did SI sessions help you in your journey as first year or doing first year psychology?' yielded the following additional themes. Some quotes are given to illustrate these themes.

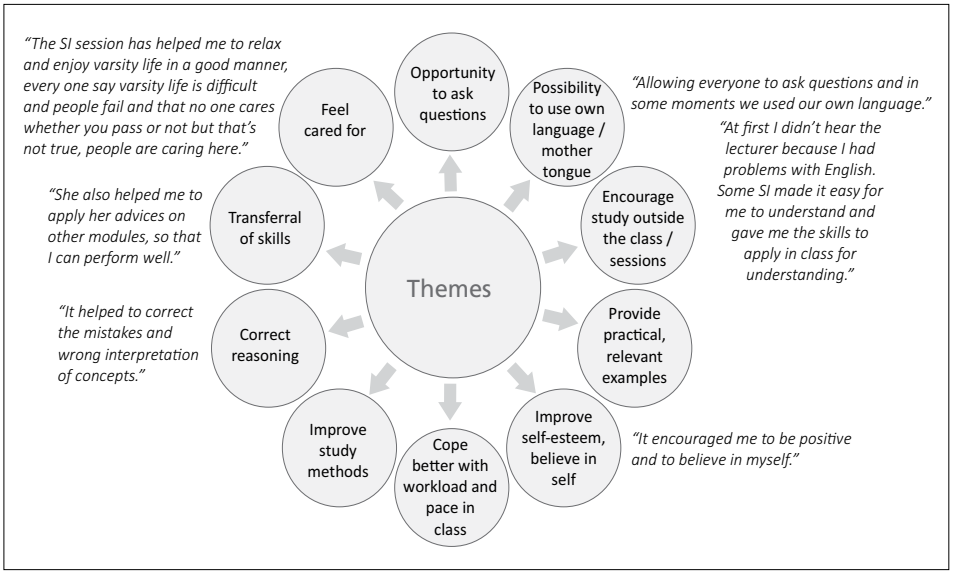

Figure 4: Value of SI: themes

2. What effect does the intervention have in improving students' performance?

By using a dependent t-test with paired samples, the pre-intervention and post-intervention test performance scores were compared to determine whether their performance improved as part of the intervention strategy. Since attendance was voluntary, some students attended whilst others did not. Comparing these two groups enabled me to link the difference to the intervention strategy implemented.

Since non-random sampling was used and attendance was voluntary, statistical inference about the population cannot be drawn. Therefore effect sizes, more specifically Cohen's d, was calculated to indicate the practical significance of any differences found. According to Ellis and Steyn (2003), a small effect would be d=0.2, a medium effect d=0.5 and a large effect d=0.8. This could also be indicated as practically non-significant, practically visible and practically significant.

Table 1: Results of t-test

SI Session	Assessment	Mean	Standard deviation	Effect size
Attended	Early detection quiz	44.51	11.034	1.18
	Test 1	57.53	10.451	
NOT Attended	Early detection quiz	43.95	10.815	0.91
	Test 1	53.74	12.488	
Attended	Test 1	41.16	6.36	1.08
	Test 2	48.00	11.49	
NOT Attended	Test 1	40.19	5.98	0.42
	Test 2	42.69	10.08	
Attended	Test 2	40.24	6.371	1.37
	Semester Test	48.94	8.771	
NOT Attended	Test 2	39.53	6.511	0.69
	Semester Test	44.03	8.848	

Based on the effect size of 1.18, 1.08 and 1.37, the difference in the test scores of the students attending the SI sessions is practically significant, improving in performance for the following assessment (44.51 to 57.53; 41.16 to 48.00; and 40.24 to 48.94). The test scores of the students NOT attending the SI sessions improved much less, as indicated by the smaller effect sizes of 0.91, 0.42 and 0.69. Thus one can conclude that the intervention did have the desired effect.

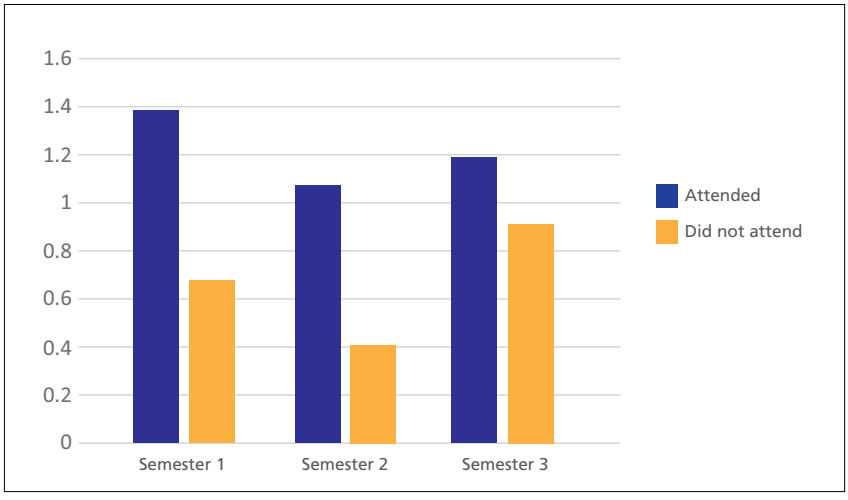

Figure 5: Effect sizes indicating practical significance

This graph portrays the influence of the SI sessions and in particular the intervention in the form of the feedback strategy that was offered during the sessions. There is a notable

difference in terms of performance between the group that attended SI and the group that did not attend. These results give some indication that this type of intervention can play a valuable role in assisting students in understanding the assessment process and improving their performance and concurs with other research that SI can be effective in improving students' performance (Kilpatrick et al., 2013; Malm, Bryngfors & Mörner, 2015; Paloyo, Rogan & Siminski, 2016; Summers et al., 2015).

Discussion

In a feedback survey, students were asked questions about SI in general, and also about the specific intervention strategy. Responses in the feedback survey indicated an overall positive perception of this practice.

Students were asked how often they attended SI sessions and they were also asked to indicate how the sessions helped them. The responses that were chosen by the highest percentage of students are linked to the feedback intervention, indicating that the strategy had positive influences. The sessions are also believed to allow students to work and network with other students and to learn from them, as is the purpose with the collaborative learning SI model (Arendale, 1994). The fact that students who are struggling are specifically reminded about the availability of SI sessions and advised to attend, also appears to encourage attendance of SI sessions.

From the findings in the open-ended question, it is clear that the SI sessions played a big role in assisting the students in understanding assessment, which confirms findings in other studies (Malm et al., 2012; Ribera et al., 2012). In addition, from this data interesting new themes emerged that would allow for further exploration in the next cycle. Keeping the student profile in mind, language seems to play an important role and the fact that some SIs are able to communicate in the students' mother tongue, might play a vital role in the success of this strategy.

Students' performance in subsequent tests was compared and the results seem to indicate that attending SI sessions was mostly associated with improved test results. These results can therefore inform other lecturers teaching large classes and contribute to quality enhancement in assessment.

Reflection: Limitations of the Study

It is vital to be aware of any limitations in a study. In the action research process, it is also important to reflect on every action in a cycle and determine how practice can be improved and what else can be done. This has been an exciting learning process for me as the lecturer.

There are several limitations, both in terms of the methodology and research, as well as the intervention itself. One limitation of this study is that it was conducted on a small scale, within one class in one specific context. This means that one cannot generalise or assume that it would have similar results in a different context. However, as part of a teaching approach, these principles might be deemed valuable to lecturers in similar situations, experiencing similar problems. As far as the t-test results are concerned, this study only followed the students that were struggling and did not consider the impact of

the intervention on the other students, whether average or good. This could be addressed in the second cycle.

In terms of the intervention, is has to be mentioned that it is rather time consuming and requires dedication. The time spent with the SIs after every test to model the feedback process is considerable. However, it is still much less time consuming than giving the feedback in a large class or drafting detailed individualised written feedback on all the questions in every test. The added value of this process for both the SIs and the students should also be taken into account when considering this option. The advantage of having done this with the first group of students, is that SIs for the next year will already have experience of this process (having been in the sessions) and have been exposed to different models (the different SIs they attended sessions with) before they start modelling the behaviour in sessions to the next group of first years. This prior experience also makes my modelling easier and quicker, since they are already familiar with the process. Having experienced this effect, I do believe that it can be a sustainable process that can help students develop.

Second Cycle of the Study

The focus in this research was on the students in need. In subsequent cycles, the other students could also be included to see whether SI feedback helped to improve their test-taking skills and enhance their overall performance in the module. Another approach that could be considered is to start the feedback process by giving students detailed written feedback for the online quizzes while still continuing with the modelling through the SIs after the tests.

In terms of assessing students' as well as SIs' experience of the process, more qualitative data will be collected in the next cycle. This could be done by having focus group interviews with some of the students, but also with the SIs in order to determine what the SIs themselves gained from being involved in this process. Did they also develop skills that helped them in their own studies?

Investigating the transferability of these skills to other modules will also add to understanding the value of this practice, by asking students if the intervention helped them in other modules as well. Exploring the development of meta-cognitive skills as well as other possible influences (like the role of language) will further extend our understanding of the role and value of this intervention.

In the second cycle, the results of first cycle will be displayed to the new group of first year students as motivation for them to attend SI sessions since Goldstein, Sauer and O'Donnell (2014) found that students' perceptions of the value of SI sessions can influence their motivation and increase their attendance.

Based on the work of Quinton and Smallbone (2010) and supported by the findings of Boud and Molloy (2013), I can also consider asking students to reflect on the feedback with the purpose of helping them to apply their learning in a feed forward into the next assessment and developing self-regulation in the process.

Conclusion

In this paper, I discussed an approach to giving valuable feedback in the context of a large class by using Supplemental Instruction and modelling. The results of this study showed that the intervention seems to improve students' performance, and that students had a positive perception of the process. SI can play a valuable role in the assessment process in a large class, especially in giving quality feedback on assessment that allows students to learn test-writing skills and develop their reasoning, but also to understand the content better. Instead of using "inky, pinky, ponky" strategies to answer MCQs, students were empowered to understand the different options given in A, B and C and make the appropriate choice. These results can inform other lecturers' practice in teaching large classes, and contribute to quality enhancement in assessment and better support for students. Even though it was done in a very specific context and within a psychology module, this strategy could also be used in other contexts and disciplines.

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Research article

Academic Support at the University of KwaZulu-Natal: A Systematic Review of Peer-Reviewed Journal Articles, 2010–2015

Vino Paideya* & Annah Bengesai**

Abstract

The aim of this systematic review was to examine research studies which focus on effective student support practices and show evidence of credible assessment. To identify effective student support practices, and also to provide a contemporary picture of effective support practices at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, 24 studies which met the inclusion criteria were reviewed and analysed in terms of: (i) aims, (ii) main participants, (iii) methodology used and (iv) the main outcomes emerging. The findings from the review indicate that there is a diversity of available evidence, ranging from assessment of peer support programmes, alternative access programmes to curriculum-based interventions. However, most of these studies are cross-sectional qualitative studies, which also draw from relatively small samples. This suggests that more large-scale studies are needed in the field in order to provide greater insight into effective student support practices. In addition, research which examines academic support programmes over long periods of time while also controlling for programme effects is recommended.

Keywords

student support; academic monitoring and support; systematic review

Introduction

Retention and throughput in higher education is a global problem. In the South African context, the literature available (see Cloete, 2016; Scott, Yeld & Hendry, 2007) indicates that high attrition rates are severe for the "previously disadvantaged" students. Whilst access to higher education has improved for these students, it is widely believed that in terms of progression, students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds continue to lag behind their counterparts from the more advantaged contexts (Fisher & Scott, 2011; Scott et al., 2007). At the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), such concerns have led to the establishment of the Academic Monitoring and Support (AMS) policy framework which was implemented in 2006 with the principal aim of enhancing the quality of teaching and

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learning. From this broad policy, all four Colleges[1] at the University of KwaZulu-Natal have since 2009 developed innovative strategies for implementation of interventions for academic success, funded to a large extent through the Teaching Development Grant from the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) (University of KwaZulu-Natal Quality Enhancement Project Report 2015).

The 2010 Academic Monitoring and Support (AMS) Report revealed that academic support interventions were compulsory for all students at the UKZN and most Colleges made extensive use of the Academic Development Officer (ADOs) in their monitoring and support activities. However, of concern was the relative "instability" of the support system because it was primarily staffed by ADOs on short-term contracts. It was also found that despite the substantial investment and the institutional support for academic monitoring and support, the graduation rate had continued to decline from 20% in 2006 to 17% in 2009 with some academic programmes experiencing higher dropout and exclusion rates than graduations. In 2011, the Quality Promotions and Assurance (QPA) office together with external evaluators conducted an audit of the AMS programmes at the university. The report highlighted several functional systems and practices in place in the four Colleges. These included the positive attitude, dedication and commitment of the staff involved in the AMS programmes, every College having some form of mentorship system and the contribution of senior academic staff to the AMS programme at both School and College level. However, substantial variations were also reported with respect to practices, and the conceptualisation of some of the roles and responsibilities of AMS personnel.

According to Hammond, Thorogood, Jenkins and Faaiuas (2013), supporting and enhancing the diversity of our students requires that all of our institutional aspects – philosophies, strategies and structures, policies, processes and practices, and particularly our learning and teaching approaches and related support delivery – are integrated, coordinated and intentional in aid of student learning, engagement and success. However, the evidence that supports and informs student support interventions and innovations remains largely theoretical (Boughey, 2010), while the available empirical evidence is dispersed across several fields. Thus, it is unclear which of these approaches to student support may have efficacy or impact (Mann, Gordon & MacLeod, 2009). To address these concerns, this study aimed at identifying and bringing together evidence of academic support practices in the four Colleges at UKZN that show promise of good practice, credible assessment and have a positive impact on student success. It is anticipated that the results of this review will inform the development of a more coherent institutional academic support programme where Colleges can adapt to/adopt other learning contexts or colleges' support structures while maintaining their autonomy and flexibility.

The specific question that this review sought to answer is: What are the credible and effective student support practices at UKZN that have inculcated assessment into support practice/programmes?

[1] There are four Colleges at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. These are the College of Agriculture, Engineering and Science (AES); Law and Management Studies (LMS); Health Sciences (HS) and Humanities.

Systematic Review as Conceptual and Methodological Framework

Denyer and Tranfield (2006) state that the need for research synthesis can only be appreciated when one understands that for gains in scholarship to be cumulative, there must be a link between past and future research. This is what this study sought to accomplish by bringing together research on academic support in an effort to better understand, and also provide a link between past and future research. A systematic literature review can be defined as a method of critically appraising, summarising and attempting to reconcile existing research on an issue of concern (Hallinger, 2013). Hence it is a "secondary research activity which reviews primary and secondary research in attempt to take stock of what is known in a particular field," (Andrews, 2005a, p. 207). Literature reviews have been used in research for many years and have formed part of every sound research project (Berg, 2007). However, what distinguishes a systematic literature review is that it is a review of the evidence from clearly formulated questions that uses systematic and overt methods to identify, select and critically appraise relevant primary research in a way that is explicit, transparent, replicable, and accountable (Andrews, 2005a, 2005b). A more general literature review on the other hand, uses selective, less systematic approaches to identify relevant sources and to extract and analyse data from the studies that are included in the review (Andrews, 2005b).

Research reviews play a crucial role in the advancement of knowledge by highlighting milestones of progress along particular lines of inquiry (Hallinger, 2013). It is argued that well-crafted reviews identify blind spots, blank spots and intellectual "dry wells" in the landscape of theory and empirical research (see Andrews & Harlen, 2006; Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Bridges, 1982). In summary, research reviews enhance the quality of theoretical and empirical efforts of scholars to contribute to knowledge production (DeGeest & Schmidt, 2010; Shemilt, Mugford, Vale, Marsh, Donaldson & Drummond, 2010; Gough, 2007).

Need for undertaking the review

Boughey (2010) notes that although great strides have been made in academic development over the past 25 years, there has been a tendency to rely on common sense rather than theory and evidence when it comes to forms of support available. This is mainly because academic support/development is an under-researched field which is often located on the periphery of institutional life. In other words, academic support is a shadow world in higher education which often goes unnoticed, yet, the findings from this research have potential benefits for student retention and success. Boughey (2010) further notes that the field has been highly contested and continues to evolve in line with the changing nature of higher education. The four AMS colloquia conducted at UKZN since 2013 have also revealed that there is fragmentation in roles and responsibilities of AMS staff as well as in the AMS activities. This fragmentation is worsened by the fact that there have not been rigorous evaluations of the AMS activities, a situation which has limited the impact of support interventions to contribute to the improvement of the teaching and learning context. Moreover, there are concerns that many students do not in fact graduate, either dropping out, or being excluded due to finances or exceeding the limit of enrolment for

their programme (Pocock, 2012). This makes it all the more urgent to initiate a study which consolidates all the studies in the field in order to identify the gaps in the field. In essence, this study is accordingly an attempt to provide an authoritative synthesis of research that can be used to inform academic support.

Selection of interventions

A defining feature of a systematic review is that it uses transparent procedures to locate and appraise research. The parameters and procedures must be clearly defined beforehand to ensure that they can be replicated. In this way, systematic reviews have the potential to minimise bias (Bearman & Phillip 2013; Petticrew & Roberts, 2006). The studies included in the review are screened for quality, so that the findings of many studies can be combined.

For this review, we defined "academic support" as interventions by staff categorised as AMS staff, or by mainstream academics meant to improve students' academic performance. We assessed academic support research in terms of:

- What kinds of support are being provided?
- Where is the support provisioning happening (location, discipline)?
- Who is receiving the support?
- How is the efficacy of the support being assessed?
- How is the support positioned in relation to the curriculum?

Data was extracted from peer-reviewed journal articles written between 2010 and 2016. In scanning the literature on credible support practices, the following were taken into consideration:

- Efficacy/reliability of the programme.
- Clarification of good practices at institutional level/college level.

This was considered in terms of how institutional- and college-level practices compare. The following databases were utilised in scanning literature on student support: SABINET, EBSCO Host, JSTOR. The key words for database search were: "UKZN and student support", "UKZN and academic support", and "UKZN and academic support and student support and student success".

A general principle in a systematic review is to set criteria for the inclusion and exclusion of studies. This helps to define the parameters of the research, thereby avoiding straying into areas that are off-centre and closing other areas that might have been relevant (Andrews, 2005a). Accordingly, the following eligibility criteria (for selection of literature) were exploited in searches:

- English
- Peer-reviewed journal
- UKZN based
- 2010–2016
- Both quantitative and qualitative studies
- UKZN undergraduate and postgraduate students

Both authors of this paper also reviewed and checked the journal articles. To avoid bias, a third reviewer was engaged to review articles that were written by the authors. The third reviewer also acted as a moderator in cases where there was disagreement in the interpretation of the findings of the studies. We anticipated gaining knowledge with respect to support practices at UKZN, particularly in regard to gaps and areas of over-subscription in the provision of support, new types of practices and/or development of assessment capabilities. We also expected that this systematic review of literature would reveal the most likely points of integration in developing a coherent Student Support Programme at UKZN.

Results and Discussion

Search results

Our initial search using the keywords located 269 studies. After reading the abstracts, 220 studies were excluded because they were either not located at UKZN, or did not fit the strict definition of support as adopted in this study. Hence, 49 articles remained after abstracts were screened. The next step was to read the methodology and results sections of the studies. This led to a further exclusion of 25 studies which were either theoretical papers, did not focus on an intervention, or simply provided a descriptive analysis of students' performance. Thus, the final sample of included studies was 24 as shown in Table 1.

Overview of Studies

Table 1 provides a summary of the interventions available in the four Colleges at the UKZN. The analysis is organised into five components.

- Study population
- Description of the interventions
- Methodological aspects
- Positioning of interventions in relation to the curriculum
- Evidence of strengths and limitations

Study population

The included studies reported interventions for students at different levels of study as well as academic performance. Some focused on 'at-risk students', postgraduate students or undergraduate students taking different modules in specific academic programmes. Only a few of the studies (seven) did not mention the number of subjects sampled.

What kind of support is being offered?

The studies reviewed demonstrate that academic support programmes have been used extensively in all the four colleges at UKZN. Specific interventions include:

(i) Peer learning-based interventions
(ii) Alternative access interventions

(iii) Curriculum-based interventions
(iv) Professional discipline

(i) Peer learning-based interventions

The key support programme in the College of Agriculture, Engineering and Science is the Supplemental Instruction (SI) "which is a peer facilitated academic support programme that targets historically difficult courses so as to improve student performance and retention by offering regularly scheduled out of class review sessions," (UMKC SI Homepage). A modified version of the programme – peer teaching/learning experience programme (PTLEP) – has also been introduced in the School of Life Sciences, College of AES. Both the SI and PTLEP programmes have been extensively evaluated through journal publications (five articles). Most of the evaluations have focused on students' perceptions and experiences of SI (Bengesai, 2011; Paideya, 2011), SI as a social learning space (Paideya, 2011; Paideya & Sookraj, 2011), as well as the efficacy of the intervention as measured by pass rates and students' perceptions (Hakizimana & Jurgens, 2013). Attendance patterns have also been explored (Bengesai, 2011). Taken together, this research has shown that peer-based learning encourages collaborative learning and provides a conducive and non-threatening space for student engagement.

(ii) Alternative access programmes

The alternative access programmes cater for students from disadvantaged educational backgrounds whose matriculation points or Maths and English grades are slightly lower than the entry requirements (Maphosa, 2014). These programmes have been necessitated by the changing nature of higher education which has seen non-traditional students gaining access to higher education. There are different forms of access programmes such as 'bridging or Foundation programmes; add on or Augmented programmes' (Maphosa, 2014; Boughey, 2010).

In the Augmented programmes, students are admitted into the first-year Bachelor's programme which is spread over two years. Hence, they register for both the mainstream programme and additional (augmented) modules, but the duration of the programme is made longer because of additional academic interventions (Zikhali & Bokana, 2013). Thereafter, students carry the normal load for their degrees. In other words, students will take a minimum of four years to complete a three-year Bachelor's degree.

The Foundation or bridging programme aims to provide a foundation for students with lower matric points. The aim is to facilitate access to tertiary education for motivated learners who have the will and potential to succeed (National Plan for Higher Education, Department of Education, 2001, p. 23). Unlike the Augmented programmes, Foundation programmes are adjunct, pre-first year and separate from the mainstream programme (Maphosa, 2014). The curriculum content is preparatory to the regular first year level courses in the mainstream and students take modules which assist in the development of academic literacy, as well as other skills required in subsequent first year level modules.

In the papers reviewed, four (4) alternative access programmes were investigated. These are the Bachelor of Science (BSc) Foundation Programme (Kirby & Dempster, 2011); Bachelor of Science Augmented Programme (Chetty, 2013), the Bachelor of Commerce (BCom) Augmented Programme (Zikhali & Bokana, 2013; Wildsmith-Cromarty & Steinke, 2014). Govender (2014) investigated successful students who started their university education through different access programmes at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, including the Humanities Access Programme. The focus of two (2) of the studies which investigated alternative access programmes has been on specific interventions within the curriculum – problem-based learning, (PBL) in BSc Augmented Physics (Chetty, 2013), and evaluation of a teaching methodology in the BSc Foundation Biology (Kirby & Dempster, 2011). Zikhali and Bokana's study compared the performance of BCom Augmented students with mainstream students and concluded that their performance was not significantly different from the mainstream students. The focus of Wildsmith-Cromarty and Steinke's study was on the efficacy of an academic literacy intervention in improving students' reading abilities.

(iii) Curriculum-based interventions

Academic support has always been on the margins of institutional life with support being provided by practitioners who are not mainstream academic staff (Boughey, 2010). This has created historical divisions between mainstream academics and academic support staff. While academic support has provided greater access, there have been concerns that this has not translated into greater success for students. Consequently, there have been calls for a shift away from academic support as marginal to the curriculum to interventions that are embedded in the curriculum (Maphosa, 2014) since the curriculum is situated within a discipline which determines the socio-cultural, cognitive, and disciplinary norms and values. At the University of KwaZulu-Natal, curriculum-based interventions have been supported through the University's Teaching and Learning Office's (UTLO) Competitive Research Grant (UKZN QEP Survey, 2015) which has seen mainstream staff designing innovative strategies to improve teaching and learning. Further, the launch of the University Teaching and Learning Conference in 2006 has resulted in the development of the scholarship of teaching and learning within the university, and encouraged academics to conduct research on their teaching.

Curriculum-based interventions have been investigated in Management Studies (Arbee & Samuels, 2015; Tang, 2011; Ranjeeth et al., 2011); Engineering (Jairos et al., 2013); Physics (Chetty, 2013) and Humanities (Govender & Dhunpath, 2011; De Lange et al., 2011). In Engineering and Physics the focus has been curriculum re-design to meet students' and industry needs, while in Management Studies, Arbee and Michaels' study focused on the impact of the writing centre on students' academic writing. Tang (2011) and Ranjeeth et al. (2011) both adopted innovative teaching methods in existing curricula to help students better understand the curriculum. Two studies focused on postgraduate support, (De Lange et al., 2011; Govender & Dhunpath, 2011). Both these studies investigated the effect of the

cohort model of supervision on developing scholarship and reflective practice among PhD candidates in the College of Humanities.

Innovative teaching methods have also been implemented in the College of Health Sciences and evaluated through peer-reviewed research. The interventions that have been researched include the use of isiZulu videos (Diab et al., 2016) and tutorial groups in a problem-based learning (PBL) environment (Singaram et al., 2010). Diab et al. investigated medical students' perceptions of simulated isiZulu videos in the development of communicative competence in isiZulu. In the medical field, communication between patients and medical professionals is imperative and hence practitioners should be proficient in the language understood by the patient (Diab et al., 2016). Apart from language acquisition, Diab et al. found that the simulated videos also led to cultural awareness, which is also important in patient-doctor relationships. The study by Singaram et al. found that while PBL had the potential to facilitate collaborative learning, it also presented a challenge to some students who struggled to cope with the diversity in the groups.

Table 1: Evidence map of published research on academic support at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2010–2016

Ref	Authors	Intervention	Setting	Population	Study Focus	Study Design	Co-curricular/ Intra-curricular	Outcomes
1.	N. Chetty (2014)	Augmented/ Add on programme	College of AES	70 BSc Augmented Students	• Pass rates • Evaluation of programme	• Pre-test, post-test • Longitudinal • Quantitative	Intra-curricular	• Identification of problem areas for students • Implementation of measures to address these problems • Improved performance of students
2.	S. Hakizimana & A. Jürgens (2013)	Peer Teaching/ Learning Experience Programme (PTLEP)	College of AES	2698 (repeat enrolments)	• Pass rates • Attendance	• Survey • Classroom observations • Longitudinal • Quantitative	Co-curricular	Peer teaching/learning improves attendance patterns, encourages student participation, motivates students, and improves pass rates.
3.	S.B. Higgins-Opitz & M. Tufts (2014)	Early identification of at-risk students	College of HS	214 students	Profiling background factors impacting on academic performance	• Pre-test, post-test • Survey • Cross-sectional • Quantitative	Intra-curricular	Student performance in the first-class test is a valuable tool to identify struggling students and should be held as early as possible.
4.	M. Jairos, D. Stretch & C. McLeod (2013)	Curriculum redesign	College of AES	Students taking the Civil Engineering Design Project module	Modification of curriculum to meet industry needs and comply with regulatory body	• Design • Cross-sectional	Intra-curricular	Exposing Engineering graduates to a deeper conceptual approach to engineering design addressing social, ethical and environmental concerns.
5.	V. Paideya (2011)	Supplemental Instruction	College of AES	First-year students attending Chemistry 15 SI sessions	How does SI leader intervention enhance first-year engineering students' "critical thinking skills" in Chemistry learning	• Design research methodology • Observations	Co-curricular	SI encourages collaborative learning engagement, encouraged students to reflect on concepts learnt and creates social spaces which are conducive for learning

Table 1: Evidence map of published research on academic support at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2010–2016

Ref	Authors	Intervention	Setting	Population	Study Focus	Study Design	Co-curricular/ Intra-curricular	Outcomes
6.	A. Bengesai (2011)	Supplemental Instruction	College of AES	15 Engineering students	Engineering students' experiences of Supplemental Instruction	• Qualitative • Interviews • Attendance registers	Co-curricular	SI can potentially provide positive social learning spaces, encourage collaborative learning and enable students to effectively engage with content. The programme also has the potential to create over-reliance on support.
7.	V. Paideya & R. Sookraj (2011)	Supplemental Instruction	College of AES	First-year students attending Chemistry 15 SI sessions	Student engagement in SI sessions	• Design research methodology • Observations	Co-curricular	SI creates social learning spaces which encourage students to ask questions, and seek explanations and conceptual understanding. It also enables reflective thinking.
8.	S. Pillay & A. Maharaj (2011)	Collaborative learning	College of AES	Foundation students	Students' experiences	• Cross-sectional • Interviews	Intra-curricular	Through collaborative learning, students develop social and team learning skills. Further, the intervention is linked to improvement in student performance in Maths.
9.	D. Sibanda & K. Jawahar (2012)	Classroom-based mentoring	College of Humanities	163 In-service teachers	The impact of the school visit mentoring support	• Questionnaire, written submissions • Classroom observations	Co-curricular	The school visit mentoring programme enhanced in-service teachers' teaching skills in MST subjects.
10.	J. Zikhali & K. Bokana (2013)	Augmented/ Add-on programme	College of LMS	95 BCom Augmented students	Programme evaluation	• Secondary analysis of pass rate data • Longitudinal	Programme evaluation	The performance of students who came into university through the Augmented/ alternative access programme is not significantly different from those who enrolled in the mainstream programme.

Table 1: Evidence map of published research on academic support at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2010–2016

Ref	Authors	Intervention	Setting	Population	Study Focus	Study Design	Co-curricular/ Intra-curricular	Outcomes
11.	Z. Bulbulia & J. Wassermann (2015)	Usefulness of Twitter in higher education	College of LMS	21 Students	Usefulness of Twitter in higher education	• Design-based research.	Co-curricular	There was a low uptake of Twitter as an alternative method of academic support, suggesting students prefer more traditional face-to-face forms of academic support.
12.	M.J. Savage, M.G. Abraha, N.C. Moyo & N. Babikir (2014)	Innovative teaching methods	College of AES	63 Students	To enhance teaching and learning in agrometeorology and allied disciplines, a web-based data and information system was developed	• An open-ended questionnaire	Intra-curricular	Web-based teaching encourages students to learn more quickly, improves visual literacy, and improves their ability to manipulate data.
13.	A. Arbee & M.A. Samuels (2015)	Writing centre Academic literacy	College of LMS	368 Students	Measuring the impact of writing place support on student performance	Longitudinal Quantitative Pass marks Attendance registers	Intra-curricular	WP users performed better on average than WP non-users.
14.	C.R. Kalenga & S. Mngomezulu (2015)	At-risk students	College of Humanities	107 Students	Psycho-social challenges faced by students at risk of academic failure	Cross- sectional Qualitative Interviews	Co-curricular	Psychosocial problems are associated with students' at-risk status. However, with practical intervention strategies, these students can improve their academic performance.
15.	S. Mngomezulu & L. Ramrathan (2015)	At-risk students	College of Humanities	12 Students	'At-risk' students' experiences of academic support	• Cross-sectional • Qualitative • Interviews	Co-curricular	Being notified of risk status causes a flurry of emotional and psychological reactions in students such as shock, disbelief, demotivation, and anger.

Table 1: Evidence map of published research on academic support at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2010–2016

Ref	Authors	Intervention	Setting	Population	Study Focus	Study Design	Co-curricular/ Intra-curricular	Outcomes
16.	S. Govender (2014)	Access programmes	University of KwaZulu-Natal	16 Students	Successful students who started in access programmes	• Cross-sectional • Qualitative • interviews	Programme evaluation	Knowledge and skills they had learnt during the access programme had enhanced their reception of the mainstream modules.
17.	N.F. Kirby & E.R. Dempster (2011)	BSc Foundation programme	College of AES	BSc Foundation students	Philosophical and pedagogical approaches in Foundation programme	• Theoretical study	Programme evaluation	Curriculum development in the foundation programme should take on a more reflexive approach, which takes into consideration feedback from all stakeholders, including students.
18.	N. de Lange, G. Pilla & V. Chikoko (2011)	Support for postgraduate students	College of Humanities	35 Students	Cohort model of supervision	• Longitudinal • Qualitative • Programme evaluation forms	Intra-curricular	The cohort model is a supportive practice which encourages active participation and relationship building, develops reflective skills and belongs to a community of practice.
19.	V. Tang (2011)	Innovative teaching	College of LMS	205 Students	Effectiveness of a cognitive-constructivist approach to teaching and learning economic concepts	• Longitudinal • Quantitative • Class observations • Examination results and questions • Survey	Intra-curricular	The approach resulted in more student engagement and also improved their analytic and creative skills.
20.	S. Ranjeeth, A. Marimuthu & M. Maharaj (2013)	Innovative teaching	LMS	135 students	Pedagogical implications of using the agile approach as part of an academic programme	• Cross-sectional • Survey • Quantitative	Students' evaluation or teaching method	There was high acceptance of the pedagogical aspects of the teaching method among students.

Table 1: Evidence map of published research on academic support at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2010–2016

Ref	Authors	Intervention	Setting	Population	Study Focus	Study Design	Co-curricular/ Intra-curricular	Outcomes
21.	P. Diab, M. Matthews & R. Gokool (2016)	Innovative teaching	HS	Final-year students in their Family Medicine rotation	To explore students' views on the use of videos of simulated clinical scenarios for isiZulu communication and language teaching, and the development of cultural awareness	• Cross-sectional • Videos • Students' comments	Intra-curricular	Teaching with simulated videos not only improved medical students' communicative competence, it also had the added benefit of helping them develop cultural awareness.
22.	V.S. Singaram, C.P.M. van der Vleuten, F. Steven & D. Dolmans (2010)	Innovative teaching methods	HS	31 (11 Tutors and 20 students)	Students' perceptions of problem-based learning	• Focus group interviews • Qualitative	Intra-curricular	While collaborative learning enhances student interaction, the heterogeneity makes some students fail to cope with those different from them.
23.	K. Govender & R. Dhunpath (2011)	Support for postgraduate students	Humanities	12 Students	Students' experiences of the PhD cohort model	• Cross-sectional • Seminar sessions • Questionnaire responses • Focus group discussions	Programme evaluation	Cohort provided opportunities for deep research learning, superseding those provided by the traditional model alone. Students experience power dynamics between supervisors in the cohort.
24.	R. Wildsmith-Cromarty & K. Steinke (2014)	AL in an access programme	Humanities	10 Students	Efficacy of R2L approach in an access programme	• Pre-test, post-test	Intra-curricular	R2L can make a difference to the academic literacy levels of students at tertiary level.

(iv) Professional discipline

Most of the academic support programme interventions reviewed through research are in the College of Agriculture Engineering and Science. Nine of the twenty-four papers reviewed reported interventions in Engineering (4); Physics (1); Agrometeorology (1); Life Sciences (2); and Mathematics (1). Three of the studies were located in the College of Health Science, five in Management Studies and six in Humanities. Only one study focused on a university-wide intervention (Govender, 2014).

Methodological quality of the studies

Study aims

Although all the studies reviewed stated their aims, some were stated quite broadly (for example, to revisit the philosophical and pedagogical perspectives upon which a curriculum is based, e.g. Kirby & Dempster, 2011; or to broaden the conceptual approach to engineering design, Jairos et al., 2013). Some of the studies, however, provided specific objectives and research questions, for instance: the use/non-use of the writing centre is linked to students' grades on an assessment task (Arbee & Michael, 2015); to evaluate whether the initiative improved the attendance (Hakizimana & Jürgens, 2013). It is also important to note that most of the studies located their work within a conceptual or theoretical framework, primarily drawing upon principles such as collaborative/peer learning, curriculum design, and reflective practice.

Study design

Of the 24 papers reviewed, six (6) were longitudinal studies and 18 cross-sectional studies. Two (2) employed a pre-test- post-test design, four (4) a design-based design, while the rest used qualitative interviews, questionnaires, or classroom observations.

Data collection methods

Methods to evaluate academic support programmes included questionnaires to assess attitudinal and cognitive change, classroom observations, and archival data such as attendance registers and test/exam scores, as well as interviews. Questionnaires (6) were the most popular method of data collection, although this was used in conjunction with other methods. This was followed by interviews (used in six studies). Four studies included classroom observations. However, in most of the studies, the response rates or samples were too low to provide generalisable findings.

Positioning of interventions in relation to the curriculum

Another way of evaluating academic support programmes is to consider their positioning in relation to the curriculum. In this study, we have identified two categories of academic support programmes, i.e. those which are intra-curricular – located in the curriculum, or co-curricular – defined by their separation from academic courses. Out of the 24 studies reviewed, eight (8), (Mngomezulu & Ramrathan, 2015; Kalenga & Mngomezulu, 2015; Bulbulia & Wassermann, 2015; Hakizimana & Jürgens, 2013; Sibanda & Jawahar, 2012;

Paideya, 2011; Bengesai, 2011; Paideya & Sookraj, 2011) were classified as co-curricular as they focused on interventions such as Supplemental Instruction, peer-based learning and academic and psycho-social support for 'at-risk' students. Twelve (12) of the studies (Diab et al., 2016; Arbee & Samuel, 2015; Savage et al., 2014; Wildsmith-Cromarty & Steinke, 2014; Wildsmith-Cromarty & Steinke, 2014; Higgins & Jurgens, 2013; Chetty, 2013; Jairos et al., 2013; Ranjeeth et al., 2013; Tang, 2011; De Lange et al., 2011; Pillay & Maharaj, 2011; Singaram et al., 2010) can be classified as intra-curricular as the interventions focused on redesigning the curriculum, use of innovative teaching methods or profiling students within the curriculum. The high number of studies classified as intra-curricular can be attributed to UKZN's Teaching and Learning office's focus on the development of academics as teachers and researchers (QEP UKZN Report, 2015). The establishment of the Teaching and Learning as a cross-cutting executive portfolio, elevates teaching as a key and central pillar of the University on par with research (QEP UKZN Report, 2015, p. 7).

There were also studies that could neither be described as co-curricular nor intra-curricular. These studies focused on evaluating a programme (Govender, 2014; Zikhali & Bokana, 2013; Kirby & Dempster, 2011; Govender & Dhunpath, 2011). Two of the studies evaluated access programmes in Science (Govender, and Kirby & Dempster) and Law and Management studies (Zikhali & Bokana). Govender and Dhunpath's study focused on the cohort programme for the PhD programme in the College of Humanities while Govender's study examined the extent to which access programmes were preparing students for mainstream studies.

Table 2: Summary of evidence of impact on student success and engagement

Impact on student success		
Strengths	Studies are practical and applied.	Studies are exploratory, practical and applied.
Promising evidence	Limited evidence based on pass marks and small numbers.	
Limited evidence	Limited evidence based on students' perceptions of their own performance.	
More needed	More research is needed to understand the impact of academia on student success. There are vast amounts of data that are often collected in AMS programmes such as attendance data which can be supplemented with institutional data available through institutional systems.	
Impact on student engagement		
Strengths	SI/Peer learning provides a social learning space where students can engage with and gain better understanding of concepts.	Studies are exploratory, practical and applied.
Promising evidence	AMS programmes (such as STAR programme, SI, ADOs) provide a space for students to interact with their peers.	
Limited evidence	Determinants of student participation in AMS.	
More needed	Rigorous evaluation of programmes to look at diverse factors impacting on student engagement, e.g. self-selection, and more quantitative analyses.	

Table 2 maps the evidence derived from this review under two broad categories: (i) impact on student success, and (ii) impact on student engagement.

Strengths of the Study

The strength of findings was rated using the following specific anchors: clear conclusions stated and can be drawn from the findings, methods are clear and the sample is representative.

Looking at the available evidence (Table 1 and 2), the following strengths can be identified.

1. There is a diversity of studies that have evaluated academic support programmes at the University of KwaZulu-Natal since the inception of the AMS policy. This diversity of studies from the four Colleges provides a methodological and research focus foundation from which future research can improve.
2. There is adequate evidence of the efficacy of peer-based interventions in supporting student learning, although the evidence base has been mainly qualitative.
3. There is evidence of programme evaluation from which other academic support programmes in the university can learn. The available evidence focuses mainly on the alternative access programmes.
4. Most of the research reviewed is applied and practical. Hence, the studies provide tangible measures of the impact of the interventions on students' success.

Limitations of the Study

The present study made use of secondary data in the form of journal articles. Although the authors endeavoured to locate all articles on academic support published during the time frame given, there is a possibility that some articles that did not have the keywords used in the search criteria were omitted. Moreover, the studies included were written between 2010 and 2016. Therefore, studies on academic support published prior to this period were omitted. Another limitation in this study relates to the small sample size (24 journal articles). This small sample makes it difficult to sufficiently identify trends in academic support research. Hence there is need for more research that will include other forms of publication such as conference proceedings, theses and dissertations, and college-based reports.

The limitations are as follows:

1. Most of the studies are small scale and focus on individual interventions with small groups of students. Ten out of the 24 studies had samples of less than 100 students, with some as low as 10 students, while in seven of the studies the sample is not mentioned.
2. While there is diversity in study focus, this is counterbalanced by the fact that most of the studies use the same methods (interviews or questionnaires).
3. Most of the studies are cross-sectional studies, which makes it difficult to measure the impact of the programmes over a long period.
4. The available evidence highlights the effects of the programmes and not the changes resulting from the intervention. This is largely because there are no baseline measures (such as pre-tests, only two studies had baseline measures) from which to explore.

5. Most of the available support focuses on learning, and there is silence on teaching.
6. There is little evidence regarding the wider factors influencing students' uptake of academic support or the success of an academic support programme.

Future research

- The capstone academic support programmes at the UKZN are the ADO initiative and peer learning (QEP report 2015). There is a need for research that investigates the former, examining the effect of academic counselling on student support.
- Research needs to move away from snapshot measures of efficacy to more longitudinal assessments of support.
- There are vast amounts of data produced through the institution's information systems which can be used to complement data gathered through academic support programmes. Through these data, the efficacy of AMS can be examined to provide university-wide measures of what works.

Conclusion

The purpose of this review was to examine research studies which showed evidence of credible assessment of academic support programmes at UKZN. The sample was taken from studies conducted between 2010 and 2016. The findings show that there is a diversity of available evidence, ranging from assessment of peer-support programmes, alternative-access programmes to curriculum-based interventions. However, most of these interventions are located in one College. The assessment is also largely based on small cross-sectional studies with no evidence of baseline measures (except for two studies). There is need for research which focuses on examining programmes over a long period of time while also controlling for programme effects.

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Research article

Paving the Road to Success: A Framework for Implementing the *Success Tutoring* Approach

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Abstract

The exponential growth of higher education enrolment in South Africa has resulted in increased diversity of the student body, leading to a proliferation of factors that affect student performance and success. Various initiatives have been adopted by tertiary institutions to mitigate the negative impact these factors may have on student success, and it is suggested that interventions that include aspects of social integration are the most successful. This paper outlines an approach called Success Tutoring (a non-academic tutorial approach used as part of a student success and support programme in the Faculty of Commerce, Law, and Management at the University of the Witwatersrand), which is underscored by empirical evidence drawn from evaluation data collected during Success Tutor symposia. The authors draw conclusions and make recommendations based on a thematic analysis of the dataset, and ultimately provide readers with a framework for implementing Success Tutoring at their tertiary institutions.

Keywords

higher education; non-academic support; student success; student support; tutorial approach; tutorial framework

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Introduction

The massification of higher education both locally and abroad (Bai, 2006; Hornsby & Osman, 2014; Luckett & Sutherland, 2000) has led to an influx of diverse, non-traditional[1] student populations (e.g. minorities and those whose access has been hampered by socio-economic circumstances in the past) to universities. Many of them are underprepared (Maitland & Lemmer, 2011; Loots, 2009) first-generation students from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Rendon, 1994; Jacklin & Robinson, 2007; Loots, 2009; Wilmer, 2008). Their expectations of university are frequently determined by their experience at school (Hill, 1995; Jacklin & Robinson, 2007), which usually sees them underestimate the demands and workload of university studies (Loots, 2009). Consequently students have high expectations for themselves based on their perceived academic competence in Grade 12 (Loots, 2009). They may thus enter university with a false sense of security and ability that makes them vulnerable to the pressures and expectations of university studies. For this reason, those passionate about the student success agenda often aim to establish structures, interventions, and/or programmes to enhance student success (Engelbrecht, Harding & Potgieter, 2014; Hatch, 2016; Perez & Ceja, 2010).

This article proposes a framework for an approach called *Success Tutoring* and could be read in conjunction with a preceding article (De Klerk, Spark, Jones & Maleswena, 2017), which outlines the student success programme the approach emanates from. For purposes of this study, student success in the South African context is defined as a university student's ability to: cope with the transition from high school to university (McGhie & Du Preez, 2015); progress through the first year of study (Andrews & Osman, 2015; Manik, 2015); graduate from their degree of choice (Andrews & Osman, 2015; McGhie & Du Preez, 2015) within five years of first registration (Scott, Yeld & Hendry, 2007); manage the psychosocial, socio-economic, cultural (McGhie & Du Preez, 2015), and academic demands (Potgieter, Harding, Kritzinger, Somo & Engelbrecht, 2015) posed by university studies; and access relevant academic and non-academic support structures on university campuses (McGhie & Du Preez, 2015). As an additional point of clarification, this study focuses on the provision of non-academic support by concentrating on the non-academic factors that may influence a student's academic performance and success, and excludes any form of academic tutoring. Non-academic factors may include (but are not limited to) excellence skills, psychosocial factors, mental health challenges, and emotional well-being. What follows is an overview of prominent dimensions linked to tutorial approaches, as outlined in the literature.

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[1] Moscati (2004) and Jacklin and Robinson (2007) highlight changes in higher education student demographics over the last twenty years, speaking of a shift from "… more traditional student cohorts […] to a more diverse student body…" (Moscati, 2004, p. 380). Here diversity denotes things like experience, student background and education, age, and motivation for studying, to name a few (Moscati, 2004; Jacklin & Robinson, 2007). As such, increased diversity means the student body we have today is different from what it was in the past (i.e. the tradition has changed).

Literature and Context

While intelligence and motivation may have been the *major* predictors of student success in the past, the diversity of present-day student populations brings into play a far greater number of factors. These include, but are not limited to, students' personal, social and academic circumstances, as well as the university staff and processes that determine whether students perform and progress at university (Walsh, Larsen & Parry, 2009; Karp, 2011; Maitland & Lemmer, 2011). While some consider it the responsibility of the student to adapt, others believe universities have an obligation to accommodate students (Walsh, Larsen & Parry, 2009; Rendon, 1994; Jacklin & Robinson, 2007; Loots, 2009), particularly those who are unable to integrate into university independently and require active intervention by lecturers, tutors, and/or other university staff to help them participate in activities and ultimately succeed (Karp, 2011; Rendon, 1994).

This may be particularly true for non-traditional university students whose family and friends are at times sceptical of them attending university or may even discourage it (Rendon, 1994). Despite many support interventions at universities to prevent student failure, dropout rates remain high (Karp, 2011; Walsh, Larsen & Parry, 2009) and may be attributed to: interventions that are only academic in nature (e.g. academic support tutorials or extended degree programmes); passive interventions (e.g. referral by a lecturer to a non-academic unit for advice or guidance) when students need someone to actively provide assistance (Karp, 2011; Rendon, 1994); and/or failure to meet the needs of students (Karp, 2011). As a result various other initiatives have been introduced, such as financial workshops, student support groups, "big brothers/sisters", academic advisers or advising programmes, counselling facilities, staff-student mentoring, and peer tutoring (Lotkowski, Robbins & Noeth, 2004). Regardless of what it may be, it is suggested that initiatives that provide holistic support, including social, psycho-emotional, and academic help, are the most successful (Maitland & Lemmer, 2011). Moreover, non-academic support initiatives are often geared towards addressing students' academic success and may focus on a number of non-academic issues and challenges faced by university students (Karp, 2011).

One of the most important factors in student success is social integration. Students who feel isolated or lack the requisite social support may drop out (Walsh, Larsen & Parry, 2009), with first-generation students and those studying at tertiary institutions far from home most likely to fall into this trap (Lotkowski, Robbins & Noeth, 2004). The literature shows that learning is a social activity (Maitland & Lemmer, 2011; Wilmer, 2008) and, despite poor academic performance, many students persevere because they have managed to realise successful social integration at their tertiary institution (Karp, 2011; Lotkowski, Robbins & Noeth, 2004). Correspondingly, students' interaction with someone who shows concern or takes an interest in them (particularly in the first year of study) is of great significance (Hill, 1995; Lotkowski, Robbins & Noeth, 2004; Rendon, 1994). The literature shows that informal (i.e. non-academic) contact between a student and lecturer outside the classroom positively affects the student's personal development, academic performance, social integration into the university, and satisfaction with the university experience (Lotkowski, Robbins & Noeth, 2004; Rendon, 1994; Karp, 2011), which aligns with Jacklin

and Robinson's (2007) assertion that (inter)personal support is the most important type of assistance for university students.

However, the literature shows that students remain reluctant to speak to lecturers (Cleland, Arnold & Chesser, 2005; Walsh, Larsen & Parry, 2009), as they often consider them unapproachable, unfriendly, or unavailable (Rendon, 1994; Walsh, Larsen & Parry, 2009). Correspondingly, lecturers may feel they do not have the time (owing to large student numbers) nor the ability (they lack formal training) to address and/or diagnose student problems (Hill, 1995; Tait & Entwistle, 1996; Walsh, Larsen & Parry, 2009). As such, lecturers may either be unwilling to provide non-academic support, unaware of non-academic support services on campus, or may not consider it their responsibility to refer students to those qualified to assist (Walsh, Larsen & Parry, 2009). Still others may feel students should have the skills to cope, as they managed to gain admission to university (Cleland, Arnold & Chesser, 2005; Karp, 2011; Tait & Entwistle, 1996). Whatever the case may be, it is vital that students are treated with the necessary sensitivity and helped where possible. This may simply require a lecturer to listen or refer appropriately (Hill, 1995), rather than blaming students for their shortcomings, which is often the case (Loots, 2009; Lotkowski, Robbins & Noeth, 2004).

Of importance then is a need to take cognisance of students' preference to talk to tutors (i.e. senior students). The term 'tutor' has several connotations that are predominantly scholarly or relate to academia (Schmidt & Moust, 1995), denoting a person who typically gives academic guidance and instruction to a small group of people or an individual (Barrows, 2002). Barrows (2002) emphasises the auxiliary nature of a tutor's teaching responsibilities (i.e. supplementary to the lecturer in a tertiary institution), while Maitland and Lemmer (2011) underscore how holistic student support by tutors consistently yields far better outcomes for students. Consequently, students tend to gravitate to tutors because they are likely to possess the following attributes: approachability, relatability with a marginal age difference (Maitland & Lemmer, 2011), contextual insight and understanding, an awareness of what it means to be in the student's shoes (Loots, 2009; Maitland & Lemmer, 2011; Walsh, Larsen & Parry, 2009), experience succeeding at university (Maitland & Lemmer, 2011), and an appreciation for the value of student support (Loots, 2009). Subsequently, students can establish meaningful supportive relationships with individuals who influence them positively (Lotkowski, Robbins & Noeth, 2004; Maitland & Lemmer, 2011), while tutors can offer solutions to the challenges students face based on personal experience, help with academic work, and assist with finding help for both academic and non-academic concerns (Lotkowski, Robbins & Noeth, 2004).

The supportive role played by the tutor is particularly significant, as students are usually reluctant to admit to having personal, physical, mental health and/or financial problems (Walsh, Larsen & Parry, 2009), which they feel are private, may have negative consequences when shared, or show weakness or an inability to cope. By forming a meaningful relationship with a tutor, students are more likely to speak out about their challenges and concerns, thus addressing Cleland, Arnold and Chesser's (2005) findings about students not knowing who to talk to regarding personal problems, or not feeling comfortable speaking

about matters of this nature. Tutors are also likely to adequately refer students to relevant counselling and support services, which makes students less likely to withdraw from their studies and has a positive effect on student achievement and retention (Walsh, Larsen & Parry, 2009).

Besides a lack of social support and integration, other factors that cause students to fail or drop out are a lack of time management, inadequate study or exam-writing skills, no/unrealistic goals, family/financial/workload pressures, and/or a fear of failure (Lotkowski, Robbins & Noeth, 2004; Loots, 2009). Not surprisingly then, programmes that bring students together help create social and learning groups where these students are taught to cope with and address these challenges. Additionally, in instances where mentoring and support are included in the support programme, student motivation, self-confidence, and engagement are improved and increased (Lotkowski, Robbins & Noeth, 2004; Rendon, 1994). Similarly, Fulk and King (2001) have found that class-wide peer-to-peer tutoring techniques make it possible to actively involve all students in the learning process, which has the added advantage of improving self-esteem and social skills among participants. Subsequently, a flexible peer-mediated strategy where students serve as tutors and tutees known as 'peer tutoring' (Hott, Walker & Sahni, 2012) allows an older or higher performing student to be paired with students in need of support, to work on academic and/or behavioural concepts they find challenging. Peer tutoring (Hott, Walker & Sahni, 2012) is common in institutions of higher learning and most syllabi are dependent on peer tutors to supplement contact time (Clarence, 2016; Hobson, 2002). The technique has a strong evidence base (Hott, Walker & Sahni, 2012; Vasquez & Slocum, 2012) and is said to aid in four ways, outlined in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Merits of peer tutoring

1. Creates social connections	Students can get information, form study groups, become part of a community where they feel welcome and are supported, know who and where to go to, receive advice, are motivated, are helped to acclimatise, and form relationships (Karp, 2011; Loots, 2009; Wilmer, 2008).
2. Increases commitment and clarifies goals	Students may not know why university is important or understand why they are learning. Guidance by senior students is a positive interaction that suggests the relevance of the degree, provides concrete reasoning, and allows the student to visualise their future selves (Karp, 2011; Loots, 2009; Wilmer, 2008).
3. Develops know-how	Students learn what they are expected to know and do, learn about context and culture, how to navigate the system, when and where to ask for help, how to make use of services, how to manage time and participate in class, and how to study and write tests (Karp, 2011; Loots, 2009; Wilmer, 2008).
4. Makes life feasible	Students learn how to deal with other day-to-day challenges such as transport, accommodation, and food (Karp, 2011; Wilmer, 2008).

Consequently, holistic experiences that assist with psychosocial problems and that are run by well-trained, enthusiastic, and committed tutors (Maitland & Lemmer, 2011) will lead to satisfied students. If students are satisfied with a support programme it will create goodwill for future implementation (Maitland & Lemmer, 2011) and assist students by "… mak[ing] life more manageable [which] can improve student outcomes" (Karp, 2011, p. 19). Similarly, students who are involved in one intervention will likely participate in others (Loots, 2009), thus increasing their chances of succeeding at university. What follows is a framework for implementing *Success Tutoring* – an approach conceptualised and adopted by the Road to Success Programme (RSP), a non-academic student success and support programme (see De Klerk et al., 2017) in the Faculty of Commerce, Law, and Management (CLM) at the University of the Witwatersrand.

Success Tutoring

In 2014 Teaching Development Grant funding was applied for by CLM, as part of a university-wide grant application to the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET). Funding was awarded for four projects, one of which had to focus on supporting *students at risk* (a term used by DHET). However, the RSP (De Klerk et al., 2017) wanted to move away from the *at-risk* label and adopted a more positive, success-orientated approach for the programme. The initial target groups were first-year students and particular cohorts of struggling students, which have since grown to include all of the approximately 5 500 undergraduate students in the faculty. The initial premise for employing between 20 and 30 non-academic tutors as part of the programme was to ensure requisite capacity to service the needs of all the students who could engage with its support initiatives. But in time RSP Grant Holders and Coordinators (see De Klerk et al., 2017) learned the value (through research and practice) of involving the student experience and voice in a programme that serves the needs of students. As a result, an approach called *Success Tutoring* was conceptualised and adopted.

The concept of *Success Tutoring* refers to the support, help, and guidance provided to a student by a *Success Tutor*. *Success Tutoring* excludes any form of academic tutoring and does not relate to any one subject in particular. The emphasis here is on the non-academic factors that may influence a student's academic performance and success. Focus areas include, but are not limited to, excellence skills (e.g. time management, study skills for university, note taking, and reflective practice), strategic planning, advice and guidance on matters pertaining to personal and university life, and referral to relevant campus support services. In turn, a *Success Tutor* is a student tutor who has been trained to occupy this position. The *Success Tutor* serves as a link between the student and the university. (S)he provides advice, support, and guidance to students in relation to particular focus areas (see definition of *Success Tutoring*), drawing on personal experience and training. Accordingly, *Success Tutors* have a variety of roles and responsibilities.

Firstly, they interact with undergraduate students in group and one-on-one settings to address excellence skills. Secondly, *Success Tutors* engage with students around personal, social, and emotional challenges, usually on a one-on-one basis. Here tutors may draw on

personal experience and what they were taught during training, or they could refer the case to one of the RSP Coordinators (De Klerk et al., 2017), should it go beyond the scope of what they are able to assist with. Finally, *Success Tutors* get involved in RSP symposia, orientation week activities, the faculty's pre-university school, awareness drives, pay-it-forward campaigns, and a number of other RSP initiatives (see De Klerk et al., 2017). Consequently, a *Success Tutor* is an individual who should be able to provide non-academic support (that supplements and complements students' academic success) to undergraduate students. These tutors play an integral role in improving and evolving the RSP, thus ensuring relevance, nuance, and an element of student voice in the programme.

Recruitment

Recruitment starts towards the end of an academic year with the submission of applications by senior students (i.e. third and fourth years) in response to a call for tutors. Candidates have to be willing to: assist undergraduates with a variety of personal, social, and emotional challenges; guide undergraduates on the path to personal growth and academic success; motivate undergraduates to unlock and realise their potential; and provide undergraduates with emotional and social support. Interviews are geared at identifying individuals who possess attributes and characteristics that align with the RSP's mandate (see De Klerk et al., 2017) and occur early in the new academic year to allow adequate time for tutor training prior to the commencement of the academic year. Although *Success Tutors* do not have to possess an exceptional academic record, they should at least be averaging in the 60s, as the programme would not want to put its own tutors at risk of not succeeding. Once all interviews have been conducted, the team deliberates and then informs new *Success Tutors* of their appointment and training dates.

Training

As *Success Tutors* provide non-academic support, their training needs are different. Recruitment is followed by a two-day tutor training programme, where day one focuses on RSP in-house training and day two on Student in Distress training (conducted by the university's counselling unit). On day one newly appointed *Success Tutors* are orientated, gain a sense of their role and responsibility, and explore the mandate of the programme. Day two focuses solely on the process of assisting students in distress, counselling, and referring students if and when necessary. The two-day training session serves to ensure that *Success Tutors* gain insight into the student success and support agenda, know what is expected of them, understand when to refer cases, and know whom to refer students to.

Support

The RSP recognises the need to adequately support *Success Tutors*, to ensure they are able to fulfil their mandate. This is achieved through clear and consistent tutorial briefs for running *Success Tutorials*, opportunities to reflect and debrief, library literacy workshops, copyright and plagiarism workshops, regular engagements with the RSP team, and an annual team-

building event. Also worth mentioning is the role played by *Success Tutors* who have been part of the programme for more than one year, as they are involved in tutor training sessions and regularly share their experience and insight with new tutors.

Methodology

The evaluation of *Success Tutoring* has proven critical in terms of programme enhancement and draws on the input of *Success Tutors* through their role as students and members of the RSP team. Nygaard and Belluigi (2011) emphasise how some methods of evaluation do not address student learning (and to some extent student needs), which is why the RSP considers contributions by *Success Tutors* (i.e. the student voice) imperative. One method of evaluation used annually since the programme's inauguration in 2015 is the RSP *Success Tutor* Symposium, which provides *Success Tutors* the opportunity to share innovations and address both internal and external factors they feel could enhance the programme as a whole and/or impact on its growth or success. During this symposium each tutor has the opportunity to conduct a five-minute presentation on a key topic (usually quite broad to allow room for personal interpretation and nuance). These topics are predetermined by RSP coordinator and sent to *Success Tutors* a few weeks before the symposium (there are usually between three and five topics). The purpose is to observe the programme through a different lens (i.e. that of the student tutor), as they engage with students and experience interventions differently from staff who occupy administrative or academic positions in the university. Consequently, this approach to evaluation has proven beneficial to the RSP, while at the same time providing *Success Tutors* the opportunity to contribute to the evaluation of the programme.

For the purpose of this study the authors analysed their 2015 and 2016 symposia notes (11 out of 25 *Success Tutors* participated in the former, while 17 out of 24 participated in the latter), using the principles and processes of thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This involved individuals familiarising themselves with their datasets (i.e. the different sets of symposia notes), identifying codes and themes, comparing themes across datasets, refining themes, and naming themes. The results of this analysis yielded four main themes, one of which has five sub-themes. Theme one was identified as the *social aspect* of the RSP, which is broken down into the sub-themes of *relationship*, *integration/know-how*, *commitments/clarify goals*, *community*, and *why tutors (vs lectures)*. *Support given*, *other (non-academic) initiatives*, and *expectations of students new to the university* emerges as themes two, three, and four respectively. These themes and sub-themes were used to explicate the value of *Success Tutoring* as an approach for addressing student success needs in the faculty, which the authors believe also apply to the greater South African higher education context.

Findings and Discussion

Social aspect

The overriding theme that arose from the thematic analysis was that of *social aspect* in relation to the RSP and the idea that "learning is a social activity". This confirms the work

of Maitland and Lemmer (2011). Within this theme the responses from *Success Tutors* were broken down into five sub-themes, which are explored in more detail below.

Relationships

The analysis showed that *Success Tutors* believed it was important to interact with someone you had a connection with, which was critical for relationship building (Lotkowski, Robbins & Noeth, 2004; Maitland & Lemmer, 2011). They felt that students *wanted to belong* and needed emotional support. In tutorials *Success Tutors* would often suggest that students *create buddies*, both with other students (particularly those in that tutorial group), as well as with the tutors. The tutors also believed that it was important for themselves to have relationships with the other *Success Tutors*, as well as with student councils and industry partners. The suggestion that relationships are important for students confirms the findings of Lotkowski, Robbins and Noeth (2004), and Maitland and Lemmer (2011), who say that students can establish relationships with tutors that can influence them positively, but also help with the challenges of university. Students are less likely to withdraw if they are assisted or referred to a unit where they can be helped, or even simply have someone to talk to or who takes an interest in them (Hill, 1995; Lotkowski, Robbins & Noeth, 2004; Rendon, 1994).

Integration/know-how

What also emerged from the analysis is that students want to belong and feel the need to fit in. A student may think that it is just her/him who is left out, while others appear to fit in and/or have friends, which is usually not the case. The *Success Tutors* suggest that students want to *become part of a society that talks to success* and that they need to know *how and where to ask for help*. Tutors would ask students if they have any friends to gauge possible feelings of isolation, which then gives the *Success Tutor* an opportunity to facilitate connections with other students. Walsh, Larsen and Parry (2009) found that students who feel isolated are more likely to drop out of university, so being part of a group within the RSP is likely to guard against this. In addition, Lotkowski, Robbins and Noeth (2004), and Karp (2011) suggest that students who have successfully integrated socially into university are more likely to persevere. Moreover, the *Success Tutors*' emphasis on the importance of knowing who and where to ask for assistance for both academic and non-academic issues substantiates the findings of Wilmer (2008), Loots (2009), and Lotkowski, Robbins and Noeth (2004).

Commitments/clarify goals

Another point that arose from the analysis was *Success Tutors*' perceived responsibility to help *develop the individual* and create a culture of not wasting potential. As such, they assist students with setting goals and discuss how to realise these goals. *Success Tutors* also engage with students, not just to assist with difficulties, but to *speak to them about how to succeed*. They act as motivators and believe they have a responsibility to help with the growth of the

students they interact with. This need for tutors to guide students in terms of their *future selves* is reiterated by Karp (2011), Loots (2009) and Wilmer (2008). The RSP *Success Tutors* see this as a positive duty, so that students can understand why they are at university, and where it will lead them. Additionally, *Success Tutors* see themselves as benefiting from this process, as by assisting others and interacting with other *Success Tutors*, they can also grow and succeed (Loots, 2009).

Community

This sub-theme relates to *Success Tutors*' beliefs that they have *a voice as a community* within the RSP. They see the RSP as having created *a culture of help and support* that builds students' self-esteem, as well as that of the tutors themselves. As senior students, *Success Tutors* feel they can *pass down guidelines* through their interactions and communications within their tutorial groups, which will support the students they engage with. Here the *Success Tutors* and their idea of the RSP community as a support mechanism to make students feel part of a wider group serve to substantiate the work of Karp (2011), Loots (2009) and Wilmer (2008). By involving students in the learning that takes place in tutorials, *Success Tutors* believe they are building their and the students' self-esteem, which can be related to the findings of Fulk and King (2001).

Why tutors (vs lecturers)

The analysis shows that *Success Tutors* believe they are in the extraordinary position of being able *to make university a better place for students*. Due to their age and experiences, they consider themselves more likely to: relate to students' issues; understand students' positions; and/or refer students when necessary. The tutors say *we have been there*. They understand that personality attributes like empathy, being encouraging, and being open and positive are vital, while also encouraging *the students to gain these attributes*. *Success Tutors* also feel they can draw on their own experiences (not just from an academic point of view) and *provide practical solutions* to particular challenges. What is more, as a big brother/sister they also get informal anecdotal feedback from students, which in turn helps them improve their own practice. The work of Maitland and Lemmer (2011), Loots (2009), and Walsh, Larsen and Parry (2009) are supported by the *Success Tutors*' experiences. The tutors find that students in RSP tutorial groups are more likely to talk to them owing to their closer age, and because the *Success Tutors* are more easily able to relate to the challenges students face, which they may have experienced themselves.

Support given

The second theme to emerge from the thematic analysis relates to the type of support provided to students. *Success Tutors* emphasised that students require support that does not focus on academics alone. Moreover, they make it clear that not only underprepared students gain from engaging with *Success Tutors*. Therefore the support provided by *Success Tutors* through the RSP addresses the fact that students' support needs are not necessarily

linked to academics. Consequently, *Success Tutors* provide interpersonal support geared at emotional, personal, and social challenges. This addresses Karp's (2011) comments about the failure to meet the needs of students and corroborates the findings of Lotkowski, Robbins and Noeth (2004) about the use of both academic and non-academic support interventions. It also links to the work of Maitland and Lemmer (2011), who emphasise the need for support structures that are not only academic in nature.

Other (non-academic) initiatives

The third theme revolves around other (non-academic) initiatives to support students and address student success needs. *Success Tutors* are involved in initiatives of this nature through the RSP (i.e. awareness drives and soup/hot beverage stations). However, they also expressed a need to influence undergraduate schools within the faculty to provide additional support that blends tutoring of both an academic and non-academic nature. Here the work of Lotkowski, Robbins and Noeth (2004) about the value of academic and non-academic support initiatives rings true once more. Additionally, Maitland and Lemmer's (2011) suggestion that those who provide support that covers social, psycho-emotional, and academic help are the most successful, cannot be discounted.

Expectations of students new to the university

The final theme to emerge from the analysis of symposia data relates to the expectations of students who are new to the university. *Success Tutors* highlighted that different students have different needs. Students entering the system may therefore be underprepared first-generation students who are far from home and vulnerable/overwhelmed. Additionally, *Success Tutors* often engage with introverted students who may not realise they need help coping with the demands of university. As a result, the *Success Tutors* emphasise the value of word-of-mouth to aid students in realising they need help, particularly when it seems that others are coping and they are not. The fact that students are willing to engage with *Success Tutors* regarding matters of a personal nature addresses Walsh, Larsen and Parry's (2009) findings about student reluctance to discuss matters of this nature. Moreover, *Success Tutors*' observations about first-generation students who live far from home reiterates Lotkowski, Robbins and Noeth's (2004) findings, in addition to corroborating what Loots (2009) says about managing student expectations in light of *Success Tutors* having *been there*. What is reassuring then is that RSP *Success Tutors* are engaging with students new to the university, which Walsh, Larsen and Parry (2009) claim has a positive effect on student achievement and retention.

Conclusion

South African higher education has seen an exponential growth in student numbers, placing severe pressure on the resources of universities and directly impacting on student success. The subsequent necessity for student support initiatives that supplement and complement the academic and non-academic student experience have become non-negotiable. In this

paper the authors shared a framework for implementing *Success Tutoring*, a tutorial approach that forms part of the student success and support programme they run. Those looking to implement *Success Tutoring* should remember that the recruitment and adequate training of suitable candidates to occupy *Success Tutor* positions is imperative to providing students with the support they feel they need and to assist with their socialisation at university. This requires individuals who are passionate about student success and support, motivated, driven, and who understand the challenges faced by South African students. Senior undergraduate or honours-level students are most likely to fit this profile, as students are likely to find them approachable and relate to them better. The approach also captures the student voice, which is essential for addressing student needs and to evaluate and enhance the student success and support programme the *Success Tutors* are affiliated with (if any). Ultimately, *Success Tutors* perform an intermediate function between academic support (which is discipline and/or subject specific) and non-academic support (which is geared at factors influencing academic success). *Success Tutors* are therefore knowledgeable about the content of their specific fields of study, can provide insight on excellence skills that are tailored to supplement academic activities, and also play a non-academic role in terms of being empathetic/sympathetic by providing support for students who are struggling with a range of issues that can adversely affect student success.[2]

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[2] Future research initiatives will explore the experience of students who have engaged with the Road to Success Programme (De Klerk, et al., 2017) and with *Success Tutors*, to better understand the needs, expectations, and challenges students face.

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Research article

The Messiness of Meaning Making: Examining the Affordances of the Digital Space as a Mentoring and Tutoring Space for the Acquisition of Academic Literacy

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Abstract

Having incorporated a digital aspect to our academic literacy course, and having monitored this over the last three years, we have come to believe that online mentoring can serve as an essential form of tutoring and mentoring. Our study is located in the field of New Literacy Studies and examines the affordances of a digital space in a first year academic literacy course in the Humanities. We focus on students' acquisition of academic literacy, as well as critical thinking and reflexivity around a core social science concept; identity. Here, we refer to the ability to think critically and reflexively, as the 'analytical mode', a key driver in shaping the pedagogy of the course. In this paper, we explore the online participation of two students and how they engage with the theme of identity, not only as an academic concept but also as one intrinsically linked with how they see themselves in a diverse post-apartheid South African context. We argue that the digital space promotes a particular form of the 'analytical mode' as students grapple with texts and concepts on the academic literacy course. Using a qualitative case study methodology, our analysis of students' online interaction revealed that the digital space allowed students to express themselves with a level of depth and sophistication, and to share dissident views that could not be expressed in the traditional classroom space. Furthermore, we argue that the digital space can suspend students' urgency to agree or disagree with the arguments of authors they read. By holding students between the two positions of agreement and disagreement, we propose that the digital space becomes a space of reflexive[1] *discomfort which captures various moments in students' drafting processes as they operate within the analytical mode. Therefore, we argue that the digital space, if harnessed with a particular type of mentoring philosophy and pedagogy that activates the analytical mode, can free up the traditional forms of academic mentoring and tutoring within the academy. This allows students the freedom to live with the messiness of their texts and to grapple with their conceptual understanding, and in doing so, develop their 'authorial self' (Clark & Ivanič, 1997).*

[1] See D'Cruz's (2007) analysis of the dynamic and innovative ways in which the concept of reflexivity is used.

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Keywords
affordances; digital space; identity; authorial voice; academic literacy; analytical mode

Introduction

Currently it is unusual for an article on digital spaces to be included in a collection intended to make a contribution to tutoring and mentoring. However, we would like to argue that the online space can be harnessed as a mentoring or tutoring space, or what Guittierez (2008) terms as a 'third space'. Therefore, it has the potential to contribute richly and in novel ways to the tutoring and mentoring aspect of higher educational pedagogies. In this paper we offer some evidence of this potential.

This study is situated in post-apartheid South Africa where, despite positive changes in the education system, the remnants of the notorious Bantu Education system can still be felt, especially in the rural areas.[2] As such, the dispensation of education remains quite divided, and only a small proportion of 'historically disadvantaged' students make it to university.[3] Our tertiary institution has thus designed a series of cross-faculty interventions to give students social and epistemic access to the ways of knowing that will facilitate their integration into academia. Such interventions are offered under the banner of transformation and social redress and are subsidised by government funding in an attempt to achieve the state's broader transformation goals.

In this paper, we analyse one such intervention which we all teach on: an academic literacy introductory course (henceforth referred to as 'AcLit') for first year Humanities students on a four-year (extended degree) programme.[4] We use a blended approach – face-to-face and online interaction – as part of our pedagogy to teach academic writing to small groups of students. The students who take the course are often those who come from historically 'disadvantaged' backgrounds and have scored low on the academic literacy component of the National Benchmark Tests (NBTs).[5] These students are seen as having

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2 See the 2005 report by HSRC; and also Holborn's (2013) article.

3 The UNESCO (2010) measure of gross enrolment rate reflects that the overall percentage of South African students who are participating in higher education in the country is about 16%, of which 60% are White and only 12% are African and Coloured. It is estimated that less than 5% of Black South African students are able to gain access to the higher education sector. See also the CHE (2013) report, and Scott, Yeld and Hendry (2007) for more insight into how racially skewed student participation rates are in South African higher education.

4 'In the Faculty of Humanities, the Four Year Degree takes the form of a Bachelor of Arts (BA) or Bachelor of Social Science (BSocSc) degree taken over four years (as opposed to three years). Students on the Four Year Degree have access to augmented courses, foundation courses and workshops, mentorship and extended periods of registration' (http://www.humanities.uct.ac.za/hum/apply/undergraduate/edu).

5 'The National Benchmark Tests' (NBTs) were commissioned by Universities South Africa with the task of assessing academic readiness of first year university students as a supplement to secondary school reports on learning achieved in content-specific courses. The NBTs assess the ability to combine aspects of prior learning in competency areas – Academic Literacy (AL), Quantitative Literacy (QL) and Mathematics (MAT) – that directly impact on success of first year university students. AL and QL are combined in the AQL test and written in a three-hour morning session; the MAT is written in a three-hour afternoon session. Both are administered under standardised testing conditions at sites across South Africa on designated 'national test dates.' For more information see http://www.nbt.ac.za/

the potential to succeed in the academy if provided with the appropriate curriculum interventions. It is, however, important to point out that the concept of 'disadvantaged' in the context of this intervention is shifting, and that the students entering the programme come from very diverse socio-economic and schooling backgrounds.

The main aim of our AcLit course is to teach students ways of reading, writing and argumentation in the Humanities context, using the themes of language, identity, culture, gender and race to ground the academic discussions. These themes are still very topical in the post-apartheid higher education context, given the fact that the memory and experience of racial prejudice and discrimination during apartheid continues to act as a stimulus for articulating ideas and expressions around identity and transformation. The recent *Decolonising the Curriculum* and *Rhodes Must Fall* student protest movements are testimony to the types of changes that students are demanding with respect to legitimising their presence on South African higher education campuses.[6]

Within the above context, the classroom can thus be seen as a space of discomfort, not only because it broaches on current issues, but because it situates itself during the transitional phase between the high school context and university, a phase that Ivanič (1998) would refer to as a 'critical event'. The latter refers to the significant encounters that individuals experience during crucial periods of change in their lives.[7] Students therefore not only learn about topical themes but learn to interrogate them. Students' experiences during this critical event are coupled with the need to operate within what we have come to call 'the analytical mode' on the AcLit course. We see the analytical mode as a pedagogical imperative that attempts to encourage students to critically engage with academic texts and concepts while holding off on taking a definitive position in an academic debate and in their initial essay drafts. One of the aims of this pedagogical imperative – the analytical mode – is to disrupt and challenge students' preconceived and commonplace notions of race, gender and culture, and get them out of their comfort zones to interrogate what they may have taken for granted. This is important, since much of the teaching practices that occur in our public schooling system is geared towards the delivery and memorisation of knowledge, and not the questioning and interrogation thereof.

The past two years in particular have brought to the fore the need to open up further spaces for students to express themselves, given the extent of student protests on campuses alluded to above. At the same time, our approach as staff on the AcLits course is that these spaces should also enable students to exercise individual thought so that they will be in a position to interrogate, and not simply be swayed by the majority view or binary thinking.

We have attempted to foster this type of learning environment by developing and embedding a digital literacies component into the AcLits course. This comprises an online website where students have the opportunity to both rehearse their engagement with texts

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6 See Kamanzi's (2015) article for useful background information on this.

7 Ivanič's understanding of the term 'critical event' is derived from the concept of 'critical experience' which is drawn from a more psycho-social analysis of lifespan identity theory. Critical events and experiences therefore concern 'moments of flux … between … [individual's sense of their] different selves' (Ivanič, 1998, p.16).

and concepts introduced in the course, and to reflect on these critically. It also provides new opportunities for online mentoring and tutoring pedagogic engagements and exchanges. In this paper, we explore the extent to which this AcLits online space promotes our pedagogical imperative – the analytical mode – to nurture a particular voice in writing, notably the 'authorial self' (Clark & Ivanič, 1997), through such online mentoring and tutoring engagements. The 'authorial self' refers to a sense of the writer's presence in their text and the ownership of ideas in their writing. This voice is discussed shortly in more detail.

Digital Spaces and Literacies

The digital space and its plethora of literacies have come under the spotlight in recent literacy research. Studies focusing on harnessing the digital space in the academy have examined its affordances for the acquisition of academic literacies (see Goodfellow & Lea, 2013). Of particular interest to us is how the digital space can be utilised to promote the analytical mode and in doing so, shape the acquisition of academic literacies and the development of an 'authorial self' (Clark & Ivanič, 1997).

In this paper, the digital space has been construed as an alternative site of learning, or in the words of Gutiérrez (2008, p. 152), as a 'third space' where the 'formal and informal intersect', promoting new forms of knowing and being in the academy, and transforming the limited views of teaching as delivery. Her description of the 'third space' fits aptly in our understanding of the digital space, when she states that this space creates 'the potential for authentic interaction, a shift in the social organisation of learning and what counts as knowledge'. Her view echoes our view of the digital space as a nurturing space for authentic learning. Through its multimodal design, the aim is to activate the different modes in which students learn and bridge the divide between the realm of ideas and that of lived experiences through tangible examples. Gutiérrez's (2008) understanding of 'third spaces' would resemble Canagarajah's (1997) 'safe house', where dissenting voices can be heard. This said, we do not adopt a technicist approach towards the digital space, nor do we view it as the panacea for the acquisition of academic literacies. Online mentoring in this regard becomes an invaluable tool for helping students to grapple with the application of theory to their own lives, so as to allow them to move beyond the abstractions that so often undermine meaningful learning.

The understanding of digital literacy pursued in this paper is aligned to that proposed by proponents of the New Literacy Studies movement, where digital literacies are viewed as a set of social practices promoted on the online learning sites. McKenna and Hughes (in Goodfellow & Lea, 2013) make this evident when they state, 'Throughout, we are informed by an academic literacies paradigm, a theoretical framework which views writing as a social practice (Lea & Street, 1998).' They use the academic literacies approach as it surfaces the tensions between power, context and identity within digital spaces. Therefore digital spaces and their literacies are not neutral forms of writing, as Street (1984) would point out, but are as ideological as any other space and the literacies it promotes.

When designed to promote academic reading and writing in the social sciences, the digital space operates in quite a distinct way, making those very modes visible for the

educator and learners, and in some ways altering the genre in which ideas get expressed. Presently, students are immersed in different social networking sites and blogging course sites, where they can share their views and comments without feeling the need to be grammatically correct or articulate. Leveraging the openness of such spaces as rehearsal spaces, the AcLits course site was designed on the Wordpress (blogging) site. According to McKenna and Hughes, 'Social networking spaces (e.g. Twitter, Wordpress, Flickr) are giving rise to alternative ways of articulating and responding to academic knowledge' (in Goodfellow & Lea, 2013, p. 22). They comment further that this new genre of writing leads to texts that are open and intertextual, with a heightened awareness of audience (McKenna and Hughes, in Goodfellow & Lea, 2013). In our case, this audience, mostly comprised of peers, is not passive, as they can engage with one another's thoughts in a collaborative spirit. These begin to redefine what we understand as 'academic writing'. For Lea and Stierer (2009), the everyday writing texts do not simply reflect academic practices but are 'central to them'.

As a result of our engagements with literature and our observations of our students' engagements, we are interested in how the digital space and its writing modalities can activate in-depth engagement with texts and concepts introduced on the course. In other words, we are interested in how the digital space can enhance engagement in the analytical mode.[8] These intersecting engagements have also forced us to reflect more critically on our own roles as instructors and facilitators of learning within the digital space, and the extent to which such roles are able to complement practices within the traditional teaching space, so that the analytical mode can be upheld.

The Analytical Mode

We understand the analytical mode as a particular disposition which encourages students to suspend judgment and remain in a productive discursive space. For us, the analytical mode represents an integrated form of engagement with course materials and academic literacy, which highlights the complexity and messiness of scholarship, which we accept as a normal part of the writing process (and is the reason why we focus on the process rather than the product of learning in our course – as will be explained shortly).

The analytical mode can also be understood as a space of discomfort for students (Zembylas & Boler, 2002), as lecturers are encouraged to create moments of tension during the course where students are asked to confront and engage with questions that relate to their notions of identity – the core theme of the course. This is particularly important in a country like South Africa, where notions such as 'the rainbow nation' have come under fire for not adequately addressing real issues of transformation,[9] thus leaving the country and its citizens to grapple with the challenge of forging a new identity after the demise of apartheid.

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[8] We are grateful to John Trimbur from Emerson for coining this concept in discussion with us.

[9] See Naylor's article (2009); see also Habib's (1996), and Sichone's (2008).

Bearing the above context in mind, we attempted to create opportunities for students to engage critically and reflexively with issues of identity as a social construct[10] so as to develop students' authorial identity in their academic writing. In the past, lecturers on our course would create space in their face-to-face interactions with their students to assist them with producing short pieces of written texts on the topic of identity. These short pieces of writing would be a form of 'inkshedding' (see Hunt, 2005), which is a social practice that involves writing down one's initial ideas on a particular topic (prior to a general class discussion on that topic) and then immediately passing them on to someone else to read, with the aim of getting feedback on the content of the writing only (i.e. the writing is not evaluated in any way). This type of writing is meant to be low stakes (students do not have to adhere to the conventions of academic writing), and developmental, and would ultimately form the building blocks for a final essay that centres on identity. During these inkshedding sessions, students were expected to draw on their life histories as a means to make sense of the notion that identity is a social construct. However, these inkshedding exercises that are by and large facilitated by lecturers and which have characterised the face-to-face interactions of the classroom, have now given way to online writing exercises in the AcLits course. Our online mentoring roles in this respect involve a level of feedback that is not judgemental or evaluative, but which responds simply to what is being stated.

In the disciplines, generally the discoursal and authorial selves are valued over and above students' brought along resources and capital. However, on the AcLits course, the online writing tasks draw on students' autobiographies as a legitimate way of inserting themselves in the process of engaging with theoretical concepts. Within this process-driven approach to academic writing (see Maybin, 1996), the autobiographical self and the discoursal self are recruited to develop an authorial identity in academic texts. The way in which these different selves are harnessed in writing can index how students engage in the analytical mode. Part of our online mentoring roles is geared towards facilitating these to and fro movements between the various selves, encountered by students.

The online language module of the AcLits course as a tutoring and mentoring space

Through the writing exercises, the digital space captures the moments when students shuttle between different selves and make visible the hidden components of the analytical mode. Further, we discuss how the digital space operates and showcases the analytical mode when learning is scaffolded through authentic tasks.

The online language module course site is an online writing-intensive, collaborative space for the last teaching day of a four-day AcLit teaching week; it takes the place of a conventional tutorial session. It also departs from the tutorial space in that the content is activated through various modes for an enriched learning experience, and students' views are captured in writing, available for peer viewing and comments. This is where students' understanding of texts and concepts that they were introduced to during the first three days

[10] For insight into identity as a social construction, see Terre Blanche and Durrheim (1999); and Shotter (1993).

of the week (that is, in the traditional classroom setting), are consolidated through reflective and application tasks that are completed online in the computer lab, in the presence of ourselves. During these sessions, we play more of the role of mentors and facilitators who prompt and respond to discussion and engagement, both in the physical lab space and online, rather than in the role of lecturers who provide knowledge content and assess the students' work.

Similar to tutorials, built into the online module are design principles such as alignment to course content, flexibility and responsiveness to students' emerging needs. As such, the online sessions are developed week by week, based on our assessment of students' orientation to texts and concepts in the face-to-face classroom. In other words, as part of our roles as mentors and facilitators in the online space, we are both responders and designers in this pedagogic endeavour.

The weekly online tasks enable students to grasp the application of theoretical ideas introduced on the course with vivid examples and case studies. The course site serves as a rehearsal space where students experiment with different writerly voices. Thus, the tasks are not formally assessed, but build toward major assignments on the course.

Students have the option of completing the online tasks at a later stage, up until Sunday of that week, and lecturers often notice high frequency of students on the site over the weekend. This is perhaps a sign that students are keeping up with the content in the course covered during the week. As online mentors, we also respond to students' online tasks collectively rather than individually, summarising core issues and providing prompts and questions that allow students to take their discussions and interrogation of texts further. These online responses are built into the following week's face-to-face formal teaching, where we shift from our roles as online mentors and facilitators and assume our roles as lecturers, and use students' online understanding of concepts as entry points for our formal teaching. And, in fact, this type of online facilitation has meant that we as online mentors also had to master the 'analytical mode' ourselves. Of course it is significant here that the successful transition from the online space into the formal face-to-face teaching space is undertaken by the same people, viz, AcLits staff, who signify an important element of continuity to the type of blended learning that occurs.

This online course site served a pedagogical function of encouraging students' expression and sharing of their views and responses to course readings and online content. Being an informal writing space of expression, it made allowance for the messiness of meaning making in process. Thus, it encouraged the development of the authorial identity by encouraging students to interact in an analytical mode.

Methodology

The online site also yielded data for research in the form of informal meaning making and pauses and dilemmas in this development. To analyse students' engagement with texts and concepts on the online course site, a qualitative case study methodology was employed.

The case study methodology enables researchers to acquire in-depth and detailed insights into particular phenomena. In case study methodology, it is also crucial to

delineate what the case is. The case is defined by Miles and Huberman (1994, p. 25) as 'a phenomenon of some sort occurring in a bounded context'. The case is, 'in effect, your unit of analysis'. In this study, the case was students' critical engagement with the concept of identity in the digital space. The case study adopted here was an exploratory one (Yin, 2003), as we did not enter the research with clear presuppositions about the outcomes of the study. We allowed the data that emanates from students' online engagement to speak for itself. At the same time, our theoretical positioning, as mentioned earlier, was very much informed by our socio-cultural approach to literacy as proposed by scholars in the New Literacy Studies field.

We were thus able to track the written work of our 120 students across different course sites (the on-line space and traditional teaching space). We obtained permissions from the students to use their online entries and submitted assignments as data for our research purposes. Our purpose here was directed at assessing a particular outcome: the main course essay, so as to gauge whether, and in what capacity, the online space impacted students' conceptual development and understanding of the concept of identity. In other words, how did the essays reflect that students were operating within an analytical mode? Through the analytical mode, how did students develop a particular authorial identity?

Heuristic: The clover model of writer identities

To analyse students' critical engagement with texts and concepts in the digital space, we pay close attention firstly to the way they enact voice in writing. This may offer insights as to how the online tasks could promote an analytical mode of engagement.

Voice in writing is a nebulous concept; for analytical purposes, we will refer to it in terms of the representation of writer identities through means such as tone, opinion and style. In his manual on writing, Fulwiler (2002), like Ivanič and Camps (2001), explains that ultimately in our written communications, the style, content and arrangement of our writing combine to represent us. He explains that the writer's voice is something that develops almost unconsciously, and largely apart from more conscious techniques that are focused on in learning to write:

> In writing, we can't, of course, hear the timbre of the voice or see the expressions on the face. Instead, we hear the voice through our reading, perhaps gleaning our first clues about the writer from the particular combination of words, punctuation, sentences, and paragraphs that we call *style.* (Fulwiler, 2002, p. 199)

Clark and Ivanič (1998) analyse voice using the clover model of writer identity, which is subdivided into the autobiographical, discoursal and authorial selves. The notions of 'autobiographical self' and 'discoursal self' allow for a clearer sense of locating and separating our research participants' constructions of their life-histories from the 'values, beliefs and power relations' that inform the discourses out of which those life-histories emerge.

The autobiographical self is that part of an individual's identity which is presented in a text to reveal the individual's sense of origin, their 'life-history'. The autobiographical self is a dynamic self, always in the process of being constructed so as to reflect the changing life-history of the individual. As such, the individual's sense of being is comprised of a dynamic interplay between events that occur and the manner in which the individual experiences and represents these events. Ivanič (1998) relates the autobiographical self to Goffman's notion of 'writer-as-performer'. It is the latter that constructs the text and 'produces a self-portrait.'

The 'discoursal self' is the 'impression' of oneself that the writer wishes to convey to the reader, and contains aspects of the socially constructed 'values, beliefs and power relations' of the context in which the text is embedded. Ivanič (1998) argues that this impression of self can be 'multiple' and even 'contradictory'. She relates the discoursal self to Goffman's identification of the 'writer-as-character', which Goffman argues is 'the identity which the writer-as-performer portrays'. Of prime concern here is how the writer uses her 'voice' in order to sound or come across to the reader in a particular way. Paxton (2006, p. 86) explains Bakhtin's (1986) analysis of how writers create a voice for themselves through 'assimilating, reworking and reaccentuating' other voices.

Finally, the authorial self is defined as the extent to which writers 'express their own ideas and beliefs in their writing' and 'their presence in the text'. The 'authorial self' would hence be reflected in the type of content the author chooses to present and the manner in which she aligns herself with that content in a way that marks her presence or absence.

Drawing on Giddens' (1991) notion of the 'reflexive project of the self'; that which is sustained through the constant revision of 'biographical narratives', Ivanič (1998) shows how the authorial voice is constantly being reworked as individuals reflexively make sense of their identities with new developments in their lives.

Alongside Ivanič, Hyland (2002) also offers interesting insights into the complexities surrounding the development of an authorial identity in student writing. Hyland's (2002) work with English second language speakers shows that students were fluent in strategies of 'author invisibility'. Our contention in the AcLits course is that some students (many of whom are English second language speakers) doing extended degrees may also have been indoctrinated along similar lines. A post from the blog, theeaparchivist (2012), commenting on Hyland's views on English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses (in his article, 'Authority and invisibility: Authorial identity in academic writing'), states:

> It seems that by adhering to the formulae of genres and 'accepted' discourse we are encouraging students to produce simulacra of academic writing. A replica with no soul. What worries me is that in doing so the power is retained within the echelons of western academia. If writers "gain credibility by projecting an identity invested with individual authority" (p. 1091) and individual authority is consistently dissuaded then we do not afford students the credibility they deserve.

In this paper, the clover model of writer identity is appropriated to analyse the shifts in writing made by students in the digital space and how these may signal particular ways of engaging with the analytical mode.

What follows by way of illustration are extracts through the chronology of the course, from two case studies in our data analysis, describing and reflecting on how the students, 'Thembi' and 'Sandra', engaged with texts and concepts on the course.

Data Analysis

Week 1: Orientation experience extract

In the first week of lectures, we gave students an online exercise which required them to write a reflective piece on their experiences on transitioning from school to university.

> **In the comments box provided below, write a reflective piece sharing your experiences at UCT so far, based on the reading on Transitions in your course reader and the video.**

In Thembi's response she provides a partially constructed narrative of her identity. She notes that her transition from school to university brought with it 'anxiety', 'fear for failure', 'lack of confidence to participate' and a shyness to engage with people who did not speak isiXhosa. Here she sees language, specifically English, as a barrier for her when it comes to engaging with her peers and lecturers. This is captured in the following words: 'I am developing hatred for English because it seems to be a barrier to my comfort zone so that I can be able to perform to the maximum of my ability when chances are available.' Although she views English as a barrier to her learning she is able to articulate quite clearly, 'I have a potential inside me' and 'I know that I also have an answer'. For Thembi, however, the performative nature of speaking in class does not always reflect the potential that she believes she has, because when speaking there is 'no chance to edit'. Here, the online environment is seen as a safer space than the traditional tutorial because students have a chance to think through their responses. Very often, the traditional tutorial interactions require immediate verbal responses, which in turn require immediate evaluation by both tutor and student.

Sandra, on the other hand, has mixed feelings, excitement, anxiety, and a number of questions about whether she will succeed and make her family proud, 'Will I succeed? What if I become very mediocre? Will I fail my family?' Like Thembi and many other first year students trying to adjust to the new university environment, Sandra initially feels overwhelmed, but soon this sentiment morphs into excitement, particularly when 'meeting new people and encountering diversity in its rawest form'. We can infer from her statement that she comes from a homogeneous schooling background. This diversity for her is an eye-opening experience. She then reflects on her goals and where she would like to see herself academically and as a person: 'I look forward to keep on carrying on in this journey […] to see how I grow academically, how I grow as a person, and to finally find my feet and know who I am and where I want to be in this world and how I can contribute in making this university, country and world into a better place!'

As we can see, Sandra's sense of personhood is tied with her ability to make or drive social changes. Her phrase, 'how I grow as a person' suggests that she sees identity as fluid and constantly evolving. The online task enables Sandra to project herself into the future and set goals to contribute nationally but also globally. At this point, we do not know much about Sandra's socio-academic background and how that informs her perceptions of self, her context and her aspirations.

Week 2: Reflection on English

In Week 2, students were given the online exercises below. That week they had been introduced to Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1986) and George Makubalo's (2007) writings.[11] The questions required them to apply their understanding of these two readings to authentic cases and their own experiences.

> **1. In light of the above statements [from Ngugi's (1986) chapter], how would you interpret his statement that the English language and literature 'takes us further and further from our selves to other selves, from our world to other worlds'? (Write a paragraph in the comment box provided below.)**
>
> **2. Makubalo (2007) argues that English is a 'commodity in great demand' (p. 21 of course reader).**
>
> **However, from the two graphs, it is evident that English is not the most spoken language both globally and locally. In your opinion, what then accounts for its dominance? Secondly, how would Makubalo respond to Ngugi's statement that the English language is taking one away from one's ethno linguistic identity? Provide a response to the two questions in the comment box below.**
>
> **3. Activity: In Makubalo's article, we are introduced to four learners: Thabo, Teboho, Anna and Sello. They each position themselves differently in terms of their language practices. Which one of these learners do you closely associate with and why? What would Makubalo's response be to the way you construct YOUR identity? Please write a paragraph in the comment box provided below. You can also comment on your peers' comments.**

Thembi's response to the questions is interesting as it differs from her construction of her identity as disadvantaged in Week 1's exercise. In this exercise Thembi foregrounds, asserts and celebrates her Xhosa identity with the statement, 'I am Xhosa and proud to be'. Although the metaphor of English as an enabler endures in her response when she states, 'it will help me in things that it will help me in', it is tempered with a protective discourse of her 'Xhosa identity' in the words, 'if a person values his culture he should not allow the advantages of English to colonize his mind'. Here Thembi views English, like Ngugi does, as possessing the ability to colonise the second-language speaker's mind but also as a vehicle for success in contexts where English is dominant and a marker of success. Judging

[11] Ngugi's (1986) chapter 'The language of African literature' presents an ethnolinguistic view of identity as something that is fixed and determined by the community in which one is born, in his case, the Gikuyu community in Kenya. He argues that the dominance of English takes him away from his Gikuyu language, sense of self and community. On the other hand, Makubalo (2007), a poststructuralist South African researcher, argues that identities are socially constructed, fluid, multiple and contradictory. His article presents four individual stories of black South African learners and their stated attitudes and language practices.

from her assertion of her Xhosa identity, coupled with her recognition of the dominance of English in a post-apartheid South Africa, it comes as no surprise that she identifies with Sello, a learner in Makubalo's paper, who values code-switching between languages.

Thembi also shows an awareness of the contradictions of supporting Ngugi's critical views on English in a university where English offers certain affordances – something that she is acutely aware of. In an attempt to resolve these contradictions, she states that 'we are different people of different cultures, and surely there is a need for us to communicate with each other, and here is English enabling us but we abuse it'. She uses the word 'abuse' to speak about the use of English (it is likely she meant 'overuse') as if she acts on the English language, but she goes on to refer to how English destroys local languages. Although her response does present the reader with some binaries, namely that of the isiXhosa speaker versus English speakers, we start seeing a move towards a more complex and nuanced understanding of identity.

In Sandra's response, she views the English language not only as a dominant language, but also as a product of the West. She links everything that is westernised with what is modernised, and sees English as a language that gives one access to status and prestige, which she refers to as a place of 'high value'. Her choice of words implies that the use of language, in this case English, is linked to one's self-worth, or that ascribed by others in society. She elaborates by explaining that English has such currency and power because it is a universal language. In that way, she suggests that while English may have emerged from the West, it has been appropriated by the rest.

She goes on to make a comparison between Makubalo and Ngugi's views on the English language, and explains that while the former believes that languages can be appropriated, the latter sees English 'taking away from African-ness'. Her use of 'African-ness' suggests firstly that she has taken the liberty to coin a new word to capture the essence of what it is to be African, and by the same token, the inverted commas suggest that she is challenging the assumption that there is a single way of being African, or at least that she is wrestling with the idea. At this point though, she does not openly state her own position.

It is only in the next task that she uses her personal history to explain why English does not destroy one's 'African-ness' and that it is 'up to us to decide whether or not it will'. In this instance, we see a strong assertion of agency when she writes her own personal reflection with respect to the English language, using English, and despite English. Like Thembi, she describes herself as an 'isiXhosa girl'. She views a Xhosa identity as not being restricted to an ability to speak isiXhosa, but also encompassing a way of life. Then, she begins to share the contradictions, 'born in Transkei but grew up in the suburbs speaking English'. She claims that she cannot speak isiXhosa; however, she notes that fluency in the language is not an essential marker of being an 'isiXhosa girl'. In this way, she can reconcile the fact that she self-identifies as an isiXhosa girl who speaks English. She does admit that she speaks isiXhosa to her mother.

She goes on to share the socio-economic situation in the household, 'living with my mother who was a domestic worker and my white guardians', but is quick to add that, 'from an early age I knew that I belonged to a different culture than the 'white people'.

Like Thembi, she is positioning herself strongly with those who are Xhosa, even though she comes from a household where she benefits from her guardians' financial support and speaks both languages. This is Sandra's way of challenging the traditional markers of language and class to define her Xhosa identity.

In the next paragraph, while she starts off saying that English has not influenced her identity, she goes on to contradict herself by acknowledging that, 'maybe English has shaped only minor things in my identity'. At this point, we find her hedging with the use of adverbs such as 'maybe', and vague terms such as 'things' which she does not qualify. Nonetheless, she still sees culture as something that one is 'born into' versus 'born with', to suggest that culture is a product of the earliest phases of socialisation. However, this view is also contradicted when she states that her Xhosa culture is 'embedded in my DNA'. She ends off on a philosophic note with 'English has given me a step up in the world, but my isiXhosa roots have given me a step up in this life'. Once again, she makes the distinction between the upward social mobility enabled through knowledge of English, and the inner growth enabled through her Xhosa identity. Like Thembi, she presents these influences as being distinct and mutually exclusive.

When asked which of Makubalo's research participants she would most relate to, she chooses Anna purely because both share the same 'origin and background'. Like Anna, we find that Sandra is romanticising her 'Xhosa' roots but goes on to state that, unlike Anna, she does not experience the same 'sense of loss' when speaking English. Even as she recalls her schooling, she firmly asserts that the other languages, 'including English', moulded her sense of self. What is significant here is that at the end of her reflection, when she sees herself through Makubalo's theoretical lens, she begins to see 'one big contradiction of culture and identity'.

Week 3: Reflective component

In Week 3, we designed an exercise to track shifts in conceptual understanding of identity as shown below. Students were expected to engage with the concept of identity reflexively, by writing in the online space about their autobiographical self in relation to new ways of understanding identity, as influenced by course readings and classroom discussions.

Task: Reflect on your notion of language and identity. Write a paragraph using the following phrases:

1. **Before I came to UCT, I used to think of identity as …**
2. **Then I read Ngugi who defines identity as …**
3. **I also read Makubalo who argues that identity is …**
4. **Now, I think of identity as … because … OR**
   I still think of identity as … because …
5. **I have the following questions which I would like to ask Ngugi and/or Makubalo and the class …**

(Note: your paragraph should be in continuous prose without the numbers 1–5.)

The Week 3 task can be seen as a pivotal moment, when students get to revisit their views on identity in light of Ngugi and Makubalo's ideas around language and identity. Here they are asked to look back on their understanding of identity *before* they came to study at the institution, and revisit their views on identity in light of Ngugi and Makubalo's ideas around language and identity. The task offers students the option to resist, challenge or acknowledge and agree with the authors' positions. This becomes a critical moment for AcLit lecturers to track how students' views on identity, often essentialist ones like in the case of Thembi and Sandra, have been transformed based on their understandings of theorists who hold post-structuralist views on identity.

In Thembi's response, we see that although she still agrees with Ngugi, she starts to understand identity as constructed and fluid. This is a view held by Makubalo who draws on post-structuralism to theorise identity and its construction. Her words, 'I still think of identity as the way you do things' (referring to 'Xhosa culture'), coupled with 'I can not say that identity is fixed', reflect an understanding of identity as constructed out of past experiences that can endure across contexts, *and* identity construction as a continual process. Therefore there is a recognition that identity is also influenced by social contexts, because she states that 'as time goes on my surroundings change of which I can not be able to socialize with them if I don't want to adapt to change'. By juxtaposing the two authors, we see that she agrees with aspects of Ngugi and Makubalo's arguments. For us, her response reflects a complex and nuanced understanding of identity and also signals a shift in her conceptual understanding of identity when compared to her responses in Week 1.

Sandra's response to this exercise shows similar shifts in her understanding of identity. In her response she notes that before she came to the academy she defined her identity along racial lines and identified herself as 'Black'. This comes as no surprise as the racial categories of the apartheid era, which drew on essentialist notions, still have currency in contemporary South Africa. While one would expect Sandra to align herself with Ngugi, based on her responses in Week 1 and 2, she actually introduces the notion of choice. She states, 'Now I think of identity as your characteristics and how you define yourself as a person, things like race, culture and language help form your identity but I think it all boils down to your beliefs, dreams and who you want to be in life. I don't believe you are defined by your ethnicity but by who you define to be.' She still sees ethnicity as playing a significant part in her self-definition, but she emphasises that she decides how these characteristics will be used to define her. In a sense then, she begins to understand that individuals have agency in the way their identities are constructed and therefore we might find that she will even reconsider her previous statement that culture is an inescapable part of her DNA.

So, while our roles as online mentors and facilitators in the computer lab seek to guide and promote students agency in terms of developing their critical and analytical thinking and writing skills, our roles as lecturers is to discern the extent to which students' understanding and conceptualising of the identity construction theory, taught in the face-to-face space, is developing and being employed in their online writing. It is in this sense that the continued interaction between our online mentoring roles and our lecturer roles contributes towards creating a holistic learning context.

Week 4 Essay

In Week 4, students submitted an essay in response to the following essay question:

> **Ngugi (1986) argues that the dominance of English takes us "further and further from our selves to other selves, from our world to other worlds". Drawing on the readings, argue for or against this statement.**

Here is Thembi's introduction to the essay,

> **I am a young girl who can write infinite scriptures if I can be asked about how my identity has been built, because there are many bricks that I and my surroundings have utilized to construct it. In addition to that, as I am still growing I cannot position myself in a fixed spot or environment because I am continuously reconstructing it. For me the fact that we are different means that we have to live in different ways in order to be united or socialise with others. This is to say that I strongly disagree with Ngugi's argument that English alters our ethnic identity into other identities and relocates us from our region to other regions, as we cannot have unwavering identity. Beliefs and actions will continue influence our creation of identity as long we live also our surroundings will always influence our actions. Bear in mind that language is one of the bricks used in identity construction because language is the carrier of culture and culture also froms up your identity.**

In Thembi's introduction to the essay we see a significant shift in how she views identity conceptually and how she views herself as compared to her initial responses in the extracts discussed above. In Week 2, for example, she not only expressed a loyalty to her 'Xhosa-ness' when she stated, 'I am Xhosa and proud to be', she also made it clear that English can colonize the minds of those who do not have English as a home language. However, in her introduction above she states, 'I am a young girl who can write infinite scriptures if I can be asked about how my identity has been built, because there are many bricks that I and my surroundings have utilized to construct it.' This sentence is significant as it suggests that she has shifted from an essentialist notion of identity to one where identity is understood as fluid and continuously under construction. We also see this conceptual shift when she writes, 'I am still growing I cannot position myself in a fixed spot or environment because I am continuously reconstructing it [referring to her identity].'

Unlike in previous exercises where she agreed with Ngugi's views, we now see that she states, 'I strongly disagree with Ngugi's argument.' For us, this emphatic statement in her introduction, signals a clear shift from an essentialist, towards a post-structuralist view on identity. Her introduction also shows that she now understands that social contexts and others have a direct impact on identity construction when she writes, 'as long we live also our surroundings will always influence our actions'. In her essay, it is apparent that she now views identity as multifaceted and that speaking a second language such as English is not the main marker of her identity or any person's identity. However, she does articulate the idea that she has an 'original' identity or core identity which underscores the identities forged when she moves from one context to the next. Furthermore, she constructs her identity as someone who is 'striving to discover' herself, which suggests a fluidity in her conceptual understanding of her identity. Again, this is a marked shift from her conceptual

understanding of identity in Week 1 of the course (before they had read the Ngugi and Makubalo texts). It is our contention that the freedom of expression created by the online space, coupled with online mentoring prompts and feedback, has made such conceptual shifts much more visible and has not only added to the students' understanding of their own experiences, but also our understanding as mentors and lecturers of our students.

In Sandra's essay, she puts forward an understanding of identity similar to that of Thembi. She reinforces the point that she constructs and re-constructs her identity, hence steering away from the essentialist notions she expressed in the first two weeks. She states, 'I adapt in different environments as Makubalo (2007) would say, I construct and reconstruct my identity.' In this way, she perceives herself as the author of her personal narrative, rather than a passive filter through which the environment encodes meaning onto her.

Like Thembi, who made mention of an original identity, Sandra adds a new element in her understanding of identity, namely that of a 'core identity'. She explains, 'I believe that as I grow I add on to my core identity. My world experiences change how I think and see things.' This 'core identity' perhaps refers to the values and beliefs she mentions in the Week 3 task. It seems to be a bedrock onto which she adds new layers of self-definition and self-expression. One of those layers is her use of English, as she mentions, 'Learning other languages and cultures is part of that long endless journey of identity. English is the key to all of this.' As such, she begins to see identity construction as a fluid and evolving process, rather than a product. Surprisingly, she now finds English to be 'key' to her self-definition, a statement which is in stark contrast with her previous views that she is a 'Xhosa girl' and that English does not define her but only gives her 'a step up in the world'. To support her argument, she refers to Makubalo who 'argues that there is no such thing as a fixed identity'.

Her strategic foregrounding of Makubalo over Ngugi again signals a shift in her position and her alignment with a constructionist view of identity. In addition, she begins to distance herself from the view that language is the only aspect defining identity. This contrasts with her previous work, where she not only saw language as a determinant of identity, but also conflated language, identity and racial belonging. At this point, we see her disentangling the different aspects of identity construction in order to take more agency in appropriating the aspects that are congruent with her personal narrative.

Affordances of the online language module as a mentoring or tutoring space

As mentioned, we understand the analytical mode to be a mode of thinking where students can grapple critically with texts and concepts in a low-stakes collaborative safe space. This collaboration between online student engagement, online mentoring and face-to-face teaching serves as an important vehicle for making sense of what and how students learn. It is an example of good innovative teaching and learning practice, as echoed by Sheridan (1992, p. 90) who defines this type of collaboration as 'an overarching framework … a conceptual umbrella' that acknowledges alternative ways for the realisation of educational goals. As we analysed Thembi and Sandra's responses, it is evident that through the reflective tasks, the online space is activating different modalities of thought and being.

Expressing the inexpressible: 'I know that I have an answer'

In traditional face-to-face teaching environments such as tutorials, there is limited time and scope to hear each and every student's views on the theme under discussion. Students remain silent for various reasons, including their perception of a lack of fluency in English. Thembi, for instance, in Week 1, views English as a 'disabler', a barrier to communication, seeing herself as being more fluent in isiXhosa. Yet she admits that, 'I have potential inside me', and 'I know that I also have an answer'.

Due to the self's uneasy location in an unfamiliar academic setting, many ideas remain hidden in the deep recesses of one's intellectual black box (Pinker, 1995, p. 137), unless articulated through words. This poses a problem if we seek to identify shifts in the 'authorial self' (Clark & Ivanič, 1998) in the classroom setting. Assuming that voice is a measure of one's critical thinking, and that it becomes manifest through speech or writing, how does one tap into the thoughts evoked in the silent moments? Can critical thinking be present in the moments of silence? The first time we hear Thembi's views about the disjuncture between her perceived competence and her performance in the classroom, is in the online space where we take on the roles of mentors and tutors, and where she is asked to share her orientation experience. This is when she steps back or steps out of the confines of the formal lecturer-led classroom to reflect critically on where she situates herself as she navigates through the institutional spaces. The online space hence takes the shape of a confessional where students can silently share ideas for which they will not be held accountable.

In the same vein, the online space is seen to open up possibilities for the articulation of deep-seated emotions and autobiographical aspects of one's identity, rare to find in a physical tutorial. Students can share feelings of anxiety, fear of failure, lack of confidence, which are common to both Thembi and Sandra as they encounter the overwhelming aspects of the university environment. The fact that 'everyday talk' is permissible on online spaces such as this one, allows for a more personal engagement with the academic theories and concepts, which in turn allows students to reflect on what the knowledge means to them, how it relates to, or jars with their lived reality. Our roles as mentors and tutors allow for a different type of interaction with students, and it is through these roles that we enable students to articulate their thoughts in a more relaxed mode of writing. It is not surprising that Lea and Stierer (2009) therefore see 'everyday talk' as encouraged by social networking sites, as central to academic activities.

In Sandra's case, she also uses the online task to project herself in the future, and share her aspirations of making a contribution locally and globally. The online space allows students to look back, but also transcend the frontiers of time to project themselves forward. These autobiographical strands are seldom acknowledged in academia, for they get misread as bias. Even in academic essays, students' authorial self often takes precedence over their lived experiences. However, through these online tutoring exercises, students on the course are able to use themselves as case studies and track their shifting sense of self over time to make powerful arguments about the fluidity of the very subject matter under examination.

Here, we note a strong overlap between students' autobiographical selves and their authorial selves (Clark & Ivanič, 1998), where the autobiographical elements get recruited to assert a strong authorial presence.

Sharing dissident views

While students are able to try out new subjectivities, we note that over time it provides them with a subject position to articulate their stance towards the texts and concepts introduced in class. As such, they begin to operate at a metacognitive level, sharing their comfort or discomfort vis-a-vis the knowledge being shared, and how it may challenge their preconceived views on identity and other themes covered on the course (Zembylas & Boler, 2002). For instance, Thembi and Sandra feel the urge to express their deep-rooted 'core' Xhosa identity, even as they encounter new ways of defining their emerging identity and acknowledging its fluidity.

By the same token, they also express their views about the language through which knowledge gets exchanged in the academic space, namely English. Both Thembi and Sandra start off by stating that English can be an enabler but can also 'colonise minds', that it is a Western product, but also one that enables upward mobility. Thembi warns against 'abusing' English, in other words, overusing it in ways that begin to erode one's self-definition. On the other hand, Sandra is able to reconcile the contradictions of being a 'Xhosa girl', while speaking English, by extending the definition of Xhosa-ness beyond its linguistic attributes. Even so, both seem to romanticise a Xhosa culture that they are 'born with' or is in their DNA. At that point, it is noteworthy that lecturers on the course do not intervene on the site to weed out the contradictions, but allow them to be juxtaposed in students' messy attempts at meaning making.

Even in Week 3, when students are asked to present their previous understandings of identity and their current one, they are offered two routes into the exercise: 'Now I think of identity as…', which would signal a shift in their conceptual understanding of identity, and 'I still think of identity as…', which would allow them to resist the influence of readings that often offer a constructionist view of identity. In that way, the online task demonstrates that the course is not trying to brainwash students into shedding their essentialist notions of identity, but rather to interrogate them in light of new perspectives. At that point, the lecturers turn into facilitators or mentors, prodding students with questions, rather than formally teaching content. These strategies of questioning versus overt didactic strategies of imparting knowledge verily form part of the pedagogy of discomfort, which the course privileges in order to enable students on the extended degree programme to embark on their own trajectories of meaning making. In this, it moves away from the discourse of 'difference as deficit' to that of 'difference as a resource' (Canagarajah, 1997), to acknowledge students' brought-along experiences as a valuable aspect of learning and knowledge-making.

Slowing time down

Spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity.
William Wordsworth (1800)

From the data analysed on the online course site, it is evident that one never reaches a point of finality. Rather, time slows down to postpone one's commitment to ideas, and the giving of reasons. Each week, students are editing and conceptually reworking their ideas. As such, the online space seems to be a site where one is not held captive by one's thoughts. It is a space where the present can be paused, where the fear of the unknown, the silencing effects of the English language can be suspended, to express the inexpressible. This is the case when Thembi and Sandra express their angst, fears and insecurities at the start of their academic year.

As mentors and tutors in this space, and through a process of trial and error, we came to the realisation that the online space required a very different type of facilitation and participation on our part, in order to accommodate the type of conceptual and analytical learning required by the slowing down of time.

In this third space, we also find students revisiting their definitions of self and alignment to concepts. Thembi begins by defining herself as disadvantaged, then as a Xhosa girl, and finally as a young girl who can write infinite scriptures. It would appear that she explores the reach of these descriptions to present a particular aspect of her identity based on what she perceives will be valued in that instance. Over time, she also revisits her view of identity as fixed to one that can be shaped by one's 'surroundings' and through the choices one makes. It is possible that her transition to the university was a 'critical event' or turning point, making her re-assess the role of the environment on one's identity. We are quite certain that even this moment of stillness or certainty is a temporary one and will be revisited.

Conceptually, the online space is one where fleeting thoughts can be captured and reflected upon to trigger new alterations. In Derrida's (1994) words, it is a moment of stasis, an 'aporia of suspension', where commitment to ideas is not required, and where contradictions are permissible. Thembi and Sandra contradict themselves week after week. Thembi's hatred for English gradually gives way to the strategic use of the language to express her dissenting views and to re-shape her personal narrative in a way that is compatible with her core beliefs and the shifts in context. The online space is therefore a space where 'one can stop and smell the roses', take cognisance of what is happening to one's ideas, how one's thoughts are shaping without being interrupted by other voices. The ability of not interrupting students' voices in the online space while simultaneously creating opportunities and possibilities for intellectual and personal growth through our mentoring interactions with them, are therefore some of the most valuable tools that are needed to promote individual agency and ownership of the learning process. Our roles as facilitators and guides in the online space have led to the realisation that a certain amount of awareness, sensitivity, empathy, openness to other ways of being and acknowledgement of the capital that students bring along with them, is needed on our part, in order to create the

necessary scaffolding needed for deep and meaningful analytical engagement. It is therefore important to recognise that learning and becoming are part of an organic and process-generated activity that develops over time. It's how we set up and facilitate the structures for these processes that takes centre stage.

As such, one could think of the online space as a suspension bridge, a site of incoherence where one can see oscillations of the self. Students' location on that bridge reflects the complex mode of shifting understandings of self and of the concept of identity. This incoherence is precisely what allows for the emergence of a coherent narrative of self over time. The learner's grappling with her identity through these online academic activities begins to call into question traditional learning contexts, what counts as knowledge, what counts as knowing, and the thin line between knowing and being. Therefore, as mentioned, Gutiérrez (2008) might describe the online space as a 'third space' for this very reason in that it opens doors for new modes of engagement and critique, like Thembi's use of the space in which she seeks to reconcile her problematic relationship with English, and in the process inserts herself more boldly in the knowledge-making project. Narratives such as these seek to inform mentors', tutors', lecturers' and institutions' understandings of the lived contexts and struggles faced by students. In saying that, we need to acknowledge that we learn as much from our students as they learn from us. It is this type of learning ethos that can develop and grow out of the type of online intervention and facilitation that we have presented in this paper.

Conclusion

The questions posed in this paper revolve around the affordances of the online space as a tutoring space to promote the analytical mode. Using an academic literacies approach, the paper delved into the writing practices of first year students on the online course site over a semester. In place of the traditional tutoring and mentoring pedagogy, the course site had the functionalities of a blogging website used to scaffold learning, and what spurred the research were the types of engagement enabled online. Using a case study method, we sought to analyse whether specific types of writer identities were promoted online or not, and more importantly, how our two participants Thembi and Sandra critically engaged with the authentic tasks online. Part of this process also required that we reflect on our own roles and responsibilities as online mentors and facilitators in the online space, and the extent to which this related to our roles as lecturers in the face-to-face space.

It emerged that the online tasks contributed to fostering an analytical ethos, an 'analytical mode' among students which led to a more nuanced understanding of course content, and a stronger developing sense of self. The sharing of autobiographical information between students became a stimulus for entering and engaging in the analytical mode, and for inserting themselves in the act of knowing. As a result of the conceptual development, students have been able to hone a more confident authorial voice.

The online space allowed students to express the inexpressible, to share dissident views and slow down learning to trigger deeper grappling with concepts, ideas and generate metacognitive reflections on the links between self and knowing. In the process, it stretched our understanding of the analytical mode itself, to mean not only critical thinking, but a

critical reflection of one's position in relation to the knowledge imparted, with possibilities to imbibe, appropriate or challenge what gets taught. It also made us reassess the traditional roles of those who impart knowledge, especially in light of the new ways of 'being' required by those who facilitate and those who participate online become embedded in the online learning space.

This freedom to interrogate the 'what' on the online space is an interesting finding especially in light of the recent wave of 'decolonising the curriculum'. However, the construction of the online space as some form of utopia misses the point. These insights would not be half as worthwhile if they did not provoke us to ask questions about the constraints of the existing physical tutoring spaces, the challenges they pose for diverse groupings of students and how these could be more adequately addressed through the intersecting modes of mentoring, facilitating and lecturing.

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Research article

International Survey of Peer Leadership (ISPL): An Emerging Snapshot of the Status of Peer Leadership in South Africa

Nelia Frade* & Gugu Wendy Tiroyabone**

Abstract

The power and importance of peer influence in educational settings has been well documented (Cuseo, 2010; Ender & Kay, 2001; Keup, 2010). In South Africa, research supports international trends that student involvement in peer-led activities contributes to student success and ultimate throughput (Layton & McKenna, 2015; Loots, 2009; Underhill & McDonald, 2010). A plethora of research exists attesting to the benefits for students who are the recipients of peer-led activities. In South Africa, however, knowledge gaps exist pertaining to a national perspective on the experiences and, to some extent, on the benefits of peer leadership activities for peer leaders themselves. The purpose of this study is to provide an initial national snapshot of the development and experiences of peer leaders at six South African institutions of higher education, using the International Survey of Peer Leaders (ISPL). The research design adopted was a non-probability purposive sampling technique, with a sample size of N=466. Data were analysed using descriptive analyses. Findings validate previous findings and provide a more comprehensive picture of the types of peer leadership positions held, the training and support peer leaders receive, levels of engagement, and the benefits of being involved in peer-led activities.

Keywords

peer leadership; higher education; student engagement; student involvement; peer leader development; peer leader gains; trends

Introduction

Globally, institutions of higher education have increasingly begun to utilise undergraduate and postgraduate peers in student support and service delivery (Cuseo, 2010; Keup, 2012; Newton & Ender, 2010). These students, known as peer leaders, are chosen to use their influence to assist undergraduate students in a way that is more accessible and less intimidating than when delivered by teaching staff, professors, or administrative staff (Cuseo, 2010).

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Current international research also indicates that peer leader positions are beneficial to both the students serving in the leadership role and the students they support. With regards to the benefits reported by peer leaders, Harmon (2006), for example, found that peer mentors for first-year students reported increases in their ability to manage groups, empathise with students, and facilitate learning. Peer leaders across America also continue to report improvements in their communication and leadership skills; increased knowledge of campus resources; more interaction with teaching staff, professors and peers; greater engagement in critical thinking and diverse problem solving, and refined interpersonal skills (Astin, 1993; Ender & Kay, 2001; Shook & Keup, 2012). These aforementioned studies, conducted at various institutions in America, also provide insight into the selection, training and compensation models for peer leaders. In addition, they further attest to the development and positive experience gained, and position peer leadership as an emergent high-impact practice (HIP) (Keup & Young, 2014). HIPs are defined as "teaching and learning practices (that) have been widely tested and have shown to be beneficial for college students from many backgrounds (and represent) practices that educational research suggests increases rates of retention and student engagement" (Kuh, 2008, p. 9). Specifically, HIPs are characterised as practices that include an investment of time and energy, substantive interaction with faculty and peers, high expectations, feedback, exposure to diverse perspectives, reflection and applied learning, and accountability (Keup, 2016).

Historically, research in South Africa has predominantly focused on particular types of peer-led activities ranging across academic as well as co-curricular lines. (Layton & McKenna, 2015; Loots, 2009; Zerger, Clark-Unite & Smith, 2006). This has resulted in localised studies and has failed to provide a national picture of the development and experiences of peer leaders.

This study explored the development and experience of South African peer leaders using the International Survey of Peer Leaders (ISPL). The ISPL is an expansion and adaptation of the 2013 American National Survey of Peer Leaders which was used to gather national data by the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition. The ISPL instrument was standardised to be responsive to the South African context. During 2014 and 2015, data were collected at six representative South African institutions of higher education. This study provides insights on an initial rollout of the ISPL as a pilot study and begins to foreground peer leadership as an emergent HIP. In addition, this study calls attention to the diverse ways in which peer leadership has historically been implemented in South Africa and offers opportunities for internal comparisons between institutions which can inform best practice around peer leadership. Looking ahead, this study provides prospects for international comparisons, which can help South African institutions of higher education to align themselves with international trends around peer leadership.

Literature Review

Educationalists define peer leaders as students who have been selected, trained, and designated by a campus authority to offer educational services to their peers. These services

are intentionally designed to assist peers to cope with the demands of tertiary education (Newton & Ender, 2010). Peer leaders are then chosen to provide support, as they are perceived as more approachable and less judgemental than an authority figure (Cuseo, 2010). In addition, both students and their peer leaders are at proximal stages of cognitive and social development, which facilitates student identification with and comprehension of the peer leader (Vygotsky, 1978; Cuseo, 2010).

The significant role that peers assume in human development has been widely documented within educational contexts (Cuseo, 2010; Ender & Kay, 2001; Keup, 2016; Newton & Ender, 2010). In fact, most theories on student development highlight the significant influence that peers have on intellectual development, academic engagement, moral development, clarification of political and social values, formation of self-concept, and interpersonal skills (Greenfield, Keup & Gardner, 2013). Peers not only influence developmental processes, but are also instrumental in interacting with and encouraging other students to become involved on their campus. Scholars such as Astin (1993), Alexander, Wogelgesang, Ikeda and Yee (2000) suggest that academic involvement and interaction with faculty and fellow students increases the time and physical and psychological energy that students devote to the academic experience. Astin (1993, p. 398) concluded, "the student's peer group is the single most potent source of influence on growth and development during the undergraduate years". In the light of this perspective, there has been a proliferation in the use of peer leaders in almost every area of academic and student support (Hilsdon, 2013; Keup & Skipper, 2016; Newton & Ender, 2010).

Keup (2012) suggests that training is critical for developing the capabilities and skills required for peer leadership. Furthermore, training differentiates the peer leader role from informal peer-to-peer interactions (Keup, 2016). Ender and Kay's (2001, p. 1) definition of peer leaders as "students who have been selected and trained to offer educational services to their peers" reinforces this view. This definition supports the notion that peer leaders must be trained to undertake their respective roles within the institution. According to Latino and Ashcraft (2012), intentional and ongoing training is a prerequisite for any successful peer leadership programme and further state that training should be intentionally designed to adequately prepare peer leaders for their roles and responsibilities.

Globally, peer leadership has come under scrutiny in an attempt to better understand the practice as well as its benefits. In the the Kingdom of Bahrain, a localised study was conducted in the Basic Medical Science Department at Qatar University (Kassab, Abu-Hijlek, Al-Shboul & Hamdy, 2005), to investigate the experiences of students engaged in problem-based learning (PBL) and the development of peer leaders. Peer leaders reported development in the following areas: interpersonal communication, teamwork, leadership, evaluation, and feedback skills.

In Australia, research traditionally focused on particular types of peer led activities, for example, tutoring. Researchers have concluded that tutors play a crucial role in university teaching in Australia as tutoring supports student engagement with discipline-specific curricula (Bell & Mladeniovic, 2014). Given that a significant percentage of Australian

tutors aim to transition into academic careers, tutoring has been identified as a useful practice for "growing one's own timber" (Bell & Mladeniovic, 2014).

In the higher education sector in Portugal, peer leadership is a widespread practice. Unfortunately, as in many other countries, limited research into the peer leader experience exists. A study conducted with peer tutors involved in Project-Led Education (PLE), found that tutors expressed satisfaction with the programme and experienced a sense of personal fulfilment (Simao, Flores, Fernandes & Figueira, 2008).

American researchers Colvin and Ashman (2010) investigated the roles, risks, and benefits of peer-mentoring relationships in higher education. Their research findings have confirmed that the most common areas that involve students helping other students are peer tutoring and peer mentoring. In addition, they found that successful peer mentoring and peer tutoring does not happen within a vacuum, but is the result of relationships among students, mentors, and instructors. Furthermore, Wawrzynski, LoConte and Straker (2011) conducted a National Peer Educator Study (NPES) to evaluate the national peer education programme and the experiences of peer educators at American colleges and universities. Results from this evaluation, yielded parallel findings to the work of Astin (1993) and Pascarella and Terenzini (2005), which indicated that peers have the most significant influence on one another's growth and development in college and that peer educators applied the information that they presented to their peers to their own student lives.

Additional studies conducted in America, focusing on the benefits associated with being a peer leader, have shown that students who serve as peer leaders also experienced gains in social and emotional development, such as improved social skills, self-confidence, self-esteem, sense of purpose and personal identity (Shook & Keup, 2012; Cuseo, 2010; Harmon, 2006; Ender & Kay, 2001). In addition, peer leaders reported a greater sense of belonging at their institution, gained a deeper understanding of institutional processes and governance, built stronger relationships with faculty and staff, became more responsible, increased their appreciation of diversity, and gained awareness of professional and ethical standards (Keup & Skipper, 2016; Latino & Ashcraft, 2012). Furthermore, it was evident that peer leaders were also more likely to experience integrative and applied learning in their educational experience (Shook & Keup, 2012), which could positively affect employability and the development of career-relevant leadership skills (Cuseo, 2010).

In 2009 and 2013, the American National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition (NRC) conducted a national survey. The purpose of the National Survey of Peer Leaders (NSP) was to gather student and institutional data to examine the ways in which peer leader programmes were structured and administered and their impact on the students who served as peer leaders. Responses from 4 932 students in peer-leader roles at 49 institutions of higher education in the United States of America provided insights into the experiences and outcomes of these positions (Keup, 2014; Keup & Skipper, 2016). Peer leaders were asked to rate their growth in four outcome areas, namely: skills development; undergraduate experiences; employability; and academic performance. They reported that their involvement and experience in peer leader positions had resulted in positive gains, specifically in skills development, undergraduate experiences

and employability outcome areas (Keup, 2014). Interestingly, despite the fact that a high number of survey respondents were engaged in academic peer-leader roles, the academic performance outcome area was the least affected. Qualitative results revealed that this was due to an over-involvement in activities, poor time management and the stress associated with the peer leader role (Shook & Keup, 2012).

Research in South Africa has predominantly focused on particular types of peer-led activities within individual institutions of higher education, for example, tutors, mentors and Supplemental Instruction leaders (Layton & McKenna, 2015; Loots, 2009; Zerger, Clark-Unite & Smith, 2006). South African research supports international trends suggesting that the recipients and providers of peer-led activities benefit academically, which can make a difference to student success and, ultimately, throughput (Underhill & McDonald, 2010). This is evident from research conducted by Loots (2009), who found that involvement in an academic peer-mentoring programme enhanced student performance, resulting in both academic and social integration for the mentor and mentee. Additional studies focusing exclusively on the experiences of mentors (Norodien-Fataar, 2012) found that mentors created links between their technological usage, engagement, and their learning. Further studies focusing on the experiences of Supplemental Instruction leaders show that they developed leadership skills and pursued careers in academia (Zerger, Clark-Unite & Smith, 2006). It is clear that involvement in peer-led activities provide benefits to the students who receive the service and the peer leaders themselves.

Methodology

Research design

This study formed part of a collaborative international research project led by the National Resource Centre for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition (NRC) in the United State of America. The said project was conducted in five English-speaking countries across the globe, namely, the U.K., Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. The 2013 American SPL was used as a point of departure to develop the ISPL in an iterative and interactive way with inputs from all stakeholders.

The purpose of the ISPL was to provide a deeper understanding of the development and experiences of peer leaders at six South African institutions of higher education. Given this, the ISPL had to be standardised for the South African situation to ensure its validity for the South African higher education context. This task was entrusted to representatives of the University of Johannesburg (UJ) and the South African National Resource Centre (SANRC) who were identified by the NRC as the South African representatives to coordinate the ISPL. The standardisation of the ISPL was a collaborative process involving staff and students, who selected changes. Finally, the completed instrument was piloted with a small group of peer leaders. The following changes were unique to the South African version of the ISPL: (a) The SPL survey only included undergraduate respondents, but for the SA context, postgraduate students were also included; (b) South African peer leaders were requested to indicate if they were degree or diploma students.

Participants

The representatives responsible for coordinating the South African ISPL were tasked with identifying and recruiting potential participants. Six South African institutions of Higher Education were selected to participate in this survey, namely the University of Johannesburg (UJ), the Stellenbosch University (SU), the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), the University of the Free State (UFS), the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU), and the Central University of Technology (CUT). These institutions were selected because of the historically high numbers of student peer leaders employed by each of these institutions to increase student learning and engagement in higher education. In addition, these institutions represent the three institutional types in South Africa, namely traditional, comprehensive and universities of technology, allowing for generalisation and nuanced inter-institutional-type comparisons.[1] Ethical clearance for this study was obtained from each participating institution.

Sampling

This study adopted a non-probability, purposive sampling technique. Sampling occurred on two levels, the first being that institutions were representative of the three types of institutions of higher education in South Africa; the second institutional sampling dimension was their consistent use of peer leadership. Institutional sampling of peer leaders varied as illustrated in Figure 1; 466 respondents participated in the survey. In each of the six institutions, the entire population of peer leaders for that year were included. The sample size, although consisting of representatives from all participating institutions, comprised a significant number of respondents from the University of Johannesburg (N=278). The reason for this was that UJ was the primary location of the study, which meant that the national representatives had direct access to the peer leaders. Furthermore, this may be because the sampled institutions were represented by only a sample of their peer leaders and not the entire population of peer leaders for the year.

[1] Universities in South Africa are divided into three types, namely, traditional universities, which offer theoretically-orientated university degrees; universities of technology, which offer vocationally orientated diplomas and degrees; and comprehensive universities, which offer a combination of both types of qualifications (https://e.m.wikipedia.org).

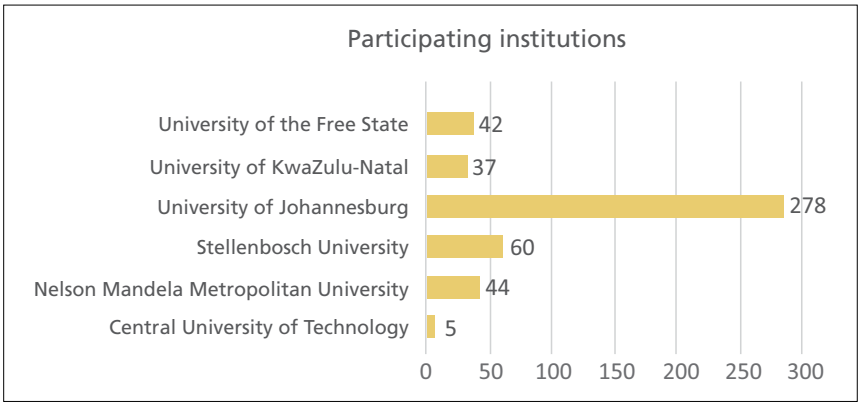

Figure 1: Frequency distribution of survey respondents per institution

Instrument

The ISPL contained questions in three main areas: demographics, structural features of the peer-leader experience and outcomes of the peer-leadership experience. Peer leaders were asked to provide demographic information including the number of years attended at university, residency, gender, and race/ethnicity. The section on structural features contained questions that focused on the number of peer leader experiences at university, the quantity of time spent performing duties per week, the amount of training received, and the types of and locations of the experiences (e.g. peer tutor, residence assistant, and orientation leader). The outcomes section included questions that focused on how the peer-leadership experience contributed to gains in relation to the institution, the development of skills, the development of workforce readiness, and overall academic success.

The ISPL consisted of quantitative and narrative measures to capture respondents' varied experiences. Each response category was coded as a dichotomous variable for analyses. The outcome variables were worded as self-reported gains, thereby representing perceived measures of change rather than direct gauges of development. Respondents were asked to indicate their self-rated change on an eight-point scale – "greatly decreased", "decreased', "slightly decreased", "no change", "slightly increased", "increased", "greatly increased' and "unable to judge". These self-rated measures limit the scope to draw conclusions about true impact but do provide descriptive analyses of perceived peer-leader experiences (Keup, 2016).

Data collection

Data collection was carried out via web technology in that each participating institution received a unique URL link. This link was sent to coordinators in each of the participating institutions who in turn made it available to the various peer leaders in their institutions. This web link allowed peer leaders to voluntarily and anonymously access the ISPL, which was completed between October 2014 and March 2015. The web link took students to

an online data-collection platform where students could respond to the survey. On this webpage, students were informed of their rights as participants in this research and were given the opportunity to opt out with no penalty.

Data analysis

Analyses of the data were undertaken using quantitative methods. The data were analysed with IBM Statistics SPSS 22. Descriptive and inferential statistical analysis was used to investigate the experiences of peer leaders in terms of the variables being measured in the ISPL instrument (questions 1–69). Frequency tables were also drawn to help describe and summarise the experiences of peer leaders in a more meaningful manner. Another level at which the data were analysed involved calculating cross-tabulations to better depict the number of times certain variable combinations occur as a result of another variable in the sample data.

Findings and Discussion

The discussion below is based on the responses of 466 students in peer-leader positions at six universities across South Africa. These results were compared to some of the results from the American 2013 National Survey of Peer Leaders as conducted by the NRC. Two unique data point adaptations to the South African version of the ISPL yielded the following results: (a) the majority of respondents were enrolled for a degree (86%) and only 14% were enrolled for a diploma; and (b) 64% were undergraduate as opposed to 36% postgraduate students. Typically, South African peer leaders were found to be senior or postgraduate students in their third to fifth years of study. This is congruent with the literature, which states that postgraduate and senior students are viewed as having developed a greater sense of interpersonal and intellectual competence, and are therefore better able to inspire and motivate undergraduate students (Astin, 1993; Colvin, 2007).

Further analysis of the South African demographic frequencies indicated that the largest age group participating in peer-led activities was within the age group 21–25 (52%). In South Africa, half of the respondents were female (50%) in contrast to 71% females in America and 53% were black South Africans in contrast to 72% being white in America; the racial mix is representative of each country's demographic composition. In addition, 55% of the South African peer leaders resided off campus compared to 43.7% in America; furthermore 52% of peer leaders in South Africa studied in the same province that they resided in; in America, a larger proportion, 76%, were in-state students. The majority of South African and American respondents reported having held between one and two peer-leader positions concurrently. South African peer leaders, however, reported spending between one and 10 hours per week performing their peer-leader responsibilities, whilst their American counterparts spent more time, namely between six and 15 hours per week. The most common use of peer leaders across the sampled South African institutions was for academic purposes (71%), followed by 17% for co-curricular (i.e. student clubs, student governance and student housing) peer-led activities and 12% for programmes that facilitate

student transitions and support (i.e. orientation and First Year Experience (FYE)). This is in sharp contrast to the American sampled institutions as peer leaders were most commonly used for co-curricular activities, followed by programmes that facilitate student transitions and support (i.e. orientation and FYE) and lastly for academic purposes (Keup, 2014). The use of peer leaders in South Africa for academic purposes highlights the gap that exists between the demands of higher education and the preparedness of school leavers for academic study and in turn the way the peer leader role is conceptualised. Institutions of higher education in South Africa are increasingly utilising peer leaders in order to deal with the learning needs of students who were previously disadvantaged as a result of apartheid-era secondary schooling (White Paper, 2013).

The American NRC study revealed that 86% of the respondents reported having being trained which is comparable to the South African ISPL respondents who reported that 84% of them had received training (Keup, 2014). Table 1 depicts the length of initial formal training that the South African and American peer leaders reported receiving in preparation for their peer leadership roles. This clearly shows that a number of peer leaders in South African and America were generally trained for half a day or less. This suggests an emergent model of best practice for peer leadership training that represents sustained development via initial training and ongoing support and supervision. From the research findings, it is evident that South African peer leaders spend between 1–10 hours per week fulfilling their roles. In order for students to gain the maximum benefit from interacting for this substantial amount of time with peer leaders, training should be intentionally designed and sufficient to provide the necessary support to students. Training should also differentiate between levels of experience, as peer leaders are often reappointed year on year. Thus, irrespective of the peer-leader position held, peer leaders must be sufficiently trained for all the positions they hold (Keup, 2012, Latino & Ashcraft, 2012).

Table 1: Duration of the initial formal training for all peer-leadership positions held

Training		
Length of formal training	South Africa	America
Half a day or less	28%	23%
One day	16%	19%
Two days	17%	18%
Three days	14%	11%
Four days	4%	6%
A week	8%	17%
Two weeks	1%	21%
Three weeks	2%	7%
Enrolled in class	5%	19%
Other	1.3%	7%

Just more than half (54%) of South African respondents reported receiving additional ongoing training after their initial training, while in the 2013 NRC study, 68% of the respondents indicated having received additional ongoing training. Table 2 indicates the type of additional training that was offered to peer leaders in both South Africa and America. In South Africa, additional ongoing training predominantly took the form of regular meetings specifically dedicated to training (46%), whilst in America the preferred type of additional ongoing training (61%) occurred during staff meetings (Keup, 2014).

Table 2: Types of additional ongoing training for all peer leadership positions held

Ongoing Additional Training		
Type	South Africa	America
Retreat	4%	39%
Staff meetings	6%	61%
Meeting with supervisor	11%	48%
Workshops	46%	7%

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the data, cross-tabulations of the South African data were calculated to examine the relationships between specific sets of data (e.g. ongoing additional training and three broad categories of peer-leader positions). Despite the fact that 84% of the ISPL respondents reported receiving training, the researchers felt that the important role that training plays in preparing and sustaining quality peer leadership needed to be further explored.

In South Africa, only 63.3% of the academic peer leaders reported having received initial training. Peer leaders employed in programmes that facilitate student transitions and support (orientation and FYE) reported that 61.9% had received training for these positions. Lastly, respondents participating in co-curricular peer-led activities reported that only 59.4% had received training. With regard to sustained support and development, only 63.4% of the academic peer leaders, 58.4% of peer leaders employed in co-curricular activities, and 61.9% of peer leaders employed in programmes that facilitate student transitions and support (orientation and FYE) reported having receiving ongoing additional training. This highlights the fact that many South African peer leaders are placed in positions for which they receive no training. This lack of training can hinder the quality of peer-mediated interventions and adversely affect student engagement in peer-led activities (Shook & Keup, 2012, Newton & Ender, 2012).

Peer leaders who are not trained cannot sufficiently assist students, and may not even be fully aware of their roles and responsibilities, which are highlighted during training. In addition, peer leaders need to receive ongoing support and development as this creates opportunities for them to form support networks with fellow peer leaders and with staff who are responsible for peer-led initiatives (Keup, 2012; Newton & Ender, 2010). These support networks allow peer leaders to identify with the institution and to feel a sense of belonging at the institution and the campus community (Astin, 1993).

Further analysis of the results shows that almost all the South African respondents rated their involvement in peer-leadership roles as satisfying (91%). This finding is comparable with results from the NRC study (95%) (Keup, 2014). In order to ascertain the benefits of peer-leadership activities on peer leaders themselves, respondents were requested to report their growth in four outcome areas, namely, the development of skills, the undergraduate experience, employability outcomes and academic performance. Concerning these four outcome areas, the majority of the South African respondents reported positive gains.

Table 3 depicts the gains reported by South African and American peer leaders in relation to the development of skills. The top three identified skills for both the South African and American respondents, as depicted by the numerical value assigned in brackets ranging from 1–3, were interpersonal communication (90% and 87.3%, respectively), leadership (91% and 82.5%, respectively), and teamwork (90% and 77.5%, respectively). This table clearly shows that more South African respondents reported increases in skills development than did their American counterparts. This suggests that many peer-leadership opportunities in South Africa may be contributing to some of the learning and personal development outcomes that significantly impact on the development of career-relevant leadership skills (Cuseo, 2010).

Table 3: Self-rated skills development gains

Skills Development	Peer leaders who reported increased skills		% Difference
	South Africa	America	
Leadership	90 (2)	87.3 (1)	2.7
Interpersonal communication	91 (1)	82.5 (2)	8.5
Teamwork	90 (3)	77.5 (3)	12.5
Time management	86	73.6	12.4
Project management	81	72.9	8.1
Organization	86	71.5	14.5
Presentation	87	67.5	19.5
Critical thinking	93	65.8	27.2
Written communication	80	53.4	26.6
Key: the ratings in brackets (1-3) indicate which skill gained through peer leadership was rated most important.			

Peer leaders were asked to rate how peer leadership affected selected university experiences. Table 4 highlights the ways in which involvement in peer leadership positions enhanced the South African and American respondents' undergraduate and postgraduate experiences. Amongst South African respondents, the top three rated undergraduate and postgraduate experiences were: being provided with opportunities for meaningful interactions with their peers (94%), interacting with and understanding people from diverse backgrounds (92%; 93%, respectively) and interacting with staff members (92%). The American respondents

reported that their peer-leadership positions had affected their undergraduate experiences in that they had provided opportunities for increased knowledge of campus resources (83.6%), meaningful interaction with peers (81.2%) and promoted a sense of belonging at the institution (76.6%). More South African respondents once again reported experiencing greater increases in positive experiences than their American counterparts did. As Kuh (2007) notes, students who are engaged with staff members and peers, and feel part of the campus community, are likely to be more motivated to perform at higher levels and more likely to persist, suggesting further positive effects on peer leaders' persistence. South African institutions of higher education are increasingly under pressure to improve access, success and throughput rates (White Paper, 2013). In order to meet these demands, practices like the use of peer leaders to promote academic and personal growth and to intentionally engage student, hold potential.

Table 4: Self-rated undergraduate and postgraduate experience gains

Undergraduate and Postgraduate Experience	Peer leaders who reported increased positive experiences		% Difference
	South Africa	America	
Knowledge of campus resources	89	83.6 (1)	5.4
Meaningful interaction with peers	94 (1)	81.2 (2)	12.8
Feeling of belonging at institution	84	76.6 (3)	7.4
Meaningful interaction with staff members	92 (3)	75.9	16.1
Interaction with people from different backgrounds	92 (3)	75.6	16.4
Meaningful interaction with faculty	85	73.3	11.7
Understanding people from different backgrounds	93 (2)	72.9	20.1
Desire to engage in continuous learning	90	71.8	18.2
Desire to persist at institution	77	68.9	8.1

Table 5 illustrates findings with respect to respondents' perceptions of their gains regarding skills that may enhance their employability. The top identified employability skill for both the South African and American respondents was their ability to build professional interpersonal relationships (93% and 77,9%, respectively). The second- and third-highest gains as reported by the South African respondents were being able to analyse problems from a new perspective (92%) and creating innovative approaches to a task (91%). In contrast, the American respondents reported their second- and third-highest gains to be: applying knowledge to real life settings (72.7%) and integrating knowledge from different places (71.2%). The difference in reported increases between the South African and American respondents ranges between 15 and 35%. In terms of employability outcomes, far more South African respondents reported increases than American respondents. The

findings show that involvement in peer-leadership activities provides the opportunity for peer leaders to develop the knowledge, skills, competencies and values (graduate attributes) that are required for them to function effectively, creatively and ethically in the world of work (White Paper, 2013).

Table 5: Peer leaders' self-rated employability outcome gains

Employability Outcomes	Peer leaders' increased sense of their own employability		% difference
	South Africa	America	
Building professional interpersonal relationships	93 (1)	77.9 (1)	15.1
Applying knowledge to real life settings	88	72.7 (2)	15.3
Integrating knowledge from different places	90	71.2 (3)	18.8
Providing direction through persuasion	89	67.8	21.2
Analysing problems from a new perspective	92 (2)	65.8	26.2
Expecting to find a job after graduation	83	65.5	17.5
Creating innovative approaches to a task	91 (3)	65.4	25.6
Engaging in ethical decision-making	87	64.5	22.5
Sharing ideas with others in writing	82	46.2	35.8

Given that the most common use of peer leaders across the sampled South African institutions was for academic purposes, it is interesting to note that gains in academic skills were the lowest. Qualitative analysis of the ISPL results suggest that this less positive outcome can be linked to the peer leaders' inability to balance their roles and responsibilities with their own academic activities, which resulted in less time spent studying. Table 6 shows that only 57% of the South African and 23.9% of the American peer leaders reported that their peer-leadership experience had a positive effect on their overall academic performance. In addition, 53% and 19% of the South African and American respondents, respectively, reported a positive effect on their average mark. This is less positive than all the other reported self-rated changes and is in sharp contrast to findings by Astin and Sax (1998) and Kuh and Pike (2005) who suggest that participating in service during the undergraduate years substantially enhanced the students' academic development and had a positive correlation with retention and academic performance. Despite this less positive outcome, at least 57% of the South African peer leaders reported that involvement in peer-leadership activities had a positive impact on their academic performance. This is particularly significant given that South African institutions of HE have increasingly come under pressure to broaden access to historically under-represented groups who are often underprepared for tertiary education (Underhill & McDonald, 2010). From a South African perspective, involvement in peer leadership activities has the potential to provide access to the epistemological discourse of *the academy*.

Table 6: Self-rated academic performance gains

Academic Performance	Perceptions of improved academic results amongst peer leaders		% difference
	South Africa	America	
Overall academic performance	57	23.9	33.1
Grade point average	53	19.0	34.0
Number of modules completed each per term/ semester	34	15.1	18.9
Facilitate timely graduation	24	1.8	22.2

The findings of this study validate research findings mentioned in the literature (Astin, 1993; Shook & Keup, 2012; Cuseo, 2010; Keup & Skipper, 2016; Latino & Ashcraft, 2012; Newton & Ender, 2010; Keup, 2014, 2012; Harmon, 2006). This research has confirmed that peer leadership provides benefits to the students who receive the service and to the peer leaders themselves. In particular, it appears that peer leaders in less developed countries, like South Africa, gain substantially from being involved in peer-leadership programmes. It further calls on the custodians of peer-led activities to design training programmes that are intentional and that will equip peer leaders with the necessary skills to provide effective support to students. In addition, it highlights the need for sustained training and development so that peer leaders can be further supported and developed, and have opportunities to establish support networks with their fellow peer leaders. It further positions peer leadership as a HIP in that it requires time and effort, facilitates experiential learning, results in positive gains, promotes meaningful interactions with faculty and students, encourages interaction with diverse individuals and provides regular feedback (Kuh, 2008).

Conclusion

This study confirms that peer leaders regard the role they play as significant in their own development, a phenomenon which has been widely documented, particularly within educational contexts (Cuseo, 2010; Shook & Keup, 2016, 2012; Newton & Ender, 2010). Given the powerful and global quality of peer leader influence, higher education has begun to utilise peers in student support and service delivery because they have the potential to be positive role models and promote academic and social accountability (Keup, 2012). As confirmed by this pilot study, peer influence can also lead to positive outcomes for the peer leaders performing their roles.

This study, although a pilot, provides a better understanding of the development and experience of peer leaders at six South African institutions of higher education. Findings show that peer-leader positions in South Africa are primarily for academic support (71%), followed by co-curricular support (17%), and then lastly for programmes that facilitate student transitions and support (i.e. orientation and FYE) (12%). In addition, this study

shows that parallels exist between graduate attributes (depicted by employability outcomes) and the gains made by peer leaders. It further highlights the need for peer leaders to be more extensively trained, developed and supported. On a national level, institutions of higher education should begin to re-evaluate the peer leadership programmes they have in place to ensure that peer leaders are receiving the necessary training and support to effectively fulfil their roles. In addition, institutions should be encouraged to form communities of practice around peer leadership in order to share best practice and potentially work towards the accreditation of peer leadership positions. Furthermore, institutions of HE should begin to harness the power of peer leadership programmes in supporting underprepared students, addressing retention and throughput rates and promoting epistemological access to their disciplines.

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Research article

Stress-Management Strategies among First-Year Students at a South African University: A Qualitative Study

Henry D. Mason*

Abstract

This article reports on a qualitative study that explored the use of coping strategies among first-year students in managing academic-related stressors. Qualitative data were collected using a non-probability and purposive sample. A total of 225 first-year students who were registered at a South African university participated in the study by writing naïve sketches. A narrative framework was adopted and data were analysed using thematic analysis. Six categories of stressors emerged from the data and were categorised as financial, spiritual, physical, emotional, mental and institutional. The qualitative findings also pointed to three prominent coping strategies, namely problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping and meaning-making. The reported outcomes of employing coping strategies included both positive and negative aspects. An overarching theme, entitled 'hanging in there' was interpreted from the data and points to an innate sense of hope that assists participants in managing stressors. Implications for student affairs practitioners and areas for further study are discussed.

Keywords

academic stress; coping; meaning; psychological stress; qualitative research

Introduction

Higher education plays a crucial role in stimulating a country's economy and empowering young people with the skills, knowledge and attitudes required for the 21st-century workplace (CHE, 2013). However, numerous factors can negatively affect a university student's pursuit of a tertiary qualification (Cilliers, 2014). These factors include, but are not limited to, financial constraints, interpersonal and intrapersonal challenges, academic under-preparedness and difficulties in balancing academic and personal life (Lewin & Mawoyo, 2014; Nelson & Low, 2011; Van Zyl, 2016). The concept of academic stress emerges as a prominent theme when considering factors that enhance low retention, high dropout and poor performance (Bojuwoye, 2002; Cotton, Dollard & De Jonge, 2002; Kausar, 2010). Academic stress refers to demands placed on students, and others, within the academic environment (Van Heerden-Pieterse, 2015).

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A rich body of research indicates that university students are exposed to various stressors on a daily basis (Bojuwoye, 2002; Burge, 2009; Kim, Newton, Downey & Benton, 2010; Mudhovozi, 2011). Amongst other things, university students are under pressure to perform academically, adapt to the higher education environment, and manage finances (Letseka, Breier & Visser 2009; Nelson & Low, 2011). Data suggest that university students often view stress as a negative experience, tend to adopt ineffective coping strategies, and struggle to access resources that could assist them in managing challenges (Lewin & Mawoyo, 2014; Mudhovozi, 2011; Nelson & Low, 2011). When stress is perceived negatively, and the required coping strategies and supportive resources are lacking, students may become impaired (Kausar, 2010).

The impaired student is at a heightened risk for the development of, amongst other things, psychological disorders and academic attrition (Seligman, 2011; Van Zyl & Rothman, 2012). The latter could ultimately result in low quality of life among university students (Van Zyl & Rothman, 2012).

Within the university context, student affairs practitioners are required to assist students in developing the strategies required to cope with stressors and establish academic-personal life balance, amongst other things (Van Lingen & De Jager, 2011; Van Heerden-Pieterse, 2015). Ample international evidence exists about the experience of stress and coping among university students in international contexts (Bowers & Lopez, 2010; Burge, 2009; Kim et al., 2010). However, stress and coping among undergraduate students within a South African context deserves more attention (Govender, Mkhabela, Hlongwane, Jalim & Jetha, 2015; Naidoo, Van Wyk, Higgins-Opitz & Moodley, 2014**)**. Moreover, research explicitly focused on the role that student affairs practitioners can play in addressing academic stress is needed.

The South African literature on the topic of stress among university students has relied primarily on quantitative research designs (Mudhovozi, 2011; Wilson, Warton & Louw, 1998). Whereas quantitative data offers certain statistical advantages, it fails to explore and interrogate the meaning of participants' unique experiences and conceptions on a specific topic (Creswell, 2007). Qualitative studies could, therefore, add a novel perspective by giving voice to participants' unique experiences and conceptions of coping with academic stressors (Radcliffe & Lester, 2003).

It is against the above-mentioned backdrop that this article reports on a qualitative study that explored students' use of coping strategies in managing academic-related stressors. The study was guided by the following three research questions: (1) What are the prominent stressors that first-year students encounter? (2) What coping strategies do first-year students use to manage stressors? and (3) How effective are students' reported coping strategies in dealing with stressors?

The article is organised as follows: First, a review of the literature is provided, and then the research methodology is presented. Next, the findings from the qualitative study are discussed. In conclusion, the key findings are summarised, limitations are discussed and avenues for further study are suggested.

Stress and Coping: Theoretical Conceptualisation

In this review of the literature, theoretical aspects relevant to the qualitative study being reported on are discussed. First, an overview of the stress within the academic context is provided. Then, the concept of coping is discussed. Lastly, the concept of meaning-making is examined.

Stress in the academic context

"One of the oldest laws in psychology holds that, beyond a moderate level, increases in anxiety and worry erode mental abilities" (Ramesar, Koortzen & Oosthuizen, 2009, p. 43). A growing body of research indicates that students in higher education are exposed to ever-greater levels of stress (Kausar, 2010; Nelson & Low, 2011; Van Zyl, 2016). Data furthermore indicate that increases in stress levels could negatively impinge on students' academic performance and levels of well-being (Moseki & Schulze, 2010; Mudhovozi, 2011; Van Zyl & Rothman, 2012). The causes of stress among university students are numerous and include aspects such as difficulties in adjusting to the university culture and context, socio-economic challenges, poor interpersonal relationships, intrapersonal problems and limited institutional support (Lewin & Mawoyo, 2014; Van Zyl, Gravett & De Bruin, 2012).

Govender et al. (2015) point to three categories of stressors reported in the literature, namely personal, academic and university-related stressors. In a study among a sample of Australian students, Burge (2009) identified additional normative categories of stressors. These categories of stressors include academic, time and balance, work, intrapersonal, relationships, interpersonal, family and quality of teaching challenges. However, it is not clear whether the categories identified by Burge (2009) would necessarily apply to a South African context, specifically in light of the socio-economic disparities between the two countries. In addition to normative categories, students enrolled at South African universities are also exposed to context-specific stressors. These context-specific stressors include, but are not limited to, being first-generation students, socio-economic challenges, high incidence of traumatic stress and, in some instances, a school system that does not adequately prepare them for the challenges of higher education (Suliman et al., 2009; Van Heerden-Pieterse, 2015).

A study among South African medical students identified the academic curriculum, workload issues, personal problems, communication and language difficulties, and financial challenges as prominent stressors (Naidoo et al., 2014). Data also suggest that a variety of factors outside of the university context could impede students' well-being (Van Heerden-Pieterse, 2015). Students should, therefore, be assisted in developing appropriate coping strategies to deal with stress in constructive ways (Nelson & Low, 2011).

Coping

The concept of coping refers to cognitive and behavioural strategies persons use to manage situations that they perceive could potentially exceed their personal resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Coping has two main functions, namely, to regulate emotions (emotion-

focused coping) and to direct behaviour in addressing the problem (problem-focused coping) (Ramesar et al., 2009).

Emotion-focused coping is directed towards internal states, rather than external situations, that may have triggered a stress reaction and are more likely to be initiated when individuals appraise situations as harmful, threatening and potentially overwhelming. Examples of emotion-focused coping strategies are wishful thinking, minimising, and avoidance (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Problem-focused coping is directed towards altering, addressing or managing external stressors and it includes aspects such as drawing on social support and initiating problem-solving behaviours. Problem-focused coping may be most appropriate when dealing with a stressor that is changeable (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

In addition to employing coping strategies, recent literature suggests that stress may also have a positive or motivating effect on persons. Amongst others, Dweck (2010) and McGonigal (2015) argue that adopting a growth mindset could assist people in viewing stress as a challenge, instead of harmful. Seligman (2006) adds that adopting an optimistic, versus pessimistic, perspective when encountering stress, could help persons to reinterpret stressors as opportunities for growth and personal development. Thus, stress could, depending on a person's explanatory style, be viewed as either overpowering or motivational (Dweck, 2006; McGonigal, 2015; Seligman, 2006).

Contemporary areas of investigation have also pointed to the importance of, amongst other things, mindfulness, meditation, cognitive behavioural strategies and healthy living through exercise, nutrition and sleep as relevant coping strategies (Brown & Gerberg, 2010; Cuddy, 2015; Robertson, 2010). An in-depth discussion of these, and other, coping strategies falls mostly beyond the scope of this article. The interested reader is referred to Brown and Gerberg (2010), Cuddy (2015), Haidt (2006), Robertson (2010) and McGonigal (2015).

Meaning-making

The concept of meaning-making refers to the capacity to recognise order, coherence and purpose in life, as well as to set, pursue and attain goals that could result in a sense of fulfilment (Steger, 2009). Literature indicates that actively engaging in meaning-making when encountering stressors could lead to psychological and spiritual growth and serve as a protective factor against the negative consequences associated with stress (Manning-Jones, De Terte & Stephens, 2015; Park, 2010; Steger, 2009).

A qualitative study by Mason (2017) involving a sample of first-year South African nursing students identified four conceptions of meaning as critical buffers against stressors, namely stress as an avenue to meaning, compassion satisfaction, relational meaning, and meaning through spirituality. Mason (2017) argues that actively searching for meaning could assist students in coping more effectively with stressors.

Various sources of meaning, such as religious orientation, social relationships, work, and academic studies appear to play a role in supporting students in pursuing and realising important life outcomes (Nell, 2014). Thus, the process of active meaning-making may

serve as an important coping strategy (Nell, 2014; Manning-Jones et al., 2015; Mason, 2017). Meaning-making processes could result in numerous meanings that are derived following stressful experiences. Examples of such meaning are identifying positive aspects and altered optimistic global beliefs about life experiences (Park & George, 2013).

Research Method

Research design

A qualitative design was adopted to conduct the study (Creswell, 2007). In adopting a qualitative design, the study was positioned within a narrative framework (Creswell, 2007).

Narrative inquiry is an approach to gathering, studying and analysing participants' depictions of experiences and events (Riessman, 2002). In narrative inquiry, people are considered as embodiments of lived stories. Consequently, a narrative approach aims to uncover the multiple layers of participants' experiences and qualitative meanings that are expressed as stories. The basic tenets of narrative inquiry rendered this approach complementary to the goal of the study being reported on, namely to explore and gain an understanding of university students' use of coping strategies in dealing with academic stressors (Riessman, 2002).

Research context

The study was conducted at a large South African residential university where the researcher is employed as a social science researcher. The specific university has a population of approximately 60 000 enrolled students. The student population is diverse and accurately resembles the broader South African demographics (Statistics South Africa, 2016). A large proportion of students at this university falls into the categories described by the Department of Higher Education and Training as the 'missing middle' and 'low income.' Thus, in addition to the expected stressors of university life, many of the students are also confronted with socio-economic challenges (Ray, 2016). For practical purposes, such as logistical constraints, access to students and limited research funding, data were only collected from one of the specific university's nine campuses.

Sample

A nonprobability convenient, purposive and voluntary sample of 225 first-year South African students participated in the qualitative study (Creswell, 2014). Criteria for inclusion were that participants had to be enrolled in a particular academic programme at a specific campus of the mentioned South African university and be 18 years of age or older. An open invitation to participate in the study was sent to all students who fulfilled the mentioned criteria (N = 452). A total of 225 students (female = 139, male = 86, age range 18–25), who complied with the criteria for inclusion voluntarily agreed to participate and wrote naïve sketches about their experiences.

Data collection and procedure

Data were collected using naïve sketches. Giorgi (1985) describes naïve sketches as documents written by participants to depict their stories and perspectives about the theme in question.

In the study, participants were first instructed to write about their experiences of stress, the coping strategies they used to manage stressors and how these coping strategies affected academic-personal life balance. Then, they were requested to draw a picture or provide a paper cut-out of a picture that depicted the process of coping for them. Lastly, participants were invited to write an essay about the picture or image that they provided. More specifically, they were asked to explain what the picture or image represented and how effective the depicted coping strategy was for them in dealing with academic-related stressors. Participants were requested to include personal examples to offer depth to their answers. The 225 naïve sketches varied in length from four to 13 pages.

According to Terre Blanche, Durrheim, and Painter (2006), saturation is reached in an exploratory study featuring a homogeneous sample, such as the study being reported on here, after 6–8 sampling units are collected or when the new material does not add new insights to the qualitative interpretation. It became apparent that data saturation was reached after studying approximately 180 naïve sketches, since an adequate number of sampling units were collected and no new insights emerged from the analysis. However, since 225 naïve sketches were received, all were included in the data analysis process.

Data analysis

The software programme Atlas.ti, version 7 was used to manage the qualitative data analysis process. A narrative thematic approach was adopted in analysing the qualitative data (Henning, Van Rensburg & Smit, 2011; Riessman, 2002). The narrative approach to qualitative analysis assisted in illuminating participants' underlying assumptions, beliefs and meanings that shaped and informed the specific application of coping strategies to manage academic stressors. Thematic analysis, consisting of five interrelated steps, namely (1) familiarisation, (2) inducing themes, (3) coding, (4) elaboration, and (5) interpretation and checking, served as a guide to analyse the naïve sketches qualitatively within a narrative framework (Henning et al., 2011; Riessman, 2002).

Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba's (1985) guidelines for qualitative research were adopted to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings. The following measures were implemented to enhance the trustworthiness: using an independent coder who had extensive experience in the field of qualitative research to verify the credibility of the analysis and interpretation; collecting rich data through narrative sketches; participant verification; using an audit trail; fully describing the research method and procedure; and ongoing reflective practice.

Research ethics

The university where data were collected granted permission to conduct the study (Ref. #: 2014/07/004). All identifying information (e.g. surnames, names and student numbers)

was treated confidentially and removed before the data analysis. No course credit or financial benefits were offered for participation. All participants gave individual written informed consent.

Findings and Discussion

One major theme emerged following the qualitative analysis and was labelled 'hanging in there'. This major theme was then organised into three themes, namely the types of stressors, coping strategies and outcomes associated with coping efforts. Each theme was further discussed in terms of relevant sub-themes. Figure 1 serves as a graphical representation of the three themes with the overarching theme.

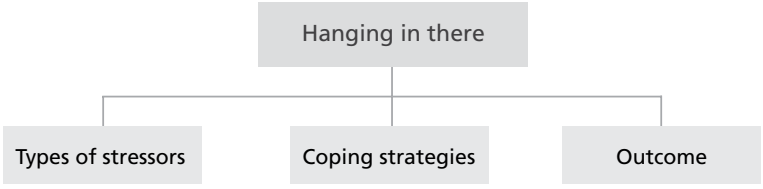

Figure 1: The three themes with the overarching theme

Table 1 serves as a summative index of the themes and the sub-themes. The frequency of participants' references to the particular themes and sub-themes is also displayed in Table 1.

Table 1: Themes, sub-themes and frequencies of responses

Hanging in there				
Themes	**Sub-themes**	**Females n (% of N)**	**Males (% of N)**	**Total N (%)**
Types of stressors	Financial	137 (61.43%)	86 (38.56%)	223 (99.11%)
	Spiritual	132 (64.71%)	72 (35.29%)	204 (90.67%)
	Physical	135 (66.18%)	69 (33.82%)	204 (90.67%)
	Emotional	131 (64.53%)	72 (35.47%)	203 (90.22%)
	Mental	130 (65.00%)	70 (35.00%)	200 (88.89%)
	Institutional	128 (64.65%)	70 (35.35%	198 (88.00%)
Coping strategies	Problem-focused	115 (58.97%)	80 (41.02%)	195 (86.67%)
	Emotion-focused	122 (63.21%)	71 (36.79%)	193 (85.78%)
	Meaning-making	118 (68.21%)	55 (31.79%)	173 (76.89%)
Outcome	Positive	135 (61.64%)	84 (38.36%)	219 (97.33%)
	Negative	71 (62.83%)	43 (37.38%)	113 (38.10%)
	Acknowledgement	128 (56.89%)	82 (36.44%)	210 (93.33%)
	Taking action	132 (58.67%)	79 (35.11%)	211 (93.78%)
	Taking stock and moving forward	119 (52.89%)	73 (32.44%)	192 (85.33%)
Note: '% of N' means gender percentage of the row frequency of responses.				

In the next section, the three qualitative themes are discussed. Then, the three themes are integrated and discussed in relation to the major theme, 'hanging in there'. Due to space limitations, only selected verbatim quotes are included to substantiate the interpretations. The ellipsis (…) at the beginning or end of particular quotes is meant to indicate that participants included additional information in the naïve sketches before and after the verbatim quotations that are included. The frequency of responses to a specific theme is indicated. For example, 90/225 indicates that 40% of participants referred to a specific thematic idea. The referencing system in parenthesis denotes participant number (e.g. P#1 for Participant 1), gender and age.

Theme 1: Types of stressors

Six prominent types of stressors emerged following the data analysis, namely financial, spiritual, physical, emotional, mental and institutional stressors. These six stressors are now discussed.

Against a backdrop of growing socio-economic inequality, scores of young South Africans have come to view access to higher education as a way to a better life. In fact, the South African Department of Higher Education and Training describes higher education as an avenue to an empowered life (DHET, 2013). However, high tuition fees, amongst other things, constitute a significant source of stress for students enrolled at South African higher education institutions (Ray, 2016). The majority of participants in this study (99.11%) indicated that financial stressors were of particular concern. One participant, a 19-year-old female, described her experience as follows:

> "*Financial problems are my major stressor … I know how important my education is and how many doors it will open for me in the future, but it is not easy to overcome the hurdle of paying class fees, paying for residence … I think this is the biggest obstacle that most students face.*" (P#82)

Financial stressors appear to be both a national and an international phenomenon (Goldrick-Rab, 2016). While alternative funding strategies are being investigated (Wild, 2016), the reality at the grassroots level is that students are experiencing significant stress due to financial concerns (Van Zyl, 2016). Participant 175, a 21-year-old male, narrated the challenge as follows:

> *"Surviving from day to day is a never-ending difficulty … I try to focus on creating a bright future, but some days it is tough to remain positive when I do not know how I am going to fund my studies or pay back my debt."*

Previous research has also indicated that students who were struggling financially and had accrued debt during their education performed less well academically compared to other students (Ross, Cleland & Macleod, 2006).

In addition to financial challenges, a large section of the sample (204/225) indicated that spirituality served as a source of stress in their lives. Amongst other things, participants reported that they struggled to straddle the tension between modern-day living or secular values and spiritual values. One participant described the challenge as follows:

> *"For me, living in this age, it is difficult … the Bible says one thing, but in our lives, we do different things. An example is caring for the less fortunate. The Bible says we must give to the less fortunate, but ignore them on the streets."* (P#144, male, 19)

According to Frankl (2010), young adults living in the modern world are confronted by spiritual questions that were, in past decades, reserved for later developmental stages. Consequently, younger adults are confronted with existential issues related to ethical living, religious belief and the finiteness of life (Nell, 2014; Yalom, 1980). Thus, in addition to everyday materialistic stressors, such as financial difficulties, participants also reported experiencing spiritual stressors.

Furthermore, participants stated that they experienced physical (90.67%), emotional (90.22%) and mental (88.89%) stressors. A total of 198 participants (88%) also described institutional stressors as a concern. In this regard, participants pointed to curriculum concerns (*"… it is important that the curriculum addresses aspects that are of concern to people living in an African context …"* P#37, female, 18), academic challenges (*"A major stress for me is studying and preparing for exams …"* P#123, female, 19) and protest action that forced the university to close (*"We never know when there will be a strike. You just arrive here in the morning to find the gates closed"* P#145, male, 23).

Institutional stressors, such as curriculum reform, providing academic support services to students and the negative impact of protest action on the management of universities are areas of particular concern and have been identified in previous research (CHE, 2013; Lewin & Mawoyo, 2014; Naidoo et al., 2014). For student affairs practitioners, the resultant impact of these stressors on students is of specific relevance. Student affairs services should remain vigilant in assisting students to develop the required coping strategies to manage stressors resulting from institutionally related challenges effectively. Amongst other things, student affairs practitioners could develop and empirically evaluate training programmes focused on equipping students with the requisite skills for effectively addressing practical concerns linked to stressful experiences (Cilliers, 2014; Naidoo et al., 2014).

Theme 2: Coping strategies utilised to manage stressors

The majority of participants (86.67%) indicated that they adopt problem-focused strategies to deal with stressors, e.g.

> *"I try to remain analytical when dealing with stress … will try to define the problem … come up with possible solutions … try to use the best option."* (P#170, male, 20)

However, a large section of the sample (85.78%) also indicated that they employ emotion-focused coping in dealing with stressors, e.g.

> *"I will do things that I enjoy, like going to a movie or dancing."* (P#69, female, 19)

Research suggests that, compared to emotion-focused strategies, problem-focused coping tends to assist people in dealing with stressors in more constructive ways (Penley, Tomaka & Wiebe, 2002). However, in real-life circumstances, people are inclined to use a combination of problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies (Govender et al., 2015; Ramesar et al., 2009).

A concerning trend identified in the data was that (78.22%) of participants also reported making use of avoidance as a coping strategy. The following quote substantiates this finding:

> *"Sometimes I just act as if the problem does not exist … some students numb their problems away with alcohol."* (P#117, female, 18)

There is literature to suggest that maladaptive coping, such as using non-prescribed medication and alcohol, and avoidance could negatively impinge on academic performance, self-esteem and well-being (Govender et al., 2015; Penley et al., 2002).

A significant proportion of participants (173/225) pointed to meaning-making as a coping strategy. One participant, a 23-year-old female, stated,

> *"I believe that there is a higher power guiding me … life will also be challenging, but through the challenges, I learn new lessons that can make me stronger in the long term."* (P#89)

Frankl (2010) hypothesises that stressors could serve to awaken people's spiritual aspirations in their search for growth and meaning against the backdrop of a stressful reality. However, this would not just necessitate the application of adequate coping strategies but would require a meaning-centred transformation (Yalom, 1980). Hence, through meaning-making, people reframe stressors as opportunities for personal growth and development (Mason, 2017; Mason & Nel, 2015). In this regard, Seligman (2011) calls on humans to search for personally meaningful goals that can guide their behaviour during, amongst other things, stressful times. Student affairs practitioners have a significant role to play in supporting students to search for, uncover and reframe stressful challenges in meaningful terms (De Villiers, 2014).

Theme 3: Outcome of coping efforts

A total of 219 participants (97.33%) reported that using coping strategies resulted in positive outcomes. These reported positive results included strong interpersonal relationships (*"By sharing my problems with friends, we tended to become closer and more trusting"* P#138, female, 19), enhanced self-esteem (*"After solving my problems I began to see myself in a more positive light … began to believe in myself"* P#44, female, 20) and improved academic performance (*"Learning how to deal with stress has helped me perform better in my studies … stress can eat away at you and cause you to lose motivation and even fail"* P#194, male, 19). This finding is consistent with the extant literature and points to the importance of establishing a context that supports students in developing adequate coping strategies (Bojuwoye, 2002; De Villiers, 2014; Ramesar et al., 2009).

A proportion of participants (38.10%) also suggested that inappropriate coping strategies resulted in negative outcomes. Participant 176, a 19-year-old male, mused that *"Poor coping strategies has caused me to fall behind in my academic studies. I tried just to ignore my financial problems, but it got the better of me. Looking back I realise that I should have looked for help to cope better. It was a hard lesson to learn. Now I can say that one must not be afraid to ask for help."* The majority of participants who reported negative outcomes cited avoidance strategies (*"… I just pretend that my problems don't exist and hope they will be gone in the morning"* P#37, female, 18), being ashamed to

seek help (*"… it's embarrassing to ask for help … makes me feel like a loser to admit that I am not coping"* P#167, male, 19) and limited insight into the stressors they were facing (*"… once education becomes free, there wouldn't be any worries about finances anymore …"* P#155, male, 18).

The preceding set of quotes suggests that a subset of participants expressed attributes (in the stated examples: personal dispositions, limited financial resources, and poor commitment) that may have had an adverse effect on the integration of academic and social experiences. These negative experiences could have been exacerbated by limited interaction with, amongst other things, student affairs services, as one participant explained: *"Looking back I realise that I should have made use of the referral to the student counselling unit. Perhaps that could have helped to cope better and get better marks"* P#183, male, 21).

Student affairs practitioners ought to remain mindful of the fact that the mere availability of services may not necessarily be adequate. Instead, students may have difficulty in approaching specific services such as counselling or psychotherapy (Egan, 2009; Gladding, 2014). Often psychological illiteracy and a failure to acknowledge the benefits of counselling could act as deterrents, and those who make use of these services could feel stigmatised and perceive the services to be culturally unsuitable, inappropriate, or lacking in their confidential handling of matters (Egan, 2009; Gladding, 2014).

Discussion: 'Hanging in there'

In the preceding discussions, three qualitative themes were discussed. First, prominent stressors that participants experienced were highlighted. The six prominent stressors that participants narrated were financial, spiritual, physical, mental, emotional and institutional. Additionally, three prominent coping strategies were discussed, namely problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping and meaning-making. Lastly, it was indicated that participants who employed problem-focused coping strategies and meaning-making were more likely to report positive outcomes. A prominent narrative that serves to integrate the three qualitative themes, namely 'hanging in there', was interpreted from the data.

'Hanging in there' was a term used by some participants to explain how they managed to cope with academic stressors and what the outcome of these coping processes entailed. Thus, the theme 'hanging in there', serves as a higher level of conceptualisation and integrates the three themes (types of stressors, coping strategies and outcome) into a coherent whole. This theme is graphically represented in Figure 2.

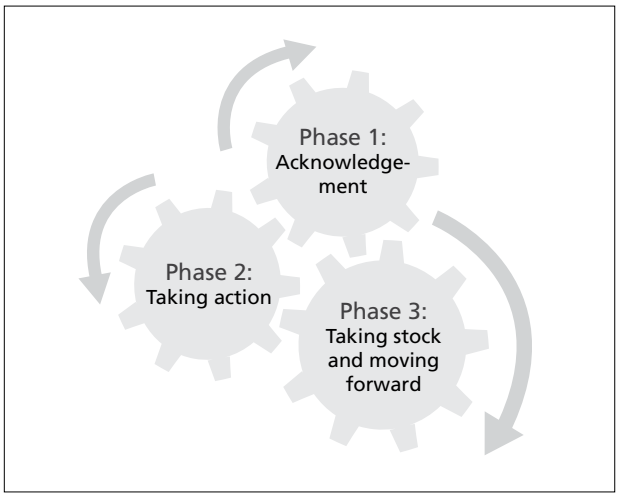

Figure 2: Graphical representation: 'Hanging in there'

In Figure 2, the three phases of the theme 'hanging in there' are presented as interlocking gears. This illustration suggests that the three phases are iterative and that the coping process, as described by participants, is dynamic. More specifically, the three phases flow into each other, and the end of one phase gives rise to the next.

The first phase of the 'hanging in there' theme relates to the acknowledgement of a specific stressor and attempting to make sense of it within a person's specific set of life circumstances. Literature suggests that stressors affect individuals in proportion to their life circumstances, available resources and psychological make-up (Egan, 2009). A significant proportion of participants (93.33%) indicated that the acknowledgement of stressors is an important component in initiating a healthy coping response. One participant explained the acknowledgment phase as follows:

> *"Financial problems are enormous in my life. I must make a plan to deal with study fees, accommodation, and the likes. Education is like winning the lottery; it changes everything for you. But education also has a cost."* (P#195, male, 18)

Another participant suggested that acknowledgement entails accepting reality as it is and then making a plan:

> *"One must remember to be honest in your dealings … life is hard but you must accept it and then move ahead … make the best of things"* (P#188, male, 21)

The second phase of the coping process entitled 'hanging in there' is labelled 'taking action.' Participants agreed (93.78%) that people need to take constructive action when confronted by stressors. Therefore, 'hanging in there' does not denote a passive process. To the contrary, it refers to a process of actively engaging with, amongst other things, stressors to identify and act upon a solution.

Crisis theory suggests that humans are motivated to restore the sense of disequilibrium brought about by stressful experiences (Herman, 1992). In working towards re-establishing equilibrium in one's life, people are advised to adopt an optimistic view of the future

(Seligman, 2006, 2011). That is, a better future is imagined. In this regard, participants suggested that 'hanging in there' is founded upon hope for a better future. One participant, a 22-year-old female, described her experience as follows:

> *"For me hope is always alive. I hope for a better tomorrow. A brighter tomorrow is what inspires and motivates me today to deal with difficult times"* (P#29)

According to Snyder (2002), the construct of hope is based on two key concepts, namely pathways thinking and agency. The term 'pathways thinking' refers to the capacity of identifying avenues, and in the case of stressors, alternative avenues towards achieving goals. Agency points to the motivation and personal inclination to pursue the pathways that were identified (Snyder, 2002). From the data, it became apparent that hope – pathways thinking and agency – are crucial components of coping with academic stressors, as discussed in the following sections.

The final phase of 'hanging in there' is entitled 'taking stock and moving forward'. The data revealed that participants (85.33%) regarded stressors as normal occurrences during the academic process. Amongst other things, participants' narrative accounts suggested that stress should not necessarily be viewed as antagonistic. Rather, stress was regarded as a constant companion on the journey to and through higher education. Thus, stress could be likened to a character that forms part of students' lives within the higher education context. A 22-year-old male described it as follows:

> *"Stress is a constant companion at university. I experience stress when I sit for exams. There is stress when I do group work and must explain things in front of a class."* (P#189)

Participants indicated that there were valuable lessons to be learned from stressful experiences as a 'constant companion'. A rich body of literature has also attested to the potentially growth-enhancing qualities that could be gleaned from dealing with stress in constructive ways (Dweck, 2006; Herman, 1992; Manning-Jones et al., 2015; McGonigal, 2015). A 21-year-old female participant explained as follows:

> *"I try to learn from my past experiences. Sometimes stress is difficult at the moment, but things get better, and life goes on. One of my most difficult challenges was when I fell pregnant. In my mind, I became a stronger person because of that difficulty."* (P#49)

Snyder and colleagues suggest that high hope students tend to draw on past experiences, regardless of whether goals were achieved or not, as diagnostic feedback to inform subsequent actions and plans (Snyder et al., 1996). In contrast, low hope students tend to adopt pessimistic attitudes that negatively affect subsequent activities (Snyder et al., 1996). Research by Duckworth (2016) also indicates that the concept of grit, which refers to the passion, perseverance and sustained self-control to pursue personally relevant and long-term goals, is related to the concept of hope. The qualitative analysis suggested that participants displayed characteristics of high hope and grit, such as goal-directedness (*"I have specific goals outlined for my life …"* P#77, female, 19), optimistic inclinations (*"My belief is that people should try to find positive things even when their lives are stressful"* P#82, female, 19) and self-efficacy (*"What I have learned is to work hard for success … must set your mind on a goal and then go for it"* P#156, male, 20). Conceptually, the notion of taking stock and moving forward appears to be related to the concept of hope. Participant 65, a 20-year-old female described such

a relationship as follows: *"The future always brings new beginnings … must trust that good things will come your way … that helps to keep me focused."* Additionally, participant 47, a 24-year-old female, included the following image that depicts the journey of dealing with stress (Figure 3):

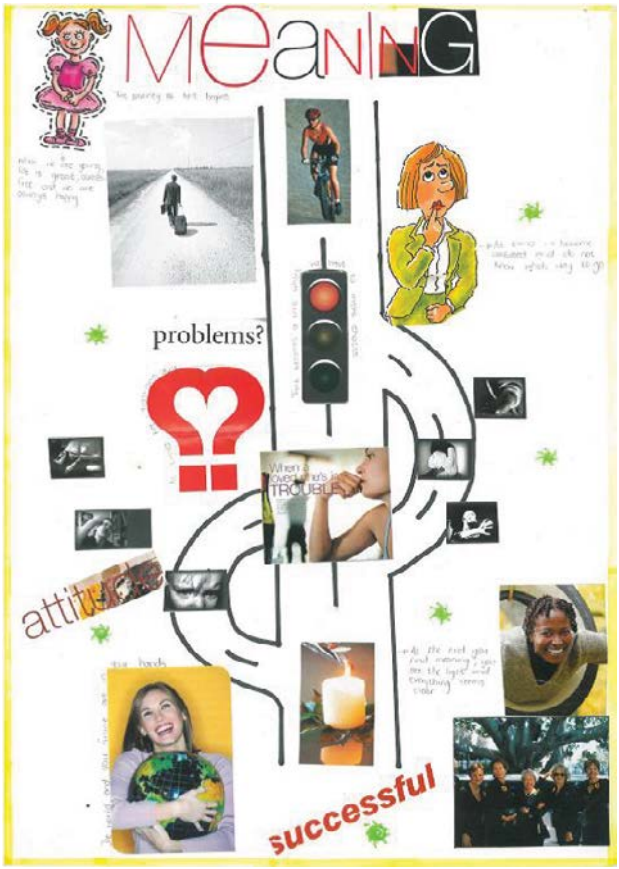

Figure 3: Dealing with stress (Participant 47)

Participant 47 narrated her experience, as depicted in Figure 3, as follows:

> *"When life begins you are always happy. When you become older things become stressful. You must learn how to deal with difficult times. At the end of your life, hopefully, you can look back and be proud of what you achieved. You will see the meaning at the end of the journey. For now, I just keep believing."*
>
> (female, 24)

Conclusion

This article reports on a qualitative study that explored university students' use of coping strategies to manage academic-related stressors. The qualitative data revealed that even though participants experienced a number of stressors, they engaged in a variety of coping

strategies to manage challenges. It also became evident that problem-focused coping strategies and meaning-making were more likely to bring about positive outcomes.

The theme 'hanging in there' served as a conceptual lens to develop a more holistic understanding of the qualitative results. Participants revealed that acknowledging stressors was an essential first step in dealing with challenges. Next, the data suggested that taking action with a hopeful future in mind was an important consideration. Lastly, the idea of taking stock and moving forward suggested that participants understood that they could learn valuable lessons from past experiences, which can inform future coping efforts.

The qualitative findings raise awareness of the stressful challenges that students encounter in the higher education sphere. Furthermore, the data revealed that students are not passive agents, but tend to act in proactive ways to cope with stressors. However, the data also serve as a call for student affairs practitioners to remain active in assisting students, amongst others, to deal with stress constructively. Student affairs practitioners could offer the following specific interventions to students:

- Workshops that provide information on the nature of stress and teach practical coping skills (De Villiers, 2014; Van Heerden-Pieterse, 2015);
- Developmental programmes focusing on the role that meaning can play in managing stressors (Mason & Nel, 2015); and
- Awareness campaigns focused on demystifying and destigmatising the role that student affairs services, with a specific emphasis on counselling and psychotherapeutic services, can fulfil in assisting students to deal with stress (Egan, 2009; Gladding, 2014).

The study was not without limitations. First, the concepts of stress and coping are dynamic. A plethora of literature has addressed, amongst other things, differing classification systems of coping strategies. Offering an in-depth discussion of these various classification systems was deemed to fall mostly outside the scope of this article. Hence, different classification systems could have offered different insights into participants' conceptions and use of coping strategies. Additionally, the findings only offer a glimpse of participants' perspectives from a single university's perspectives on stress and coping. Moreover, data were collected at the start of the second academic semester in 2015. It could be speculated that a different qualitative picture may have emerged if data were collected at a different point in time, for example during the height of #FeesMustFall protests or while students were sitting for annual examinations. A second limitation is that data were collected using only naïve sketches. Therefore, participants had limited opportunity to revise and reflect on statements as would have been the case if qualitative interviews had been conducted. A third limitation is that participants (225 out of 452 invited to participate) may have been particularly motivated to provide data. A more holistic qualitative picture could have emerged if a more representative sample had been included in the study. Additionally, identifying the reasons why a subsection of the population who were invited to participate declined to do so could have offered greater insight into the qualitative findings.

Notwithstanding the above-mentioned limitations, this study offered insight into the stressful experiences and coping efforts among first-year university students. Moreover, the study paves the way for further research that could focus on, amongst other things, developing strategies and interventions to assist students in coping with academic-related stressors. Student affairs practitioners should take the lead on developing and empirically evaluating such initiatives. Research should also explore the stressors that students experience in the post #FeesMustFall period. Further studies could delve into the role that cultural differences and grit play in coping with stress. Lastly, students' decisions of not making use of student affairs services and the impact of this on the experience of stress and subsequent coping behaviours should be considered.

Stress is a ubiquitous factor in student life. As student affairs practitioners we have a responsibility to not only empirically explore students' perspectives on stress. Rather, practical application of lessons learned should guide the way forward as we assist students in developing the skills, knowledge and attitudes required to flourish in the 21st century.

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Reflective practice

Facilitating Multilingual Tutorials at the University of the Free State

Theuns du Buisson*

Abstract

Conducting undergraduate studies in the English language, while only a small minority of students speak English at home, poses many problems to learning in the South African context. This article explores how restrictive language policies may influence proper learning and impact negatively on the self-understanding of students. It also explores how multilingualism could help to reduce the continued reliance on English, without doing away with English in its entirety. This is especially relevant in light of English and other colonial languages still being perceived as "languages of power" (Stroud & Kerfoot, 2013, p. 403). Therefore, attention is given to the link between language and power, especially in light of languages often being used to implement, display and preserve power. Language use in the classroom, especially with regard to codeswitching (also called translanguaging), is discussed. Finally, it explores the success that was achieved during multilingual tutorial sessions. In the tutorials, students were encouraged to explore the course work in their native languages, thereby internalising it and getting a better understanding thereof.

Keywords

tutoring; multilingualism; higher education; codeswitching

Introduction

In 2016, with the language policy committee reviewing the University of the Free State's language policy, some of us in the Philosophy Department decided to conduct the tutorials for philosophy by means of a multilingual approach. This was done in preparation for what seemed to be the future language policy. Our expectations were realised in the new language policy (University of the Free State, 2016). Rather than having separate tutorials for English and Afrikaans language speakers as in the past, we brought all students together in one class. They were then allowed to form smaller groups, according to their mother tongues, or language preferences. The motivation was that we were of the opinion that a high proportion of learning problems stem from students' lack of English comprehension and usage.

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The aim of this article, therefore, is to assess the impact of language policies on students' learning experiences. Special attention is given to multilingual policies. Challenges to such policies are discussed, in conjunction with the challenges faced by second-language students. Finally, the multilingual tutorials themselves are discussed in a reflective manner.

Discussion

Multilingualism in language policies across the world and in South Africa

Even though the European Union and the Council of Europe are encouraging multilingualism, it is rarely seen in official language policies. In Austria, for example, Slovene is neglected in favour of German. This is because having everyone speak German is thought to be good for social cohesion (Purkarthofer & Mossakowski, 2011, p. 554). In Portugal, a similar situation occurs, with the difference being that second-language speakers are usually immigrants (Faneca, Sa & Melo-Pfeifer, 2016, p. 45). As part of nation building, many countries opt for a monolingual policy, aiming towards single-language societies. This frequently alienates speakers of minority languages from influential positions. Even if national languages are local, they still put students who are speakers of other languages at a disadvantage (Tupas, 2015, p. 114). Bilingualism and multilingualism are often seen as enemies of national unity. They are therefore portrayed in purely negative terms. According to Skutnabb-Kangas and Garcia (1995, p. 223) it is especially common for people in the United States of America to view bilingualism and multilingualism as factors leading to "ghettoization", "ethnic unrest" or "separatism". Bilingualism then stands in stark contrast to nation-building and assimilation (Asfaha, 2015, p. 138; Skutnabb-Kangas & Garcia, 1995, p. 223).

Nation building is not the only political consideration that plagues multilingualism. Many developmental agencies, such as the Association of South-East Asian Nations opt for single-language policies in order to integrate geographical economic communities. English is generally the choice of such organisations, as it opens trade between the region and the rest of the world (Tupas, 2015, p. 113). Many Arabic countries opt for purely Arabic policies to ensure that the dominant group retains its position of power (Bahous, Bachab & Nabhani, 2014, p. 355). National governments use language as a means to attain and expand power in both economic and political domains. According to Van der Walt and Wolhuter (2016, p. 1024), a language becomes a language of power, when those in favour of it also wield economic, political and military power.

The question with regard to policy is usually in terms of the role of other languages in relation to English. English language proficiency then becomes a gatekeeper in deciding who has access to university and who does not (Dafouz & Smith, 2016, p. 404). In India, many universities decided to teach in the majority language of the region, with English as a supplementary language. This simultaneously prevents language from becoming a gatekeeper, but also ensures that everything does not succumb to the English melting-pot (Makalela & McCabe, 2014, p. 408). This can easily be the case, as English is seen as a language of power.

In South Africa, power also played a decisive role in developing language policies. This was often the case when white people formed policies in such a way that their interests were advanced, often at the cost of black people and their indigenous languages. Today, universities are expected to aid students by providing assistance and lectures in African languages, as the majority of students are not proficient in English or Afrikaans (Aziakpono & Bekker, 2010, p. 39). Later in this text, however, it becomes clear that this is seldom done. Even though in 1994, South Africa was in the position to implement fully multilingual policies in higher education, this did not happen. There was hope for a fully inclusive policy that would have put African languages at the same level as English, making South Africa a leader in the advancement of African language interests. Because no decisive action was taken, meaning that language policies were almost in a state of non-existence, proponents of African language instruction have been disappointed overall. The result is that most universities became monolingual English institutions (Makalela & McCabe, 2014, p. 407).

Despite some universities, mainly previously Afrikaans universities, becoming bilingual (by including English) and officially mentioning African languages in their policies, we are yet to see real advances being made with regard to African languages as languages of teaching and learning (Makalela & McCabe, 2014, p. 407). Although African languages are mentioned in policies, it seems clear that none of the universities plan to use them as a medium of instruction soon. African languages should not be seen as having an inferior vocabulary. When Afrikaans was first used, it did not have an extended vocabulary either, but consisted of words used by its "agrarian original speakers" (King & Chetty, 2014, pp. 46–47). Afrikaans did, however, become a fully-fledged language of commerce, science and education (King & Chetty, 2014, pp. 46–47). For a language to be regarded as a language of power, it is a prerequisite that it be used in these fields, as Afrikaans came to do. Therefore, using a lack of vocabulary as a reason to exclude African languages is illogical, as languages develop through use, and should be used "in their current form as primary or auxiliary media of instruction" (Madiba, 2013, p. 387).

The University of Limpopo also opted for teaching in English only. Despite their expectation of students being proficient in English, this was seldom the case. The majority of students have only the most basic grasp of English, meaning that they struggle to finish their degrees within the required time (Makalela & McCabe, 2014, p. 409). With a graduation rate of 15%, which is mostly ascribed to English deficiency, it is almost unfathomable that English is still the only language of teaching and learning at UL. This "gravitation towards unilingualism" threatens other languages and the cultural value that they carry within them (Makalela & McCabe, 2014, p. 411).

The Council for Higher Education (CHE) lists several reasons for the poor academic performance of undergraduate students. These include, but are not limited to, material and socio-economic factors related to the inequalities that stem from apartheid, the lack of academic support and underpreparedness for university studies (CHE, 2013, pp. 54–57). According to the CHE-report, this underpreparedness, or insufficient academic literacy, is mainly linguistic in nature. Almost all of the requirements for being academically literate, as listed in the report, have to do with reading and writing (CHE, 2013, p. 58). "The academic

problems are familiar – a severe articulation gap, difficulties with the medium of instruction for the majority of students for whom English is a second, third or sometimes fourth language, and mainstream curricula that have not adjusted to these realities…" (CHE, 2013, p. 83). By providing students with the opportunity to have academic discourses in their mother tongues, we aim to take steps in order to adjust to this reality.

By following resource-based, rather than rights-based approaches, the academic registers of many languages could be built up simultaneously. What this would entail is that actual resources are spent on the development of different languages. In most current language policies, language diversity is displayed by means of having building names in multiple languages or handing out pamphlets in multiple languages. A resource-based approach, rather than a rights-based approach, would mean that actual work is being done in terms of developing different languages (Stroud & Kerfoot, 2013, p. 399). This could then bridge the gaps between African and Western knowledge systems. In this way, a higher education system in which only about 5% of the population succeeds can be radically transformed (Stroud & Kerfoot, 2013, p. 403). Transformation, however, seldom refers to language when it is used in university policies, visions and goal statements. With the emphasis on a vague thing called "transformation," many students may feel that they are "already transformed". The obvious next step is then to learn the so-called "languages of power", meaning that English is the only language option that makes sense (Stroud & Kerfoot, 2013, p. 403). Not only do restrictive language policies lead to low academic achievement in the short term, but also to a negative self-perception in the long term (Fredricks & Warriner, 2016, p. 319). It is, of course, not just students who must transform. A joint effort by students and faculty staff should be undertaken to ensure transformation from superficial language rights, to the actual granting thereof.

Even though English is currently the language of "business and trade," languages and their roles are not static. The role of the English language could easily be taken over by other languages in the future (Dafouz & Smith, 2016, p. 411). One country that realises this in its policy-making is Eritrea. Even though it went through a lot of political turmoil, with each regime favouring their chosen languages, primary education is currently offered in nine languages. English enjoys a prominent position, without infringing on the grounds of other languages (Asfaha, 2015, pp. 137–138). It is well known that people learn to read better when taught in a language that they already know and speak (Trudell & Schroeder, 2007, p. 165). Therefore, access to the languages of power, or the languages of those in power, can only be granted once people are literate. Like in the case of Eritrea, mother tongue-based multilingual education is the best way to attain that.

Language, power, culture and identity

Language policies can have vast impacts on the behaviour of people in certain settings, in response to their own language use. The state of Arizona implemented an "English only" policy in their public schools. This has led to people policing themselves and others, and even making people reflect negatively on their own languages. Languages other than English are often portrayed in the vilest ways imaginable (Fredricks & Warriner, 2016,

p. 309). People in general also associate English with modernity, while vernacular languages are seen as backward. This is especially the case in many societies that were previously colonised (Tupas, 2015, p. 120).

One should be wary of alienating particular cultures in favour of an Anglocentric model. Just because English is used, the language need not control the culture of discourses (Dafouz & Smith, 2016, pp. 405–406). Often, if attention is only given to the language of teaching and learning, heritage languages are stripped of their power. They become associated with inferiority (Faneca et al., 2016, p. 49). One of the ultimate contradictions in such a scenario is that native speakers of minority languages are discouraged from speaking it. Non-native speakers, on the other hand, are encouraged to learn minority languages (Fredricks & Warriner, 2016, p. 312).

A school usually has language hierarchies that are closely linked to power relations (Purkarthofer & Mossakowski, 2011, pp. 557–558). Inequalities and unequal power structures that are shaped by language use can only be uprooted by confronting them, by means of mother tongue-based multilingual education. Unfortunately, many ideological misconceptions hinder such policies from being embraced (Tupas, 2015, pp. 115–117).

Often, socio-economic factors can be aligned with language and the prestige of the relevant languages. If speakers of a certain language are generally poor, they may associate certain other languages with power and progress. This makes them hesitant when they are expected to choose their own language as a subject, or receive instruction in it (Aziakpono & Bekker, 2010, p. 41). This is one of the reasons why using African languages in education is often criticised, even though such criticism runs contrary to most theories of education, which state that mother tongue-based education is by far the most effective. Other possible reasons may be the argument that the apartheid government advocated teaching in African languages, to keep black people out of the "languages of power". (King & Chetty, 2014, p. 47). English, and to some extent Afrikaans, is still regarded as such today, even though many people, including native speakers thereof, are wary of Afrikaans, due to its connotation with apartheid (King & Chetty, 2014, p. 47).

Some governments may have a vested interest in keeping certain groups, and their languages from attaining power. As there is a proven link between thought, culture and language, oppressing a certain language may prevent the speakers thereof from uplifting themselves by means of autonomous thought. The best, if not the only, way to prevent this lack of autonomy, and encourage free thought, is by means of instruction in the first language of those being taught (Van der Walt & Wolhuter, 2016, p. 1027).

Different dialects could also be deemed as belonging to different power positions. Ferguson (1959), as cited by (Bahous et al., 2014, p. 356) identifies "diglossic" languages as different dialects that are used in the same region. This refers to a "higher" variation that is mostly used in education and official documentation, and a "lower" register that is used in colloquial settings. Codeswitching and diglossia are both often used as means to establish and show off power. Studies in the Philippines show that this also happens when external "power languages" are acquired. Even though most people in the Philippines choose to be schooled in English, inequality is so great that poor students end up learning a type of English that is "deemed undesirable by society" (Tupas, 2015, p. 119).

When learning languages in order to escape certain socio-economic conditions, one must remember that the languages of power are not stagnant. Just as languages can lose value, they can also gain value through seemingly unrelated causes. As political instability in Lebanon came to be the norm, English and French achieved an even higher status. It became a way out, through which students could further their studies overseas (Bahous et al., 2014, p. 355).

Languages are not spoken in isolation, but often form part of many other social functions. Therefore, languages also have certain values or prestige attached to them. Usually, languages of learning and higher orders have "overt prestige", while vernacular languages have "covert prestige". This means that they are valued, but not as much in public as in private (Aziakpono & Bekker, 2010, p. 40). It is therefore of the utmost importance to understand students' relationships with their heritage languages. As language and culture are often intertwined, one must be cognisant of the "real or imaginary language practices in the various contexts in which they move" (Faneca et al., 2016, pp. 49–50). Even though language may not be a defining cultural marker for everyone, as with religion, class or ethnicity for some people, it always contributes. Users of language may feel different affinities to the languages that they know. Some languages may be simply a tool, while others may be at the heart of their being (Van der Walt, 2013, pp. 164–165).

Teaching and learning subject language

If students cannot cope with the language in which they are learning, they are set back for as long as it takes to become proficient in the language (Gibbons, 1995, p. 104). One of the prominent parts of learning a particular subject is the technical language terms thereof, as each field of study comes with words that are endemic to it. For students who are still learning the language of teaching and learning, this poses many problems (Gablasova, 2015, p. 62). Second-language students often use a blend of technical English and common English, which is not suited to their particular fields (Winberg, Van der Geest, Lehman & Nduna, 2010, p. 299). Even though more South African students claim English as their first language, compared to in the past, it is clear that the type of English that they refer to is often far removed from the English required for university studies. This is being addressed by means of Academic Literacy programmes, in which students are taught how to write in the academic style and register (CHE, 2013, p. 71). Our tutorial programme also aims to serve as a partial remedy. Students' reference to English as a home language may also be mistaken, as many of their homes are bilingual or multilingual. Such students seldom come into contact with academic registers in any context (Stroud & Kerfoot, 2013, p. 398).

Native speakers often have trouble with new words, or subject-specific words. While non-native speakers would then guess at wrong meanings, native speakers would guess at correct, but incomplete meanings for such words. If other words in a sentence are unknown to a student, the chances are slim that they would understand the technical terms (Gablasova, 2015, p. 69). Such learning not only concerns learning new concepts, but also erroneous information that is often included in mental definitions of words (Gablasova, 2015, p. 70).

Studying the acquisition of technical terms for non-native speakers is difficult as they often do not distinguish between new words that are known to native speakers and actual technical words. Non-native learners are often able to grasp technical concepts, but with a much narrower scope of the meaning thereof (Gablasova, 2015, p. 69). Where words exist in students' native languages, the translation could provide a reference point from which understanding can follow. Simply appplying a label to a concept could be meaningless if the student has no way of recognising it in his/her own frame of reference (King & Chetty, 2014, p. 46).

Students who write in their own languages tend to grasp their audience better, as compared to when they write in English. Certain fields are seen to "belong" to English, and therefore, in the students' view, the focus, when writing, should fall on how it is presented, rather than on explaining content (Winberg et al., 2010, p. 302). Plagiarism often occurs, because students struggle to integrate different sources. Melles (2015), quoted by Winberg et al. (2010, p. 301) coined the term "plagiphrasing" which refers to students who "plagiarise entire phrases as a compensatory strategy".

Language use within the classroom

Even though mother-tongue learning is by far the best type of instruction, it must be acknowledged that learners are not only confined by language. Their languages form but part of one of many systems that help them to either exert control, or to be controlled by others (Tupas, 2015, p. 121). Students who are not proficient in the English language usually come from schools where they also faced other challenges. It would be an oversimplification to only refer to "English-medium teaching" in the same way across countries, as not all have the same language demography. In multilingual settings, multilingual students and lecturers work together to construct knowledge, by means of their respective linguistic backgrounds and resources (Dafouz & Smith, 2016, p. 400). Second-language learners not only differ in their competency of the language of learning, but they also differ in the richness of the language that they bring with them. This is often undervalued, with minor exceptions when it comes to common second languages. If students' home languages are to be used in a productive way, they cannot be placed into strict confines like "languages of origin", pitted against the "target language" (Purkarthofer & Mossakowski, 2011, pp. 555–556).

Students who only understand English on a very basic level when being accepted to study at English-medium universities, is not only a South African problem. During a Lebanese study, many lecturers complained that students were using a mix of Arabic and English in class. This is probably due to them being at the "minimum level required" to be accepted to university (Bahous et al., 2014, p. 354).

One should take into account that very few languages are homogenous throughout. In most cases, the language spoken at home is a completely different dialect than that spoken in academia. Therefore, insisting on the use of pure standardised languages, even mother-tongue, would be just as foreign to students as the current English-only approach (Madiba, 2013, p. 390). One way to address this is by making use of, often subconscious, codeswitching.

King & Chetty (2014, p. 40) "loosely" define codeswitching as "the use of two or more languages, varieties, or even dialects within a single language turn". This is in no way confined to classrooms. Codeswitching often happens because students are not competent enough in the target language. Many studies, specifically around language learning, have found that using the local pidgin forms of the language could be helpful in learning the "proper" form thereof (Bahous et al., 2014, p. 357). Codeswitching is often used to shift power from the teacher to students. In this way, a question may seem less intimidating when asked in the student's native language, rather than in English, which carries its own imperatives (King & Chetty, 2014, p. 43). Students often code-switch to clarify meaning or to confirm their understanding of certain concepts. The majority agree that they form a better understanding when teachers use both English and their native languages (Aziakpano & Bekker, 2010, p. 47; Bahous et al., 2014, p. 360; Stroud & Kerfoot, 2013, p. 400). Codeswitching often occurs so as to ensure that students understand the English concepts that they are being taught (King & Chetty, 2014, p. 41).

Because it may be seen as a failure of adapting to the university setup, many students and teachers deny ever codeswitching in a classroom situation. This may be because they act in contravention of the language policy, or because it would be a confession to not being fully proficient in English (Bahous et al., 2014, p. 631). Another possible reason, especially in the South African context, for not affirming the use of codeswitching, could be the internalised links between language and racial or ethnic purity (King & Chetty, 2014, p. 44).

Studies of English-medium education in multilingual settings are not only concerned with the language that is spoken in class, but also with how English is used elsewhere. It is not only the language of teaching and learning, but also the common language between professions and trade (Dafouz & Smith, 2016, p. 399).

Facilitating tutorials

Research has shown that peer tutoring helps students to better understand academic work, while also improving the throughput thereof (Bowman-Perry, Burke, Zhang & Zaini, 2014, p. 261). Reciprocal peer tutoring motivates students to constantly monitor their own understanding of the work that they are studying (De Backer et al., 2015, p. 482). In this model of tutoring, students constantly switch from being tutors to students, and vice versa, within their groups. Academic achievement leads to more academic engagement (Bowman-Perry et al., 2014). Because peer tutoring increases both, it could start a positive cycle, resulting in greater academic gains.

Increasing student numbers, compared to relatively low increases in teaching staff, constantly forces universities to rethink the ways in which they encourage and support students. One such way is Reciprocal Peer Tutoring (De Backer et al., 2015, pp. 484–485). One major advantage of having tutors is that individual feedback can be received from students, without increasing the workload of the instructor (Lee, Hong & Choi, 2017, p. 43).

Students often report that they are scared or shy to ask questions, or to actively take part in tutorials. This is usually the result of their poor language skills in English. For this

reason, many students requested that isiXhosa tutorials be offered as an option during the first academic year at Rhodes University (Aziakpono & Bekker, 2010, p. 47). Similarly, this request has been made in our department at the University of the Free State for SeSotho and isiZulu tutorials.

Academic staff, especially tutors, should use classroom interactions to measure proficiency in academic discourse. These discourses generate new meaning, by means of students and lecturers engaging their respective cultures in these discourses. The English language is merely the lingua franca, a tool through which these discourses happen (Dafouz & Smith, 2016, p. 407). Some of the tutors' roles have to do with facilitating discussions and having discussions with students. This is an important tool that should be used to measure how students are progressing (Lee et al., 2017, p. 154). Students have shown that they are more inclined to take ownership of their learning when they are allowed to converse about coursework in the languages of their choice (Purkarthofer & Mossakowski, 2011, p. 558). Monitoring of academic progress could then happen when feedback is given, or through actively listening to student discussions. These discussions are not just for monitoring student progress, but also so that guidance can be given when students are struggling.

Reflection on philosophy tutorials at the University of the Free State

Tutorials were held once a week to supplement the weekly lectures. Both were two hours in duration. Students were required to read a philosophical text in preparation for the weekly lectures and tutorials. During lectures, a member or the instructional staff explained the week's reading fully. I, as facilitator, was tasked with supplementing these lectures by means of tutorials. During these tutorials, the aim was not merely to repeat the lecture in a different format, but to equip students with the necessary skills to interpret such lectures by themselves.

I usually split up the two-hour tutorial session into two parts. During the first part, I conducted an informal discussion with the class. This part usually lasted a maximum of 45 minutes. During this time, I went through some key words and phrases in order to ensure that everybody shared certain levels of understanding. This process reinforced the acquisition of subject-specific terms.

Students were often asked to paraphrase certain important passages from the text. They were given a specific amount of time to finish this. Afterwards, students were requested to send their anonymously written answers to me in the front of the class. I then read some of these aloud to the whole class, asking them to locate where improvements could be made. Not only did this help to attain academic literacy, but by doing such exercises, I hoped to equip students with the skills needed for them to act as peer-tutors for each other. This served as a basis from which the second part of the tutorial followed.

During the second part of the tutorial, students were asked to divide themselves into groups of no more than five students per group, according to their native languages, or the languages which they prefer. In this particular class, students tended to form English, Afrikaans, Sesotho and isiZulu groups.

Some questions were then displayed on the screen, which students were required to discuss within their groups. Students were then encouraged to speak the languages that they were most comfortable with in discussing the questions. The questions were displayed in English, Afrikaans, isiZulu and Sesotho. Thereafter, students gave feedback to the class in the English language.

At first, some students were hesitant to practise academic discourses in their native languages. Many students thought that they simply would not have the vocabulary in their languages to express philosophy as it is usually done by means of the English and Afrikaans languages. These fears were quickly replaced with confidence as students realised that questions on the screen made no use of words borrowed from other languages. Students were even more surprised to find that they knew many of these words already. Even though African languages are not regarded as languages of power, students were implicitly made aware that this lack of power stems from past politics. They could then come to the conclusion that languages are not innately inferior when they are not used as languages of instruction.

From about the second week of the course, it became apparent that students were prepared to get actively involved in the process. What was probably the most empowering was when they realised that their understanding really improved as they were able to internalise the concepts before conveying them in the English language again.

As the module was concerned with the contribution of the Founding Fathers of the Christian Church to Philosophy, it became apparent, especially to students of the Catholic faith, that they were more familiar with the vocabulary. Catholicism is a widely practised religion in South Africa, and especially Lesotho, where many of our students are from. This enabled most of the group members to function with a remarkable grasp of the content knowledge.

As mentioned earlier, many students were initially reluctant to speak in the class because they were scared of demonstrating their lack of English proficiency. By enabling dialogues in multiple languages in the course, this fear was quickly overcome such that when students were asked to give feedback in English, they were much less reluctant than before.

Conclusion

The use of language is an important part of learning. Many problems that students experience, when it comes to learning, emanate from their limited language capabilities. Even though language policies that support second-language learners should be implemented, this has not yet been done sufficiently. By offering multilingual tutorials, within an English language-centred coursework, lecturers and tutors can offer relevant support to students without stepping outside the institution's language policy.

The increase in confidence, paired with much better student engagement, serves to prove how effective multilingual subject learning could be. It empowers students to dig deeper into their personal experiences, which are seldom formed in the English language, in order to better enrich their understanding of content knowledge. Should it become possible to offer course materials in students' mother tongue, the expectation is that students will become even more involved with their own learning.

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Reflective practice

An Assessment of the Impact of the Mentoring Programme on Student Performance

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Abstract

The University of Venda introduced an academic mentoring programme in 2012. The introduction of the programme was in response to the results of a national study that was conducted by Scott, Yeld and Hendry (2007). The study was replicated at institutional level and it yielded similar results that indicated that at least 30% of undergraduate students drop out at the end of their first year. Using Margaret Archer's morphogenetic framework, this paper seeks to assess the impact of the programme on students' performance. The key question asked in this study is: 'What impact has the mentoring programme made on the academic performance of students in the Department of Communication and Applied Language Studies?' This department formed part of this study because the module lecturer was among the first few who exercised her agency by consciously volunteering to join the programme with the hope that it would improve pass rate. The pass rate improved from 80% to 92% the first time the programme was implemented and it has been high ever since, while the students in that department have continued to embrace the programme. Both qualitative and quantitative methods were adopted for this study. Qualitative data consisted of an open-ended questionnaire which was used to collect data from forty-five mentees. Interviews were also conducted with ten mentees, three student mentors, the Media Studies (MST 1541) lecturer and the educational development practitioner (EDP). From the forty-five questionnaire respondents, only ten mentees were also interviewed to confirm responses that were given in questionnaires before the researcher had reached saturation point. Quantitative data were collected through a comparison of module results for 2012 and 2013. The MST 1541 classes in 2012 and 2013 were taught by the same lecturer, who confirmed minimal changes in terms of content and teaching methods which could have influenced the improved pass rate in 2013. The study concludes that the mentoring programme contributed to improving student success. However, the study only focused on one causal mechanism, namely mentoring. It is therefore recommended that a broader study be conducted to evaluate the impact of additional causal mechanisms. Furthermore, the researchers recommend improved monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to curb the inconsistencies and irregularities reported by the mentors, mentees, lecturer and educational development practitioner.

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Keywords
critical realism; mentoring; retention; social realism; success; student performance; student support

Introduction

This paper seeks to assess the impact of a student mentoring programme on student performance among first-level students at the University of Venda (UNIVEN). The study explores departmental conditions and the student success rates before and after the introduction of the mentoring programme in the Department of Communication and Applied Language Studies (CALS). UNIVEN is a rural-based, previously disadvantaged institution, which mainly caters for the formerly marginalised black population in the Limpopo Province of South Africa (Mabika, 2015). The University of Venda's Centre for Higher Education Teaching and Learning (CHETL) reported that at least 53% of the students who wrote the 2011 examinations would be repeating a module or two of their first-year modules the following year (Masehela & Ndebele, 2016, p. 117). The institution attracts mostly first-generation students who come from disadvantaged schooling backgrounds from peri-urban and rural communities. These students face financial challenges, underpreparedness, a lack of exposure to various technologies, poverty and a range of emotional burdens which can significantly affect their academic participation and performance (Krause, 2005). However, in its effort to deal with some of these challenges, UNIVEN introduced an institution-wide academic mentoring programme in the second half of 2012. This programme was accepted by some lecturers and rejected by others who felt it added more work to their already heavy workloads (Masehela, Ndebele, Sikhwari & Maphosa, 2014).

This paper aims to share the experiences of a lecturer who was a member of the department before the introduction of the programme and who later became one of the first academics to participate in the programme when it was eventually introduced. The paper also shares the experiences of an educational development practitioner (EDP) who participated in the programme since its inception and worked directly with the lecturer concerned in implementing the programme in CALS. Students who also participated in this programme during its inception completed a questionnaire for this study. Using Archer's morphogenetic framework, the paper seeks to establish if mentoring was one of the causal mechanisms that impacted on the performance of students in CALS. Archer's non-conflationary framework adopts the analytical dualism approach to analyse data that contributes to the success or non-success of the mentoring programme. Thus, the structure, culture and agency are analysed separately to explore the status quo of student performance in the department.

The question posed for this study was: 'What impact does the mentoring programme have on the academic performance of students in the Department of Communication and Applied Language Studies?' Data were collected through questionnaires, interviews, the EDP, the module lecturer and module results. Quantitative data which were comparatively analysed were collected from the lecturer's 2012 and 2013 records in the department of CALS.

This paper provides a brief background of the need for support programmes in higher education in the recent past both globally and in the South African higher education landscape. The paper further introduces the theoretical framework that underpins this research, namely social realism which is rooted in the critical realism philosophy of life, and discusses the reasons for choosing this framework. This is followed by the methodology used to analyse the data.

Background

Hably (2004) found that students' interactions with faculty, staff, advisors, peers and administrators directly influenced undergraduate retention. To this end, Tinto (2004) suggests that, to improve undergraduate retention, all institutions of higher education must offer easily accessible academic, personal and social support services. This perspective is not only relevant to the experiences of the global North. Norodine-Fataar (2011) found that the mentoring programme offered at the Fundani Centre of the Cape Peninsular University of Technology served a dual focus, that is, academic and social. Du Preez, Steenkamp and Baard's (2013) study also confirms that the promotion of active interaction amongst students, faculty, staff, advisors, peers and administrators which is further enhanced through the introduction of mentoring programmes can impact positively on student retention.

The growing body of literature on High Impact Practices (HIPs) clearly supports student mentoring, stating that there is a link between engaged learning and successful degree completion (Kuh, 2008; Brownell & Swaner, 2009; Kuh & O'Donnell, 2013; Wellman & Brusi, 2013). HIPs are defined as undergraduate opportunities that have a positive association with student learning and retention which further share several traits: They demand considerable time and effort, facilitate learning outside of the classroom, require meaningful interactions with faculty and students, encourage collaboration with diverse others, and provide frequent and substantive feedback (Keup, 2015).

The Theoretical Framework: A Critical Realist Ontology

This study explores Margaret Archer's (1995, 2003) theory of social realism, which is grounded in Roy Bhaskar's (1979) philosophy of science known as critical realism. Bhaskar argues for a stratified ontology that takes account of an ultimate reality that exists independently of human action and thought. Bhaskar (1979) argues against a flat monistic view of reality by advocating for three levels of reality, namely the Real, the Actual and the Empirical. The level of the Real is where structures and mechanisms are placed and it is at the bottom stratum. This is the level where planning takes place. After that, events emerge at the level of the Actual. The impact of the planning that took place at the bottom of the ladder is realised at this second level. However, agents who participate in the event experience the effects of the event differently, either positively or negatively, at the level of the Empirical.

Critical realists attempt to recognise the subjective nature of knowledge and argue for the presence of underlying deep mechanisms and enduring structures within a social world. This philosophy of science sees reality through neither the positivist lens nor the

constructivist lens (Sayer, 2007, p. 2). We now turn to explain why social realism was used in this study.

Why social realist methodology or ontology?

First, social realism draws on Bhaskar's notion of a stratified view of reality, outlined above. Bhaskar's critical realism asserts that the world is composed of three strata or layers, that is discourses, structures, powers and tendencies at the level of the Real; events at the level of the Actual; and experiences and impressions at the level of the Empirical (Bhaskar, 1979; Patomaki & Wight, 2000; Sayer, 2007). Therefore, for the purposes of this study, the researchers were interested in unearthing the tendencies at the level of the Real which contributed to the outcome of an improved academic performance at the level of the Empirical.

Secondly, social realism allows for an exploration of the way change occurs, or does not occur, over time. It does this through the use of Archer's (1995) morphogenetic framework, which allows social researchers to analyse the interplay between 'the people' (i.e. human agency) and 'the parts' (i.e. structure and culture) in any social milieu. In the case of this study, we used Archer's framework to explore what could have led to the improvement or non-improvement of student performance after the introduction of a mentoring programme in the Department of CALS. In this study we examine student performance before the introduction of the mentoring programme, using 2012 results and analysing departmental practices at that time. This is then followed by a comparison of the MST 1541 2012 and 2013 results and an examination of the departmental practices after the introduction of the mentoring programme.

Thirdly, social realism requires us to adopt analytical dualism, which involves the artificial separation, for the purposes of analysis, of 'the parts' (structure and culture) and 'the people' (agency). The rationale behind the separate analysis of the parts is so that each domain has its own unique emergent, autonomous and efficacious properties and powers that can or cannot bring about change. Social realism avoids the epiphenomenal character prevalent in other social theories, for instance empirical and linguistic realism, where "… either the 'parts' or the 'people' are held to be the ultimate constituents of social reality to which the other could be reduced" (Archer, 2000, p. 5). Therefore, in this study, Archer's framework adopts the analytical dualism approach to analyse data and to explore the parts and the people's contribution to the success or non-success of the high-impact practice programme with specific reference to the mentoring programme in CALS. This approach to exploring conditions allows researchers to dig deep down to the root cause of the situation.

The Context of Study: CALS at UNIVEN

CALS is housed in the School of Human and Social Sciences at UNIVEN in Limpopo Province of South Africa. UNIVEN is a historically disadvantaged institution, which draws most of its learners from the lowly rated rural and township high schools around

Vhembe District and surrounding areas (Mabika, 2015). 'Lowly rated schools' refers to poorly funded public schools which normally draw learners from the poor black rural and high-density townships. This is confirmed in the *Report of the Ministerial Committee for the Review of the Funding of Universities* (Department of Higher Education, 2013, p. 14). The higher education system in South Africa shifted after the attainment of democracy in 1994, opening up access to all. This resulted in burgeoning enrolments in the underprepared institutions. It is reported that the University of Venda in 2002, boasted an enrolment figure of a total headcount of 7 783 students (Department of Education, 2004, p. 41), while the same institution boasted a total headcount of 14 147 students in 2015 (University of Venda Annual Report, 2015, p. 43). Yet infrastructure and staff complement did not match the growth. The year 2017 shows further growth of enrolment in this institution. In addition to this, the study that was conducted by Scott, Yeld, and Hendry (2007) on behalf of the Council on Higher Education (CHE) identified poor throughput rate as a national challenge which requires the higher education system to work together as a collective to address the challenge; this was done through the introduction of the Quality Enhancement Project (QEP) (CHE, 2014, p. ii). Statistics for the poor national throughput rate in higher education are shared by Schoeman (2014) as follows: only 15% of SA university students graduate, only 25% of students in "contact institutions" graduate in the required time, only 35% of the total intake and 48% of contact students graduate within five years.

In light of these poor throughput rates, this study also acknowledges the following as key conditions in exacerbating poor performance and attrition of students: academic under-preparedness of academic staff and students; transition or adjustment problems; career choice uncertainties in students and inadequate financial support. Wadesango and Machingambi (2012, p. 118) add that academic achievement is closely tied to socio-economic status, and that being raised in a low-income family often means having fewer educational resources. They further point out that, in spite of resilience and the will to be successful, low-income families face additional challenges such as limited access to health care and nutrition, which could contribute to lower academic performance. In addition, students' lack of what Bourdieu (1977) calls "cultural capital", aggravates a student's underpreparedness for higher education. Cultural capital is the assumption that children from working-class families do not have the privilege of acquiring the skills and knowledge that they would require at university from their parents because they are first-generation students. Therefore, student mentors can act as role models for junior students who might not have academic roles models.

There are also fears that digital illiteracy is rife among students from poor rural communities in South Africa due to lack of access to digital technologies. Poley, Cotton and McAlpin (2000, p. 1) argue that there is "a growing problem of the digital millennium with increasing polarization between the information haves and have nots". They further argue that, as technology continues to develop, the gap between the information haves and have nots continues to widen. Wadesango and Machingambi (2011) further note classroom absenteeism as another major contributor to poor performance in higher education.

With the intake of the above-mentioned student body in the Department of CALS at UNIVEN, the challenge is aggravated by the nature of the discipline and the staff component of the department. The department is multi-disciplinary; it was originally the Department of Linguistics but later incorporated Media Studies and became the Department of CALS. Most students who enrol at the School of Humanities register for the Media Studies programme. However, the greatest challenge for this very popular degree programme is the lecturer to student ratio. Lecturers in the Media Studies programme are overwhelmed by the large numbers of students. The lecturer/student ratio is approximately 1:120. The department has six full-time lecturers, including the head of department, one part-time lecturer for Media Studies and one for Linguistics.

The Significance of the Study

Given the context of UNIVEN, it is clear that there is not only a need for student support and development programmes in this institution, but there is also a critical need to critique these programmes at close range to ascertain their relevance in this context. Although student mentors at UNIVEN are selected on merit and undergo training the researchers saw the need to give a critique of how the mentoring programme was unfolding in the Department of CALS. While the research questions in this study will assist the researchers to unearth the impact that the mentoring programme might or might not have made on student performance, the study will also serve as a reflective tool for the lecturer in the study and other lecturers, as well as the development practitioner and other practitioners. Since student support initiatives at UNIVEN are relatively new measures, reflective and reflexive practices are critical in order to move towards innovative practices that speak directly to the context instead of being influenced by pragmatic practices that have worked in other institutions. According to Barry Stierer (2008) reflective practice is the act of scrutinising and critiquing one's teaching habits. Stierer argues that the philosophy of personal effectiveness in teaching is a very important component in professional development. Teaching in higher education could even go beyond reflection to reflexivity. Luckett (2001) argues for an epistemologically diverse curriculum which encourages reflexive competence, that is, knowing how one knows that which one knows, and how one got to know it. Therefore, it is important for one to put forward one's role as a teacher rather than simply acknowledge one's command of the content only.

Tinto (2012) argues that student success is strengthened by assessing performance of both academics and students in ways that allow them to change their behaviour, in order to keep improving success rates. In their quest to professionalise their teaching practices, it is important for academics at UNIVEN to base their practices on research-based evidence as advocated by Stierer (2008). Hence, this study selected Archer's social realist ontology to serve as a lens through which to critique the interplay between students, academics, academic developers and the structures that the institution has put in place to improve student performance. Following is a section that shares literature on peer mentoring, what it entails and the impact it has on student performance in higher education.

Literature Review

Peer mentoring

Mentoring is interpreted differently in different contexts. Du Preez et al. (2013) define peer mentoring within the academic context (module mentoring) as a process whereby reciprocity and equal status abide, and both the mentor and the mentee exchange knowledge, ideas, support and interest to the benefit of both parties. These authors advance the importance of reciprocity and equality between the mentor and mentees since in this context they both occupy the same position, that of student. In that sense, they both stand a chance of learning something from each other or from the interaction itself. Langhout, Rhodes and Osborne (2004) propose four styles of mentoring: (1) moderate mentors (conditional support and moderate levels of structure and activities); (2) unconditionally supportive mentors (highest level of support with moderate levels of structure and activity); (3) active mentors (highest level of activity combined with the lowest degree of structure); and (4) low-key mentors (highest support and lowest activity). Leidenfrost, Strassing, Schabmann, Carbon and Spiel (2011) add three more peer-mentoring styles, namely the motivating master mentoring, informatory standard mentoring and negative minimalist mentoring. The motivating master mentor performs well academically, is committed to mentoring sessions, and provides informational and motivational mentoring, while avoiding negative mentoring. Informational mentors focus on providing information without being asked for it, while negative minimalist mentors are ignorant of the content and fail to answer any questions. For further research at UNIVEN around mentorship, it would be beneficial to investigate the kind of mentors who are likely to be recruited in this institution. In addition, the University of Venda pays its mentors a stipend, which adds to their motivation to do the task. The question could be: What kind of mentors will the institution recruit when there is no stipend attached? More on the kind of mentors at CALS is shared in the data analysis section.

The authors of this paper examine the impact of mentoring in a rural historically disadvantaged university in South Africa. Given the history of the country and its academic support practices, the first phase of the academic development movement, as noted by Pavlich and Orkin (1993, cited in Boughey, 2010, p. 4), emerged as a result of historically white liberal universities admitting small numbers of black students in the early 1980s due to "relaxed state apartheid policies". Other than that, academic student support practices in higher education institutions were not common except for student counselling services. As a result, current academics know and understand very little about student support practices, especially those that are regarded as high-impact practices.

What is academic mentoring?

Landolt (2012) and Masehela et al. (2014, p. 369) define mentoring as an informal face-to face communication process, over a predetermined and sustained period of time, between a person who is perceived to have greater relevant knowledge, wisdom, or experience (the

mentor) and a person who is perceived to be less knowledgeable (mentee). In addition, a mentor is knowledgeable in a specific academic area of expertise and should share that knowledge and skills with their mentees (Landolt, 2012). It is further argued that effective mentoring is more than a question-and-answer session, but involves various informal methods of sharing information through dialogue, and the development of an ongoing relationship of open learning where the mentor and the mentee face and resolve challenges as a team.

However, Eby, Rhodes and Allen (2007) see the end result of mentoring as key to defining mentoring. They define mentoring as a way to help reduce school dropout rates, increase academic achievement, promote self-identity and a positive self-image, reduce risky behaviours, and facilitate career development. These views are also shared by academic developers at UNIVEN. They see mentoring as more than just improving academic performance of students, but also as concerned with assisting mentees to cope with their psychological and social challenges. Mentors, in this institution, are also trained in life skills in order to be able to provide lay counselling to their mentees. However, these mentors are encouraged to refer their mentees to professional student counsellors as soon as they detect serious psychological issues in their mentees.

Research Methodology

To address the research problem, which seeks to assess the issue of change/non- change after the introduction of the mentoring programme at UNIVEN, the study adopted qualitative and quantitative approaches. Quantitative data comprise of two subsequent MST 1541 classes (2012 and 2013), while qualitative data were collected using in-depth interviews with ten student mentees. Seventy mentees were given questionnaires and, of those seventy, forty-five were completed and returned. Furthermore, student mentors and the lecturer of the selected module, as well as the EDP, were interviewed. The morphogenetic approach was used to evaluate the change that occurred (or lack of change) as the department transitioned from a period before and after the introduction of the mentoring programme.

Population and purposive sampling

The study used purposive sampling. Ashley Crossman (2017) defines a purposive sample as a non-probability sample that is selected based on characteristics of a population and the objective of the study. The choice of participants in this study was selective as per Crossman's description of purposive sampling. The module lecturer taught this module prior to and after the implementation of the mentoring programme. The mentors were in the pilot programme in 2013 and at the time of data collection they were honours students in the department. The mentees were in their third year of study when data was collected. The study focused only on 2013 mentees and mentors. The lecturer, who has been teaching this cohort of students since 2010, is still teaching the module, while the EDP is still facilitating this programme in CHETL. When the study was conducted, six of the eleven mentors from CALS, who were first trained in 2013, were still at UNIVEN

completing their honours degrees, while seventy of the 2013 mentees were doing their third and final year of study in the Department of CALS. Some of the mentees are now mentors in the department, which has made data collection for this study possible.

Out of the six mentors who were still at UNIVEN, only three mentors agreed to participate in this study. The other three declined to participate because they were finalising their honours mini-dissertations at the time of data collection. However, all seventy mentees agreed to participate in the study. Forty-five completed and returned the questionnaire. Ten of the mentees were interviewed. The MST 1541 lecturer and the EDP were both interviewed.

Data collection

Qualitative data collection

Interviews: This study adopted in-depth interviewing for data collection from the various population groups selected for this study. In-depth interviewing is a qualitative technique of data collection which uses open-ended questions and probing to solicit details from the information-rich selected population. Interviews are labour-intensive and produce a lot of information, which makes it difficult to collect data from a large sample (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006). Interviews rely on a small sample, sometimes as small as one, and because of that the results cannot be generalised beyond the selected sample for the study (Masehela et al., 2014). Participants who were interviewed consisted of the EDP, the lecturer, three mentors (who comprised of two males and one female) and ten mentees (consisting of five males and five females). All the interviews were conducted in English and audio recorded.

Questionnaire: An open-ended questionnaire was handed to a total of seventy students who were mentees in this module in 2013. Forty-five questionnaires in total were returned and analysed for this study.

Quantitative data collection

Quantitative data were collected through a comparison (by percentage) of MST 1541 module results for 2012 and 2013.

Data Analysis: Results and Discussion

Analysis of qualitative data: interview and questionnaire data

Using analytical dualism – the temporary separation of structure, culture and agency as proposed by Archer (1995, 2000) – interview data of the three mentors were analysed using the critical discourse analysis approach of Norman Fairclough (1989). As discourses are analysed, the culture of the department in question is understood. Discourses were extracted from the data. In the next section, the discourses that were uncovered from the data, including the analysis of these discourses, are provided. The culture and manner in which agency was exercised by the mentors, mentees and lecturer is unearthed in the following analysis.

- The discourse of responsibility:

  Why do you think mentoring was helpful to your mentees?

  "Mentees became more involved and their marks also improved." (Mentor C)

Mentors A and B conceded that their mentees become more confident and active in their sessions.

Agentially, the programme taught mentees to take responsibility for their learning. The programme strengthened their agency. Archer (2000) argues that human beings have the power to exercise agency in any context irrespective of the challenges of the time. All the mentees who were interviewed in this study agreed with this assertion. Most of the mentees pointed out that their mentors advised them to prepare for their main lectures beforehand because that would make it easier for them to actively participate during class discussions with their lecturer. The culture of low pass rates (80%) gave way to that of high pass rates (93%) as revealed by the differences between the 2012 results, before adoption of mentoring, and the 2013 results, after the introduction of the mentoring programme. Young (2015) reported a similar outcome in a study conducted in a South African university where students had to explain 'Why Peer Leadership Works'.

- The discourse of 'proximity':

  How was your relationship with your mentor helpful to you?

  "… it was even easier for me to ask questions when I did not understand …" (Mentee A)

  "Interacting with the mentors was a means of understanding [sic] the given module on a more generational level, it facilitated understanding." (Mentee F)

The discourse of proximity re-emerges in the mentees' data. Culturally, students are freer working with their peers than with their lecturers. They find peers more approachable. Students feel more comfortable communicating with mentors compared to the power differentials that exist between students and lecturer. Mentee m10, during the interview session, also alluded to the same view when s/he said:

> *"I gained more from my mentor than I did from my lecturer and I also learned how to participate in class because I got the opportunity to be open between my peers."*

These mentees' responses from the questionnaires and interviews confirm the mentors' claims that student-to-student relationships make the learning process less intimidating. Various scholars assert that mentoring success depends largely on the proximity of the members involved (McCuaig, Hare & Monsen 2014; Sambunjak & Marušić, 2009; Frazier, 2007). Proximity means that students feel more comfortable and motivated when they work with their peers during a learning process. One respondent in Young's (2015) study showed appreciation for 'proximity', stating the following: 'I have had difficulties in my first year without guidance, I felt the need for an African child to be assisted is highly in demand if not imperative. Making change in the black (race) community, as I run most of my sessions in isiZulu.' In the interview with the module lecturer, she confirmed that, since she deals with large classes, the mentoring programme creates an opportunity for a much more effective interaction with her students:

"Some of the students require individual attention but this was difficult as the numbers continued to increase each year. This in a way resulted in me failing to effectively utilise the various assessment methods, particularly formative assessment. Prior to the introduction of mentoring, I mainly focused on summative assessment only. This later improved when mentors were introduced. I used the small groups to introduce formative assessment. I would give my students an assignment in class. They would submit their first draft to the mentor who would go through it using a marking memo which I would have prepared and give as much feedback as possible on the scripts and during their sessions. Students would now go and rework the assignment before submitting it to me. I would now assess and give them a mark which would be recorded. Thus we merged mentoring and lecturing together in order to achieve better results." (Lecturer)

The mentoring programme also impacted positively on the assessment practices by the lecturer.

- The discourse of freedom:

  What was your relationship with your mentees?

  "I am free to express my views without fear because I am confident of my capabilities because my lecturer and the EDP have fully prepared us for the task."

A culture of free-spiritedness was inculcated during mentoring sessions. Mentors felt free, Mentor B avers, and this claim is in line with Cuseo's (1991) observation that peer leaders are empowered to exert influence in a less intimidating way than staff or faculty. This is similar to the claim made in the discourse discussed above. Mentees m4 and m9 also asserted that they felt more relaxed and less intimidated to participate in their discussion with their mentors since they were fewer and the mentor was a student like them. Mentee m6 said he felt more secure making a mistake in these small groups than in a large class full of people.

- The discourse of reflectivity:

  What was the best part of being a mentor?

  "It helped me to reflect on what I have learnt in my first year. I also learned new things through our discussions with my mentees."

The mentoring programme brought another learning perspective to the mentors which might not have transpired had they not been involved in the mentoring programme. Joseph Joubert (1994) argues that "to teach is to learn twice". Furthermore, mentoring sessions allowed both mentors and mentees to be themselves and to operate in an informal environment, while mentoring also made mentors feel good because they were being given an opportunity of becoming motivating master mentors as alluded to by Leidenfrost et al., (2011): "… it gave me a chance to impart knowledge to juniors."

Mentors also see themselves as carriers of knowledge, a feeling that builds self-esteem and self-confidence.

- The discourse of lack of commitment:

  What is the downside of being a mentor?

  "*Attendance was sometimes poor and this was discouraging. They usually attend when they are facing an imminent challenge. e.g. Tests.*" (Mentor B)

The nature of mentoring, that of being a flexible, non-compulsory activity for students, makes it open to abuse. Mentees do not feel obliged to attend sessions. Tinto (2012) argues that there is nothing optional for students if the institution is serious about student success. Archer (1995) rightly argues that institutional structures condition human action. Therefore, if the institutional structures do not make student support programmes compulsory, not all students will be equally committed to the programmes. In this instance, the interplay between structure and culture is seen to be influencing agency. The mentees here are seen to be taking the programme for granted.

- The discourse of mentor commitment:

  Were you able to commit to mentoring duties at all times?

  "*The mentees need us all the time, which was not possible at times since we were also students who would be busy at times.*" (Mentor A)

Mentors raised an important structural matter in this study. Mentor A argues that there is a need to revisit the method used to select mentors, because some of the mentors were not dedicated in their work as mentors and even their performance as mentors was not satisfactory. An important suggestion by the mentors is advanced here. This point tallies with what the authors have raised above concerning future research on mentoring at UNIVEN. Mentors also suggest that mentoring sessions should be included in the main timetable slot so that mentees can take it seriously. However, it is interesting to note that, despite this challenge, student performance improved in 2013 from 80% to 92% (see details of analysis in the next section).

- The discourse of 'epistemological access':

  What benefits did you obtain from attending the mentoring sessions?

  "I managed to understand how to tackle questions during the exams and express myself."

Students understood concepts and themes better. Mentee m2, pointed out that:

> "*… attending mentoring sessions where we revised a number of past tests and examinations helped me to understand how things were done in varsity. It helped me understand how test questions were set and how to answer them*."

The epistemological access discourse confirms the claim made by different scholars that epistemological access does not come naturally to students: they have to be inducted into this academic literacy (Boughey, 2010; Boughey & Niven, 2012). This implies that students from both poor schooling backgrounds and well-resourced backgrounds need to be inducted into the academic culture. The difference could be that those from well-resourced schools and families might possess in them greater cultural capital as expounded by Bourdieu (1977).

- The discourse of excellent relationship:

  What was your relationship with the mentor?

  Mentors and mentees had relationships that were relaxed and friendly:

"She was patient, she treated us like we were her little brothers and sisters. We were a family, an academic family …"

This approach proved appropriate for students. However, the approach itself might pose risks such as encouraging intimate relationships between mentor and mentees, abuse of power by mostly mentors, losing focus during session by turning session into an informal chat session. These risks are shared during mentor training with the mentors in order to enable them to avoid the risk of turning the relationship into something beyond the mentor–mentee relationship.

- The discourse of building self-esteem:

  How did you benefit from mentoring others?

  Mentoring boosts an individual's self esteem:

  "It helped me gain confidence in steering my views."

Mentee m7 stated that the open discussions during the mentoring sessions allowed the shy students to come out of their shells which also boosted their confidence to participate in class discussions. Hobson, Ashby, Malderez and Tomlinson's (2009) study revealed that mentoring is helpful in boosting the confidence of mentees because in its nature it is able to provide emotional and psychological support.

- The discourse of student support for senior students:

  Do you think the mentoring programme for first year learners is sufficient?

  Most of the students see the importance of student support and feel that they would have done better in second and third year if they had received similar support.

  "My second year … marks were not satisfactory at all and I believe that if I had been mentored I could have done better."

  "We have a lot of content which we do not understand. We seek mentoring especially in the 3rd year."

However, some students are against the idea of attending mentoring sessions at senior level, arguing that first-year mentoring is enough to prepare them for senior phases.

"I gained enough confidence and studying skills which have sustained me in my 2nd and 3rd level hence I think mentoring should be limited to 1st years," opines Interviewee m8.

The discourses shared above (A to J) are indicative of the potential positive changes that mentoring can bring to an institution. However, there are also challenges associated with the implementation of such a programme. The following discourses indicate that for the programme to improve some issues need to addressed.

- The discourse of incentivising:

  Do you think mentors should be given stipends for their services?

  In addition, mentors in CALS propose that the incentive for mentors should be increased as currently it is not worth the effort required. (At UNIVEN, mentors are paid R1 000 per month.) The module lecturer is also in support of this view:

"In addition, the incentives are too little considering the important service the mentors are offering." (Lecturer)

This view is supported by the result of a study conducted by Du Preez, Steenkamp and Baard (2013, p. 1232) at Stellenbosch University in South Africa. This study found that mentors felt that the incentives linked to mentoring were not worth the effort. However, some mentors realised that it was not just about the money but that it also benefited them and helped them to relearn the basics in their subjects. This is in support of Joubert's (1994) notion that "to teach is to learn twice".

- The discourse of time management:

  What other distinct benefits did you gain from the mentoring programme?

  "I learned to be punctual."

Mentees confirmed that they took responsibility for their learning through the mentoring programme. They learned to manage their time better and to take the initiative instead of waiting for someone to motivate them.

Mentee m5, during interviews, said the following:

"*Juggling time between class activities, mentoring and other personal social activities made me realise I have to come up with a logical and systematic time management plan*."

This quote confirms that, in the process of engaging with mentoring sessions, mentees saw the necessity of managing their time effectively. Jackson (2009, p. 434) outlines key steps for successful time management as follows: (1) set realistic goals; (2) get organised; (3) delegate; (4) relax and recharge; and (5) stop feeling guilty. These are some of the aspects covered during mentor training. Similarly, these are covered during time management workshops offered to first years at UNIVEN.

- Discourses of challenges:

  What were some of the weaknesses of the mentoring programme?

Although there are discourses that may discourage students from committing themselves to the programme, they are not strong enough to dissuade the students and lecturers from partaking in these programmes. Both mentors and mentees feel that there are not enough resources to support the programme. This frustration is also shared by the module lecturer:

"There is a lack of venues for mentoring sessions."

It is unfortunate that the institution was not designed to accommodate co-curricular programmes from the beginning. As a result, students are encouraged to hold mentoring sessions under trees or anywhere else on campus grounds due to a lack of venues.

"The mentors should get more materials, study materials and prepare a lot."

"… it shouldn't be a one-way process. Provide venues to build a support structure for the mentoring programme." (Lecturer)

Interviewee m6 also bemoaned the lack of space as affecting their participation in mentoring sessions. They said:

"Having no fixed venue affected my attendance sometimes; if my battery is flat I am not able to communicate with my mentor or other mentee in my group hence sometimes I missed my meeting because I could not locate my group on time."

Another challenge raised by mentors was that some mentees showed commitment only during assessment periods.

"Most of us took mentoring for granted since it was still a new thing to them and did not show up most of the time but when there was a test they showed up in numbers."

A similar finding was noted in a similar study of the same context by Masehela et al. (2014). It was established that mentees were irregular in their attendance of mentoring sessions.

However, in an interview, Mentee m3 owned up, saying:

"… I only realised mentoring sessions were equally important after failing our first test which most students who took mentoring seriously from the beginning passed."

Analysis of quantitative data

Data analysis for quantitative data which is basically a comparison of the 2012 and 2013 results for MST 1541:

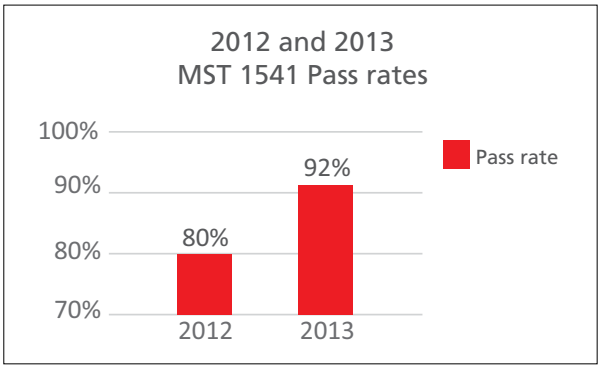

Figure 1: Pass rates for 2012 and 2013 in MST 1541

Between 2012 and 2013, the MST 1541 class was taught by the lecturer who participated in this study. The lecturer revealed that she utilised similar course content and used almost the same teaching methods for both years. However, in 2013 she implemented the newly introduced student mentoring programme as an additional teaching method. The study revealed that, although mentoring is still facing various challenges, it can contribute to improved student performance at UNIVEN. This is supported by the pass rates of first-year students in CALS. The pass rate increased from 80% in 2012, prior to the introduction of the mentoring programme, to 92% in 2013, after the introduction of the programme. The mentors, mentees and even the lecturer involved attributed this to the significant role that mentoring played in changing the pass rate of the under-prepared first-year students at UNIVEN.

Recommendations

Lecturer recommendations

The selection process of appointing mentors has to be tightened so that only the committed and most dedicated mentors are drawn into the programme. There is a need for the Academic Development Unit to develop a feedback form for mentors and the mentees to complete at the end of each term. This will help the lecturer and the unit to improve this service. Furthermore, there is need for office space for student support and development work.

Analysis of EDP data

In the EDP's role, a lot goes on at the level of the Real (Archer, 1995) to constantly improve the programme. The mentoring programme at UNIVEN was developed according to supplemental instruction principles. Supplemental instruction is an attitude to learning in which learners are self-driven by curiosity and their willingness to exchange thoughts and ideas with other students (Malm, Bryngfors & Mörner, 2011). Therefore, the UNIVEN mentoring programme encourages the mentor-mentee relationship to be driven by exchange of thoughts, ideas and self-drive. The principles of the social integration theory in Tinto (1975) also guided the shaping of this programme. For senior students to become mentors, they have to undergo training which includes the topics of basic understanding of mentoring in an academic context, and teaching strategies. These two topics are dealt with in a one-day session. There is a follow-up session on life skills provided by the student counselling unit from CHETL. After students have undergone these two training sessions, they then qualify to receive a certificate.

Nonetheless, there are challenges that EDPs continue to face. The matter of monitoring and evaluating mentoring sessions is still difficult to do. However, lecturers are encouraged to take responsibility for this since they are the owners of the modules. Two interns have since been employed to take responsibility of monitoring and evaluation of the programme, and they make sporadic visits to the sessions. Each mentor is required to submit a personal mentoring timetable to the monitors.

Ethical Issues

Students participated in this survey willingly. They were all asked to sign a written consent form. There was no form of punitive measure taken against those students who chose not to participate in the study or those who changed their mind after signing the consent form.

Conclusion

This study examined the impact of the mentoring programme in the Department of CALS at UNIVEN with the following research question: 'What impact has the mentoring programme made on the academic performance of students in the Department of Communication and Applied Language Studies?' It emerged from the study that mentoring

is a required and highly appreciated programme by mentees at UNIVEN. It is contributing positively towards imparting academic and cultural capital to students involved in this programme. However, the current structure of a non-compulsory mentoring programme is not proving completely successful as students fail to attend until they realise its value in their learning.

There is an urgent need to convert the newly created temporary staff positions for monitoring and evaluation into permanent ones. Given the positive reaction by both students and lecturers, and the results of this study regarding the effectiveness of the programme, permanent positions for monitors and evaluators of the programme should be created. Lastly, this study, although limited in analysing one causal factor, does suggest that a mentoring programme can impact student performance. However, a broader study should be conducted to compare the impact of this factor in conjunction with others to confirm whether pass rate improvement can be attributed to mentoring only or a combination of factors.

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Book review

Meyer, H.-D., St. John, E.P., Chankseliani, M. & Uribe, L. (Eds.). (2013). *Fairness in Access to Higher Education in a Global Perspective: Reconciling Excellence, Efficiency, and Justice.* Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.

Reviewed by Elisa Brewis*

Fairness in Access to Higher Education in a Global Perspective: Reconciling Excellence, Efficiency, and Justice is an edited volume that aims to address the central question of how and why we can promote policies for fair access to higher education (HE). It takes a fairly common view of equity, exploring fair access in terms of racial, socio-economic and rural/urban background. The chapters on China and Georgia also consider fairness in the context of political favouritism and nepotism. The book's primary focus is on access to HE, in other words, academic preparation, selection of students and affordability of HE. To a lesser extent, the book also explores the question of how to sustain *participation in* and *completion of* HE among disadvantaged groups.

From the outset, the editors make it very clear that the purpose of the book is to counter a neoliberal narrative. They wish to open up a space among HE researchers and practitioners to learn about and consider alternative models for HE. The book aims to do this by giving us a systems-level perspective on HE policy, comparing post-WWII systems with current ones, and comparing systems across continents and political contexts. It does not, for instance, examine fair access policies via institutional behaviour or particular intervention programmes. The resultant 'bird's-eye view' of HE systems provides us a comprehensive and empirically rich entry point to a discussion on fair access to HE, with an attempt to include some non-OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) experiences as well. Although the book is pitched as a critique of the neoliberal model of HE, it nonetheless adopts a consistently pragmatic tone. This is evident in the way the discussion on fairness (*justice*) is framed alongside the policy-making concerns of improving quality *vis à vis* global competition (*excellence*) and funding constraints (*efficiency*).

Before launching into the country case studies, the book first addresses theoretical understandings of justice in HE. In line with the approach described above, this discussion is anchored in concrete notions of justice. For example, Heinz-Dieter Meyer's chapter argues for an institutional-comparative approach (Sen, 2009) to reasoning about fair access to HE, as it "focuses our attention on the manifest and remediable injustices in a particular setting…" (p. 16). The context of race, class and HE participation in the U.S.A. provide a

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backdrop for the next two chapters. Lesley Jacobs presents a case for the use of affirmative action policies, based on the ideological argument that diversity in HE is a positive, societal "plus". Edward St. John, in turn, highlights a historical precedent for fair access policies even in the libertarian political climate of the U.S.A. He uses ample statistical data to demonstrate that equitable access to and full completion of HE were only achieved with serious political commitment and state funding, most notably via the GI Bill of 1944 and the Pell Grants introduced in 1972.

Having established that fair access policies are both justifiable and historically precedented, even within neoliberal traditions, the second part of the book moves on to illustrate the successes and failures of national equity policies through a survey of nine country case studies – Finland, China, Colombia, Korea, Germany, Georgia, South Africa, Brazil and Australia. The central theme that emerges is the tension between concentrating limited state resources into pockets of excellence (for instance, the Chinese or Korean solutions), or spreading the resources thin for the sake of regional equality (for instance the Finnish or German models). Another recurring theme is the need for *political commitment* as an important precursor to adequate state funding. The case of Finland illustrates this very clearly. As Marja Jalava points out, an equitable distribution of access to HE across the heavily polarised urban/rural nation was only possible thanks to significant political support. The Agrarian League political alliance was able to lobby the interests of the non-elite metropole, while the strong leftist movement advocated against a vocationalisation or proletarianisation of HE. The result was the establishment of new research-based universities across several provinces.

It is laudable that the book also includes a third section dedicated to the student voice in countering neoliberal HE policies – even if the conclusions drawn are rather gloomy. Oscar Espinoza and Luis Eduardo Gonzales recount the mass social support for student protests in Chile. This support stemmed from the high burden placed on families to cover HE costs (79.2% of total expenditure on HE in comparison to 14.4% from the state, p. 243). Even with such a broad support base, it was still very difficult for the student movement to challenge the neoliberal status quo. In the American HE context, Anna Schwenck reveals how a discourse on "excellence" has drowned out demands for a just and equitable society. It appears that even in California, the home of the Clerk Kerr HE "Masterplan" to promote social mobility, funding cuts have altered policy discourse and forced a wedge between students and HE management.

The final section of the book (Part 4) ends on some concrete policy recommendations. In the first chapter, the editors conclude that we urgently need evidence to counter the neoliberal model. They argue that current funding mechanisms rely more on "ideological arguments" than on an "evidence-based discourse about fairness" (p. 284). This book can be seen as one such concerted effort to make an evidence-based case for fairness. In the final chapter, Edward St. John and Heinz-Dieter Meyer propose a 10-point list of what a fair access policy might involve. They concede that, if market models and loans are to be used, we need to at least temper their most serious ramifications for disadvantaged groups, such as using loans only as a last resort and making repayment terms lenient.

Reflecting on the 'call to arms' in this book to collect more data on equity issues, it is promising that there are on-going attempts to do just that. For example, the Global Equity Index project is attempting to chart a global map on inequality in access to HE (Atherton, Dumangane & Whitty, 2016). An example of a country-level initiative is the Siyaphumelela project in South Africa, which strives to use data analytics to improve student outcomes.

The conclusion of the book is perhaps somewhat disheartening, however, as it focuses on 'what can be done within a neoliberal funding model' rather than returning to the initial discussion on *ideological* arguments in favour of fair access policies. For example, it would be helpful to explore the way in which the social justice dimension of HE is often explicitly linked to national development plans in low-middle income contexts, and its potential to fuel fair access policies. Nevertheless, *Fairness in Access to Higher Education in a Global Perspective* is a timely book that makes an important contribution to the field of HE studies by offering an empirically rich exploration of fair access policies.

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Dr Catherine Hutchings is based in CHED at the University of Cape Town, South Africa. She teaches on the first year academic literacy course for Humanities students and for students in the Performing Arts. She has taught on a similar course in Commerce and has run various interventions in Health Sciences. She also facilitates postgraduate workshops and research writing interventions across the university. Her current research interests are in the areas of student development and identity and transformation, as well as the development of pedagogies making use of online and blended methods.

Andrew Jones was a Co-Grant Holder for the Road to Success Programme in the Faculty of Commerce, Law and Management of the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa until June 2017. His interest in education has seen him expand into primary and tertiary education, with a particular focus on remediation and holistic academic support for students from grades R through Matric. Corresponding, Andrew owns and runs the Kip McGrath Centre in Edenvale, Johannesburg, South Africa. His research interests span teaching and learning in higher education, undergraduate student success and assessment, and curriculum design within professional qualifications. He holds a Master's degree in Commerce and is currently completing a two-year professional Postgraduate Diploma in Higher Education Studies. Andrew worked in the higher education sector for more than 20 years, and has extensive experience in the area of holistic student success and support in the current tertiary climate. His expertise includes academic advising and student guidance, lecturing and coordinating courses in accountancy and taxation, curriculum planning and course design, course coordination, as well as academic administration.

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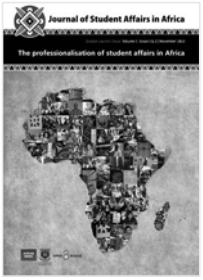
Dr Birgit Schreiber is Senior Director of Student Affairs at Stellenbosch University, South Africa. Prior to that she was the Director of the Centre for Student Support Services at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) in Cape Town. She holds a PhD from UWC. Birgit has published in national and international academic journals on student support and development, has presented research papers and keynotes in national and international conferences and given lectures at the UC Berkley, the University of Leuven (Netherlands), and the University of Oslo (Norway). She was a visiting scholar at the UC Berkeley, where she was involved in their student affairs department. She has also been involved in various quality assurance panels reviewing student affairs at South African universities and has taken part in the national review of the South African Student Engagement tool (SASSE). She has been a member of the national executive of various national professional organisations

including the South African Association of Senior Student Affairs Professionals (SAASSAP), and currently serves on the Executive of the Southern African Federation of Student Affairs and Services (SAFSAS). She is also the Africa Regional Coordinator of the International Association of Student Affairs and Services (IASAS). She is a founding member of the Editorial Executive of the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*.

Linda Spark is a Senior Tutor and Programme Grant Holder in the Faculty of Commerce, Law, and Management of the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa. She has been lecturing in Information Systems for more than 20 years, and prior to that worked in the IT industry. She has extensive experience with student advising and support, lecturing and course coordination, curriculum and course development, various academic, administrative and citizenship roles, including the portfolio of assistant dean in teaching and learning for the faculty. Her research interests include the use of technology in education, technology and ethics, and student support and success.

Gugu Wendy Tiroyabone is the Chief Officer for Academic Advising in the Centre for Teaching and Learning of the University of the Free State (UFS), South Africa. She is certified by the internationally-based board for student advising, the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA). Wendy is responsible for providing leadership and management in the research, implementation and evaluation of academic advising across the UFS. Her other responsibilities include the management of strategic relationships with stakeholders involved in the advising network across the institution. She is passionate about empowering and supporting students in becoming self-directed, motivated, and responsible decision-makers. Wendy has completed a BSc in Genetics, and an Honours degree in Behavioural Genetics. She is currently completing a Master's degree in Higher Education Studies. Her main focus is on academic advising as a practice aimed at facilitating student success in higher education. She remains primarily committed to the fields of student development, student engagement, student orientation, student support and, ultimately, student success to ensure a new generation of graduates are engineered through efforts such as academic advising. In expanding her latitude of professionalism in higher education, Wendy has worked as Researcher for the South African National Resource Centre for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition (SANRC), Research Assistant in Student Development and Success, and as Learning Facilitator for the UFS pioneering first-year curriculum, UFS101.



Call for submission of papers for the
***Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* (*JSAA*)**,
Vol. 6 (2018):

"Space, language and identity politics in 21st century higher education"

Guest editor: Philippa Tumubweinee

As a way of introducing the theme to be tackled in a 2018 guest-edited issue of the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa,* it is worthwhile to pose a question, albeit a rhetorical one: Why would a journal dedicated to theoretical, practice-relevant, and reflective contributions from across the scholarly and professional field of Student Affairs entertain a special edition on space, language and identity politics in higher education?

The short answer would be: everything. The long answer to this question, however, is to be found in an exposition by Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities* (2006). In Anderson's view, *style* has the potential of producing further assumptions about *space* and *time*. 'Style' in this case would refer to *JSAA* which, in the Student Affairs terrain and discourses in Africa, has provided the intellectual and technical means for representing the kind of imagined community that is the Student Affairs fraternity on the continent – a fraternity which comes with its largesse and baggage in the form of the scope of *JSAA*.

It is instructive that the 'representation' under reference occurs primarily through the medium of a code i.e. *language*. In the imagined community created by *JSAA* – which existentially approximates the Student Affairs terrain in Africa and even beyond – the multitude of actors are nonetheless bounded by *space* and *time*. They are connected by the same encircled, fixed landscape within which they all simultaneously exist. In following this logic through, the commonalities of code and simultaneities of space and time exemplified by *JSAA* are at the heart of the ways in which actors in the Student Affairs fraternity on the continent, and possibly beyond, consider themselves part of a community, and therefore strive to build an *identity* informed by the fraternity's imaginary.

By design therefore, this guest-edited issue will address itself to the **politics of space, language and identity in higher education**, in Africa and globally. The contributions in the guest-edited issue will singularly and collectively grapple with the nuances attendant to the intersections amongst space, language and identity in higher education.

Key topics to be pursued in this issue include:

- Higher education spaces and the politics of space in higher education
- Space and identity, symbols and signs in the post-colonial university
- Politics of identity: student protests, language, institutional culture

- Institutional policies and their impact on (the politics of) practice (e.g. language policies)
- Social cohesion, diversity and citizenship
- Intersections of language, curriculum, educational access and transformation
- Curriculum, decolonisation, and epistemic injustices | freedoms
- Student experience, student identity, and student politics of diverse student groups (e.g. LGBTIQ+ students).

JSAA is an independent, peer-reviewed, multi-disciplinary, open access academic journal that publishes scholarly research and reflective discussions about the theory and practice of Student Affairs in Africa. *JSAA* is published twice a year by the *JSAA* Editorial Executive in collaboration with Stellenbosch University and African Sun Media.

The journal is indexed in international indices and available full-text open access from ERIC, DOAJ, AJOL as well as on its own website hosted with Stellenbosch University. Since 2017, *JSAA* has been accredited by the South African Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) as a subsidy-earning journal on the SA list of scholarly journals. Authors publish free of charge; there are no processing or page fees.

Submission Process and Important Dates

Manuscripts due: 15 January 2018 (or by arrangement with the guest editor)
Envisaged publication date: June 2018

Please submit abstracts to the guest editor for guidance or contact her for further information:

- **Ms Philippa Tumubweinee**, M.Prof Arch, Pretoria
  email: philippa@inafricadesign.co.za

Please submit final manuscripts by email to Ms Philippa Tumubweinee.
Email: **philippa@inafricadesign.co.za** with **cc to email**: **jsaa_editor@outlook.com**

***JSAA*: Submission Preparation Checklist** – please see online at http://**www.jsaa.ac.za**

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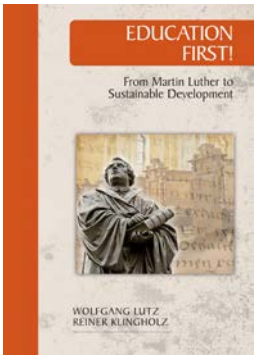

Education First! – From Martin Luther to Sustainable Development by Wolfgang Lutz & Reiner Klingholz (2017)

"This scholarly yet highly accessible volume by two renowned experts shows why education is under threat, and what should be done to counter this. The authors mobilise a fascinating array of compelling historical and current evidence which demonstrates the centrality of education to the creation of flourishing societies and show the dire consequences of its neglect. Anyone interested in education and development should read this book."
– Professor Ian Goldin, University of Oxford

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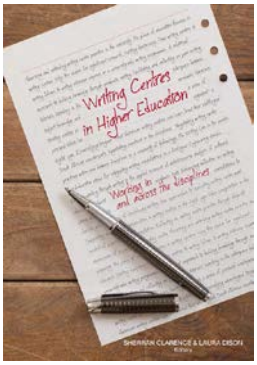

Writing Centres in Higher Education – Working in and across the disciplines by Sherran Clarence & Laura Dison (2017)

Writing Centres in South Africa, and globally, are now well established academic support centres within many universities. Historically tasked with supporting students as they grapple with the demands of academic writing, many centres are now moving beyond their own walls to work with academic tutors, lecturers and departments to rethink the ways in which knowledge is transformed into different kinds of disciplinary writing. This move raises pertinent questions for writing centre directors, tutors/consultants, and for the universities that house them, e.g. how does a centre, tasked with supporting more general academic literacy development, initiate students into a range of particularised discourse communities?

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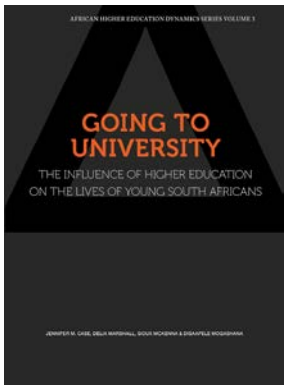

Going to University: The Influence of Higher Education on the Lives of Young South Africans by Jennifer M. Case, Delia Marshall, Sioux McKenna & Disaapele Mogashanaz (2017)

What influences students' experiences of success and failure? This book follows 73 students that started going to university in South Africa six years ago and then enrolled in three-year Bachelor's degrees, either in the Arts or Sciences. Chapter by chapter, the book introduces more student voices and their narratives around which the book is structured and which provide the rich material for the closer examination of students' experiences of going to university. The students about which the book is come from a range of socio-economic backgrounds; many of them are what can be termed first generation students in that their parents did not participate in bachelor's level university study. For many of them, access to university brings huge expectations to live different lives to that of their parents: expectations of social mobility. Some of them succeed in getting their degrees, some of them don't succeed at first but then get there, some are still grappling. Some of them move with ease into the jobs they had anticipated; many of them struggle to find the kind of work that fits their ideas of what they should be doing. Follow the narratives of Cheryl, Nala, Paul, Tebogo and Temba, and 68 more in this book which represents the third issue in African Minds' flagship book series African Higher Education Dynamics.

All publications by African Minds can be downloaded as e-books (PDFs) free of charge from the African Minds website. Print copies can be ordered from:

www.africanminds.org.za (publisher's website)
www.africanbookscollective.com or www.amazon.com (for international orders)

Submissions

Please register as an author and read the Author Guidelines at http://www.jsaa.ac.za. Submissions must be made by email to the Journal Manager at jsaa_editor@outlook.com. Submissions in response to special calls for papers must also be made directly to the guest editors concerned (see Call for Papers).

The *JSAA* typically has themed issues. However, submissions that fall within the general scope and focus of the Journal can be made at any time and may be published irrespective of the overall theme of the Journal. Particularly encouraged are open-theme manuscripts that address the following:

- Case studies of innovative practices in student affairs in the context of African higher education (e.g. student lifecycle, orientation, residence management, student governance, student counselling).
- High-level reflective practitioner accounts.
- Explorations of the nexus of student affairs theory, policy and practice in the African context and beyond.
- Conceptual discussions of student development, and key enablers and inhibitors of student development in Africa.
- Explorations of authoritative literature, theory and professional trends related to student affairs in Africa.

Please note that there are different requirements for different types of manuscripts:

- **Research articles:** Contributors are encouraged to submit research-based manuscripts. Research articles must include an extensive consideration of recent literature and relevant theory. Research-based articles must be original and research-based and must make a significant conceptual (or empirical or normative) contribution relevant to the scope and focus of the *JSAA*. The length must be approximately 5 000 words, including all references, notes, tables and figures. Manuscripts should be accompanied by an abstract of approximately 150–300 words.
- **Reflective practitioner accounts:** High-quality reports on professional campus practice are screened and reviewed according to the same criteria as for research articles, albeit with a different emphasis. Unlike a research article, they do not need to include an extensive consideration of recent literature and theory, but they must nonetheless comply with standard academic convention and scholarly practice. Reflective practitioner articles must be original, must make a significant empirical contribution, and must significantly enhance our understanding of student affairs practice within their respective scope and focus. Typical length should be 2 500–5 000 words. Manuscripts should be accompanied by an abstract of approximately 150–300 words.
- **Book reviews** should be between 800 and 1 000 words in length. Competent reviews of key student affairs books are published at the discretion of the Editorial Executive.
- **Comments and critique**, of no more than 2 500 words, are also welcome.
- **Proposal for the Journal's Dialogue/Interview section and Calls and Notices** should be emailed directly to the Journal Manager. The publication of calls and notices (for conferences, vacancies, etc.) may incur a nominal fee.

Authors are required to check their submission's compliance with all of the following items, and submissions that do not adhere to these guidelines may be returned to authors.

1. The ethical requirements of social research have been considered and fully complied with.
2. The submission has not been previously published, nor is it before another journal for consideration (or an explanation has been provided in Comments to the Editor).
3. The submission file is in MS Word, OpenOffice, or RTF document file format.
4. The text is double-spaced; uses a 12-point font; employs italics rather than underlining (except with URL addresses); and all illustrations, figures and tables are placed within the text at the appropriate points, rather than at the end.
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6. The Journal uses the APA author–date referencing system.
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8. If submitting a proposal for the Dialogue section, a Call/Notice, or a Comment/Critique, this should be emailed directly to the Journal Manager.
9. The final text of the article has been professionally edited and proofread prior to submission.

10. The front page of the manuscript indicates the Section under which it is proposed that the article be published, i.e. Research Article (peer-reviewed); Reflective Practice (peer-reviewed); or Book Reviews/Dialogues/other contributions.
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Section review policy and process

The *JSAA* publishes research articles (peer-reviewed); high-quality reflective practitioner accounts (peer-reviewed); dialogues/interviews (non-reviewed); and book reviews (non-reviewed). The Journal is committed to assisting emerging scholars and professionals in developing promising manuscripts to the point of publication.

Editorial commentary
☐ Open submissions ☑ Indexed ☐ Peer reviewed

Research articles and professional practitioner accounts
☑ Open submissions ☑ Indexed ☑ Peer reviewed

Campus dialogue/interview section
☑ Open submissions ☑ Indexed ☐ Peer reviewed

Book reviews
☑ Open submissions ☑ Indexed ☐ Peer reviewed

The editorial and peer-review policy adheres to the *ASSAf National Code of Best Practice in Editorial Discretion and Peer Review for South African Scholarly Journals* (ASSAf Council, 2008). All submitted manuscripts undergo an initial careful examination by the Editorial Executive to ensure that authors' submissions fall within the mission, scope and focus of the *JSAA* and conform to scholarly best practice. Qualifying scholarly research-based articles and high-quality, relevant reflective practitioner accounts are blind-reviewed by at least two peer reviewers, who would typically be members of the International Editorial Advisory Board of the *JSAA*. Peer reviewers have proven scholarly and/or professional expertise in the subject matter of a manuscript. Reviewer reports are assessed by a member of the Editorial Executive and form the basis of any decision by the Editorial Executive on how to proceed with a manuscript. The suitability of a manuscript is evaluated in terms of originality, significance, scholarship and adherence to the requirements of ethical social research, scope and interest, and accessibility.

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