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# ‘Cultural studies meets academic literacies: exploring students’ resources through symbolic objects’

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## Abstract

This paper reflects on a first year communication project in a South African engineering foundation programme which attempted to bring a cultural studies perspective to the teaching of academic literacy practices. In the project, students identify everyday objects that have symbolic meanings and examine these in a range of physical, cultural and communicational contexts. These objects are seen as catalysts for enabling student narratives and understandings to emerge. Objects also become a way of exploring notions of culture and cultural practices in the classroom and the tensions between convention and change they often index. This paper focuses on a particular manifestation of this tension, in the form of a moralistic discourse, or a discourse of ‘propriety’. The pedagogical implications of this kind of cultural studies project are explored, including the importance of opening up less regulated spaces to allow different competencies to be validated and, crucially, ways of framing and critiquing students’ resources in order to harness these constructively.

**Key words**
Cultural studies, symbolic objects, cultural practices, academic literacies, multimodality

## Introduction

In this paper I theorize the using of objects and symbolism as a way of exploring notions of culture, cultural practices and change in the classroom. I am interested in exploring a new lens or entry point into questions of ‘voice’ in academic literacies work. For this, I have looked towards cultural studies which centres on the forms and practices of culture, including its texts and artefacts, and looks at their relationships to social groups. Eclectic in its approach, cultural studies seeks to understand “the

relationships of cultural production, consumption, belief and meaning, to social processes and institutions" (Lister and Wells 2001: 61). I report on a 'cultural studies' project in a first year Communication Course in a South African engineering foundation programme which caters for students from less advantaged educational backgrounds. In order to introduce certain topics around development, such as cultural relativity, power dynamics, appropriacy for context, relationships to landscapes, the course begins with a project that focuses on symbolic objects. In the project, students identify everyday objects that have symbolic meanings within their communities and examine these in a range of contexts. Objects are seen as catalysts for enabling student narratives and understandings to emerge. A project such as this breaks disciplinary frames, working across diverse disciplinary contexts such as engineering and cultural studies, in order to begin to explore some of the complexities around 'development' in a country like South Africa.

**Context of study**

The engineering foundation programme is located at a medium-sized university and approximately 80 students enrol each year. The students are diverse in terms of languages, age differences, gender, rural and urban origins. Most have English as an additional language. They enter university via an alternate access route with entrance criteria based on potential and not final school leaving grades, due to the inequitable educational opportunities afforded them. This programme structures the students' learning experience by extending the period of study and by including courses, such as the Communication Course, aimed at developing academic literacy practices. The course focuses on sustainable development in rural areas, concentrating on housing, transport, power, water provision and protection. Through the processes of

researching and writing about rural development, academic literacy practices are explicitly taught, such as argument, referencing conventions, scientific discourse, academic genres.

I have based this paper on one year of the course, although I have used the Symbolic Object project in the classroom for over five years. I concentrate my analysis on classroom observations, students' multimodal textual productions and their written reflections thereon. I concentrate in some detail on one student text, namely 'Pants on Women', as it demonstrates a common discourse to emerge across the students' texts, namely a discourse of propriety, and the tensions around convention and change that seem to be prevalent in a developing country like South Africa.

**A rationale for looking at objects and symbolism in the classroom**

To open up discussion on development, I try to get students to talk about themselves and their backgrounds, particularly their relationships to 'home'. About a third of the students in the class are from rural areas – often particularly poor areas in the South African context. However, getting students to speak about their life histories, past experiences and values is not a simple straightforward process. It often feels fraught, highlighting the diversity in the classroom along the lines of class, race and the rural / urban divide, and sometimes results in either bland depictions or over-the-top stereotypes. Also, as Bangeni and Kapp (2005) have argued, students develop increasingly ambivalent relationships to home as they become more enmeshed in the cultures and environments of the university. It is clear that any narrative does not so much reflect 'the truth' as construct it in a particular way. Poststructuralist textual analysts have treated accounts that people give of their lives and experiences as

fictions. However, Hoskins, an anthropologist working in Eastern Indonesia, argues that "even if we accept the highly invented and constructed nature of any such narrative, we must address the relationship between experience and representation" (1998: 6). I began to think of different and innovative ways of encouraging students to talk about themselves and their communities, using objects as metaphors to elicit indirect accounts of personal experience. Discussions around objects seemed to open up dynamic processes within students, and between the students and the total environment more than narrative accounts or 'life histories' did.

Hoskins' argues that stories generated around objects "provide a distanced form of introspection … and a form of reflection on the meaning of one's own life" (1998: 2). My hope was that the discussions would open up the role of objects in students' definition of who they are and who they have been, and help in making the connection with 'home' in the classroom. "The same culturally legitimised object might provide only fleeting comfort to one person, whereas to another it signified complex emotional and cognitive ties to other people and ideas" (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981: x). What I attempted to do in the Symbolic Object project then, along the lines of Hoskins, was to focus on the "narrative creation of the self through the vehicle of an object" (1998: 24).

Perhaps differently to Hoskins, I saw the link to 'place' as important and became particularly interested in the recontextualization of objects from 'home' or other contexts to the environments of first year students at a tertiary institution. New meanings are created through recontextualization (Bernstein 1996, Iedema 1999, Kell 2006), familiar objects are 'made strange' by examining them in new contexts, and

objects can become catalysts for talking about change in the classroom. For instance, one student commented on the importance of wood in his community, and how its meaning has shifted in the new context he finds himself in:

> Wood where I stay is sort of something that we all need. Its used for cooking, boiling water for bathing, and washing dishes. In the winters it sort of brings families together because they sit around fires and chat. They usually braai [barbeque] nuts as well and eat. It is essential for every family…The meaning of wood here [at the university] is absolutely zero. I would never see a piece of wood and think of picking it up. It is seen as waste material.[1]

Linked to biography, I saw objects as a refracted way of engaging with notions of culture and cultural practices. Contemporary cultural studies sees 'culture' as "contested yet creative, limiting but empowering, stable yet transformed and transforming, compromised yet valid, bounded but always transcending boundaries" (Thornton 2000: 44 – 45). The assumption underlying the Communication Course is that 'culture' is dynamic, always contested, and any practice of culture involves some element of control, coercion or power. In fact, social power exists in the rituals, practices and customs of everyday life and the ordinary (Foucault 1972). De Certeau (1998) emphasizes that these 'unnoticed' practices ensure that people discipline themselves, and maintain notions of order and 'propriety'. Cultural studies are concerned with the analysis of these practices in the context of "the relations of power which condition their production, circulation, deployment and … effects" (Bennett 1998: 60). Through discussions on symbolic objects and rural development, the course attempts to situate particular cultural practices within the broader systems of meaning and values that sustain them, and attempts to highlight cultural practices as complex sets of meaning that are in tension with each other.

[1] All student quotes are from written reflections on their symbolic object productions.

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**Introducing the Symbolic Object project**

The course begins by thinking about different aspects of communication. Three categories of communication emerge, namely media of communication (telephones, faxes, radio, TV), genres of communication (letters, e-mails, newspaper articles) and modes of communication (chatting, images, music). By mode I mean the culturally shaped material available for representation, such as visual mode, written mode, oral mode (Kress 2000). Media, genres and modes form part of what Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996) call the 'semiotic landscape', namely the range of forms or modes of public communication available in a society, and their uses and valuations. The course emphasizes the notion of appropriate media, genres and modes to communicate a particular message to a particular audience. Appropriacy refers to the constraints of context, the suitability of an object or action for a particular context. Is a report more appropriate than a poster for a particular audience and purpose? Can a picture or graphical representation give more information in a given context than written text? Is lexis from a technical domain more appropriate than slang in a given context? The considerations point to the fact that textual forms are always located in a specific context which necessarily constrains them by valuing specific discursive practices.

In order to explore 'home', cultural practices and students' resources in the course, we look at students' names and their meanings. The name exercise allows students to recontextualize meanings by examining the familiar in the unfamiliar context of the classroom. In this sense, the exercise is a version of the Symbolic Object project, but perhaps easier for students to access, and thus works well as a scaffolding exercise. We look at an example, Chinua Achebe, and how he chose from the resources available when changing his name from Albert Chinualumogu. He changed his name

as a statement of identity as, for him, 'Albert' pointed to a connection with British colonialism, and 'Chinualumogu' evoked a traditional African past (Achebe 1975: 67). For him, the name 'Chinua Achebe' appeared more global and corporate and thus removed from the cultural and historical baggage of the past. The discussion around names in the class is often extremely generative. For instance, one student's name meant 'lucky' as his mother was the first in the family to give birth to a son. His second name also meant a version of this, 'a gift'. Another student spoke about his surname – how at the time of the Mfecane[2] his family moved down to a certain area, and his great grandfather changed his name to become the chief of the area. Another student went to an Afrikaans school and therefore adopted her second name, which was not Xhosa, but an English name. It is clear that in talking about one's names and nicknames, people draw on their available resources in order to make statements about themselves and their communities.

Following this discussion, I introduce the Symbolic Objects project to the class. In groups, the students need to identify everyday objects that have symbolic meanings in their communities. The groups produce a text which discusses the physical characteristics and uses of an object, as well as the symbolic, social and cultural meanings people attach to it. The students are able to choose between predominantly written modes or predominantly visual modes (such as posters, photos, video, 3-dimensional constructions). They write a brief justification for their choice of 'mode' of production and think about the relevance of the project for themselves as future engineers. Although this project took place in a less regulated curriculum space and the parameters of the task were broad, the projects were assessed. The criteria used

[2] The Mfecane was a period of great upheaval and conflict in Southern African history resulting in large scale movement of groups of people.

were the following: the exploration of the concept in relation to physical, cultural and communicational landscapes; the quality of research, interviews and observations; the appropriacy of the choice of mode of presentation and the reflections thereon.

**Observations: Objects as indexing tensions between convention and change**

The students identified a range of everyday objects with symbolic meanings. These included technological 'objects' (such as electricity, cars, tractors, cellular phones); natural objects (flowers, trees, doves, lions, goats, wood); bodily adornments, including clothes (short skirts, pants, uniforms) and jewellery (rings, chains, beads). They also identified objects relating to crime (burglar bars, barbed wire, guns); politics (flags, statues); illness (AIDS ribbon, TB symbol); religion (bible, rosary, dreadlocks – a hairstyle commonly associated with the Rastafarian movement).

Many of these objects indexed change in one way or another, and highlighted shifts and contradictions in certain cultural practices. These contradictions focused mainly on gender, race, generational conflict, urban / rural traditions, the individual and the collective. For instance, beer in South African society has different meanings for different contexts. It highlights issues of generation, class, cultural groupings, economics and crime. In terms of generation, traditional beer is not drunk by young people because it symbolises 'manhood': "only people who come from initiation school can drink traditional beer" (student reflection). On the other hand, 'modern' beer is drunk more by young people: "They drink it for various reasons, for example, some say they drink it for fun, and some experiment with it and some just drink to 'relieve stress'". The students argued that different kinds of alcoholic beverages can be attributed to different classes of people – rich people drink expensive brandy and

wine, while poorer people drink relatively cheaper beers. Also, that beer drinking culture differs across groups in our society:

> Whites drink beer to celebrate something … Black people especially the Zulus, use beer (traditional beer) when they have feasts, they use it to communicate with their ancestors. Basically when there is beer they should talk to their ancestors.

The link between beer and social ills was also made: "Many people have committed crime at some time in their lives and claimed that it was because of the influence of beer." Although often linked to societal problems, the students also argued that the production of beer is a means of creating job opportunities, and that companies like South African Breweries (SAB) support community development projects and help to strengthen the economy.

Another group of students chose the 'face' as a Symbolic Object. They focused on facial expressions, adornments and modifications. In terms of facial expressions they highlighted the link between expression and emotion, emphasizing the face as a key signifier in human communication. In terms of adornments, they looked at make-up from a cross-cultural perspective. This included talking about South African initiation rituals for boys into manhood, which involves painting the face white whilst in a state of transition, and red to signify the entry into manhood. They also mentioned head-dresses, for instance, worn by a chief at special occasions. Lastly, they looked at facial modifications, specifically in the form of piercings and scarification ("According to some cultures people who belong to a certain clan … have to scar their faces to protect themselves from evil spirits"). The choice to focus on the 'face' is interesting as it highlights changing identities and the construction of identity from available resources. Facial adornments or modifications can indicate social demarcation (such as boys from men, or chiefs). But they can also indicate statements about individuality

(such as, certain kinds of facial piercings). From these investigations, the students produced a poster as well as a 3-D object, a white paper-mache mask. The mask points to highlighted tensions around identity – what is revealed and what is hidden, and the ability to construct one's own identity. The mask also has resonances in African traditionalist religions where by wearing a mask you become transformed, you assume another identity, rather than hiding or obscuring your own identity. See figure *i* below for the presentation of the mask to the class.

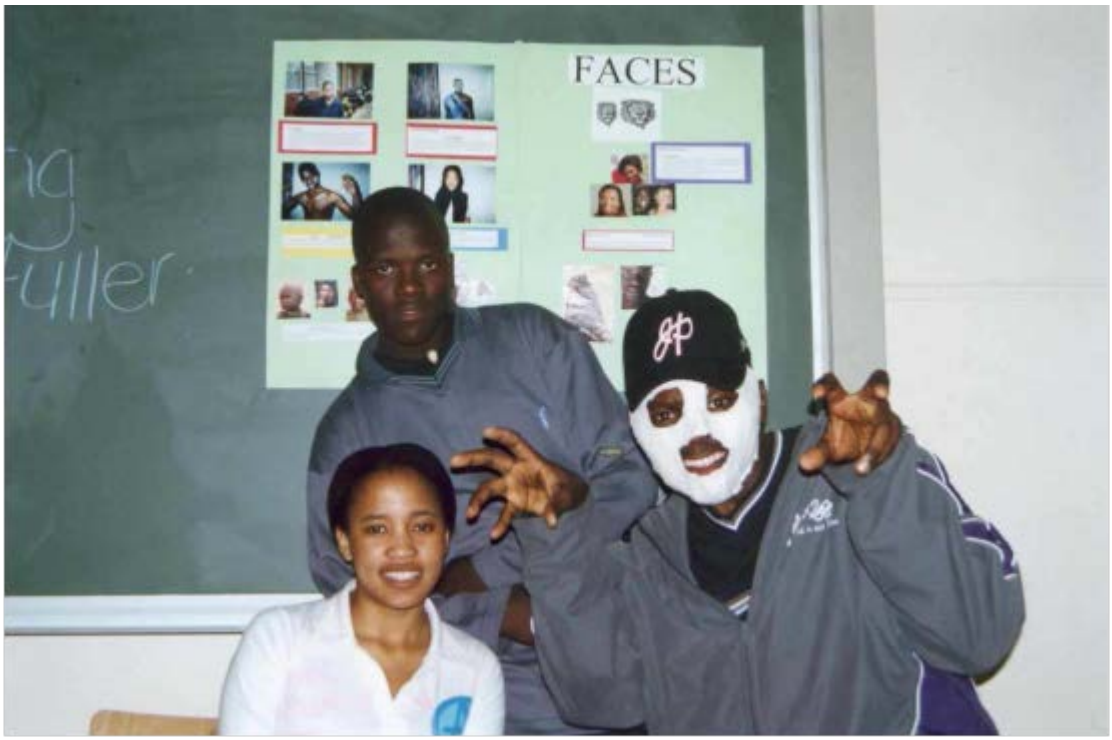


Figure 1. The students presenting their project on 'the face'.

It is clear that the two objects discussed above (beer and faces) are located in particular sociocultural contexts which are constantly changing. "Ordinary culture hides a fundamental diversity of situations, interests, and contexts under the apparent repetition of objects that it uses" (De Certeau 1998: 256). Although cultural practices may appear constant, timeless and static, they are in fact reactualized in daily practice and are thus open to variation and contestation. The students' discussions on the objects and their subsequent textual productions highlighted the areas of contestation, the tensions between change and convention.

**Propriety versus individualism: the importance of 'fit'**

In the students' texts, convention often took the form of a discourse of propriety, specifically those texts that focused on the representation of the body in society. Propriety operates through the internal regulation of behaviour as the effect of a particular emotional, political, economic heritage which allows the subject to be located in a particular social universe (Mayol 1998: 16 – 21). According to Mayol, propriety includes social transparency, especially in social domains that do not take transgression well. Propriety is expressed through "the negative form of a 'how far is not going too far?' attitude" (1998: 21). I refer to propriety as a 'discourse' as, in the Foucaultian (1970) sense of the term, it can give expression to the meaning and values of an institution or social grouping. Propriety defines a moral view on adherence to convention in a specific context and thus works to suppress heteroglossia and naturalize itself as dominant.

The two objects mentioned above (beer and faces) are strongly framed by a discourse of propriety, although they also highlight change in cultural practices. Change and propriety often work in conflict with each other. For instance, beer is framed by who can and cannot drink it in terms of gender, generation, and context. The discussions around the face emphasize who can wear certain markers of status or belonging, and include many morality judgements about women wearing make-up. Gender, age and status thus demarcate the cultural and social spaces one is allowed to occupy.

I will now look in some detail at the text produced by one group of students which examines the object trousers or 'pants', specifically as worn by women. The Pants on Women poster (see figure *ii from the publisher's final version*) examines the

perceptions and cultural practices around women wearing trousers or 'pants' in different sectors of South African society. It raises interesting questions about a society in transition and elucidates the complexities around the discourse of propriety. According to one woman student,

> Physically pants are just clothing to cover the body for warmth and as mentioned covering your body for safety. There are different cultures in this world and it differs in each culture if they allow pants or not like Zulu, Xhosa, Swazi, they all do not allow pants. In the olden days and those places which still live by their cultures they wear skin animals, cloths, women do not wear pants.

The poster explores whether freedom is the right to do what you want as an individual, or the right to follow your cultural practices. Within this context, it explores gender issues and stereotypes about men's and women's roles, and the link between cultural norms and religion.

Signifiers of propriety are often realized semiotically through the representation of the body. Young people tend to have a strong awareness of image, the presentations of the physical self in particular contexts. The body is often seen as a text to be inscribed, as a way of making statements about personal, cultural, and religious identity. These statements can be a reaction to or endorsement of the perceived principles embedded in a conception of propriety. Prince (quoted in Barnard 2000) has argued that aesthetics involve a replacement of vanishing theological standards with a performative ritual, in which an increasingly heterogeneous audience can be united through its shared responses to select aesthetic phenomena. Propriety is a combination of taste (realized as aesthetics) and ethics (realized as a particular morality). For example, if the pants are too revealing then it is not appropriate for a woman to wear them. Taste and ethics are realized as one composite worldview which appears seamless and non-contentious, but the rifts are apparent in a poster like Pants

on Women where the emphasis is on 'looking good' as well as 'behaving appropriately'. This uneasy mix of taste and respect is emphasized in the following statement by a student:

> Most Africans forbid the wearing of pants to church by females regardless of their *age* and *size*. This is because the church is perceived as a *respectable* place and pants as inappropriate there.

The emphasis on 'age' and 'size' point to concerns of 'fit' (who looks good in pants and who does not).

Propriety is about social transparency which seems to go hand-in-hand with a particular kind of scrutiny. Perhaps what is startling about the photographs displaying women wearing pants in the students' poster is how they flout modelling conventions entirely. The models in magazines are specifically rejected in preference for the 'realistic' images of real people.

> Photos gave us the opportunity to show how women looked like when wearing pants and how pants came in all sizes and shapes. This allowed us to show the real fit of pants on people's bodies and one can actually view the picture and figure out why that particular person is wearing such pants.

The strong sense of scrutiny here is not that of a gaze directed at a fashion magazine, but more that of a judge of degrees of propriety. The discourse of propriety is realized through the provenance of design elements here, where an awareness of design in modelling conventions is shown. These conventions are not drawn on (whether consciously or unconsciously) and signs are not imported from the fashion magazine context. In this way, the representation distances itself from the ideas and values associated with that context. This could be because the subject matter has been pedagogized within an institutional setting.

The discourse of propriety functions by favouring the collective over the individual and therefore upholds societal boundaries. It functions by specifying appropriate behaviour in relation to others: “Physically pants are a way of covering our bodies but when they are worn with other motive such as to attract attention they can be a problem”. Here a sense of propriety is valued over ‘attracting attention to oneself’ in an individualistic way. However, there is a central tension between the collective and a discourse of individualism which includes freedom of choice (“freedom is of great significance”) and sees change as an unquestionable good, an affordance of the modern era which frees us from the limits of tradition. This conflict is evident in the following statement:

> Today’s generation just believe that do what fits you well if do not fit you well do not wear it. That means as long as you are comfortable on pants just wear them, if you don’t just leave them. But the fact remain that pants on women is for western culture not Nguni culture.

There is a central tension here between freedom of choice and persisting cultural traditions; perhaps this epitomizes the tensions between generations, cultures, and beliefs that many young people are grappling with. There is also an opposition between views of culture as static and self-perpetuating and culture as dynamic and changing as encapsulated in the following statement in the middle of the poster: “In many cultures and traditions the act of wearing pants is strictly prohibited but culture changes every generation!” The binaries operating in the poster are summarized in table I below.

It is clear that these binaries do not function as a neutral system for organizing knowledge, but rather as a source of tension. This tension is evident at times in the contradictions between the written and the visual modes. The individuality of the represented participants is upheld in the written mode through naming, but negated in

the visual by the faceless representations. The modal division of labour between image and captions enables these binaries to be expressed and resolved to a certain extent.

Table 1. Binaries operating in the Pants on Women poster.

| Discourse of individualism | Discourse of propriety |
|---|---|
| The individual | The collective |
| Freedom to choose, to express yourself | Conforming to the collective/Not attracting individual attention |
| Personalised | Depersonalised |
| Personal view points | Cultural view points and institutional view points |
| Context-specific | Generalised |
| Representations of people's views, in their specific contexts | Representations of 'types' of physical 'fit' of pants |
| Culture as change | Culture as static |

Because propriety is about appropriate behaviour in a specific context, it is inextricably linked to other discourses, such as religious and gender discourse. As religious discourse constructs a moral view on adherence to convention, it is clearly closely related to 'propriety'. The dominant feature of the poster is the central image of the church with the sub-heading 'culture and religion'. Some of the arguments for freedom of choice are constructed through interpretations of the bible: "No where in the bible does it specifically say women should not wear pants". Thus, freedom and individualism are sometimes uneasily positioned within religious discourse, which is a collective construct.

Gender discourse and propriety work together to describe 'appropriate' behaviour, mostly for women, and the locus of attention is often the body. Although the project is presented as an invitation to debate and strong emphasis is placed on the individual's freedom of choice, it seems that the ideology of 'looking good' becomes a new gospel. Also, the poster raises questions around perceptions of men and women's roles in society. Ultimately these are issues about power, who has power over whom.

In the following written reflection, the student spells out the link between culture, gender roles and power.

> Different cultures have different opinions about pants on women and married women especially in the African cultures are not allowed to wear pants. Because when they get married, they are under the husband's rule and they are in turn governed by the culture, they have to cover their bodies with long skirts or dresses ... These women are not free to wear what they want as it is an unwritten rule that they are forbidden to wear pants. A woman cannot be equal to a man in most African cultures, another unwritten rule.

Here the student clearly links the control over dress with forms of patriarchal control. On the one hand, the extract is presented as informing the reader of cultural practices. On the other, the "unwritten rules" of culture are exposed in order to question them.

To sum up, in the Pants on Women poster, students reflect on the relativity of meaning through their exploration of the appropriacy of women wearing pants in particular contexts. They provide a historical and cross-cultural perspective, and place emphasis on the fact that what people wear is culturally determined and not some universalized 'norm'. Also, they raise tensions and rifts within cultural practices as points of debate. 'Modern' views are presented as well as more 'traditional' views; different cultural, religious and gendered perspectives are offered. These dimensions are intertwined where tradition and certain reified conceptions of culture feed off each other, including the positioning of gender within particular cultural perspectives.

**Transformed and transforming practice: reframing students' resources**

Elsewhere I have argued for the importance of creating less regulated curriculum spaces in Higher Education in order to harness students' resources (Archer 2007). A 'cultural studies' project, such as the Symbolic Object project, can create a less regulated curriculum space, enabling students to draw on and experiment with a range

of genres and modes. The students could choose their own objects for investigation and talk about why certain objects were meaningful to them. The Symbolic Object project thus opened up an opportunity for exchange of cultural and personal knowledge, and created opportunities for students who may have been marginalized in the classroom to find a legitimate voice. In this less regulated space, students could also experiment with multimodal representation and draw on a range of discourses, such as religious discourse and propriety.

However, this type of project tends to unleash a lot in the classroom, such as strong moralistic discourses, anger about change, nostalgia for previous circumstances, humiliation about poverty. The crucial pedagogical challenge is to harness what has been unleashed. Kress and Van Leeuwen (2001) argue that moral discourses, for many in the West, are no longer systematically and overtly shown, they have gone underground. However, the students in this study explicitly evoked strong moralistic discourses when they were given free range to do what they wanted. Yet, as the course progresses and the students have to produce more regulated genres, such as written reports and academic posters, there seemed to be a tempering or a demise of the overly moralistic aspect of propriety.

In the Communication Course, I have explored ways of harnessing a discourse like propriety. Because propriety functions by specifying appropriate behaviour in relation to others, it can be aligned with certain notions of development where the community and the common good are emphasized over individual gain. This is the idea of sustainable development with an eye on subsequent generations. The strong notion of propriety evidenced in the Pants on Women poster, seems to take another more

productive form in this group's textual productions on rural development. For instance, they recommend communal planting schemes to sustain the current villagers as well as the generations to come. A discussion around the different manifestations of propriety and appropriacy could be usefully harnessed in understanding the issues around tradition, change, sustainability and development. In the Communication Course we extend the conversation about 'appropriacy' to speak about appropriate technologies for particular social, economic and political contexts in South Africa. Technology is not seen as 'good' or 'bad', rather it is the use of technology in a specific context that can have particular effects (Kranzberg 1997). We do not think of appropriacy of technology only in functional terms and emphasize that technological objects are often used for purposes other than their designed functional use.

Another way of harnessing a discourse like propriety could be to consider it as a springboard for reflecting on meaning-making and theorizing the teaching of academic literacy practices. Propriety is about being able to read a particular context and make decisions deemed appropriate to that context. In this sense, it is a crucial resource in decisions about meaning-making. In highly valued practices, such as the regulated genres of academic practices, the emphasis on 'fit' or appropriacy to the perceived context becomes paramount. This is a point worth raising in a course designed to teach academic literacy practices. The concept of appropriacy as 'fit' slots into a socialization model of academic literacy (Lea and Street 1998), where becoming 'academically literate' is seen as learning to read the academic culture with its distinctive practices, values, styles of language. However, theorists such as Fairclough (1995) criticize the notion of appropriacy and advocate a critical perspective which questions assimilationist views and advocates pedagogical

practices that enable students to challenge the 'ways of knowing' and ways of presenting knowledge. Kress (2000), in turn, argues that this notion of critique implies a static sense of underlying power relations and a stable set of social contexts. Instead, he advocates the notion of 'design': "the intentional deployment of resources in specific configurations to implement the purposes of the designers" (Kress, Ogborn, Jewitt and Tsatsarelis 2001: 340). 'Design' implies agency since the starting point for semiotic activity is the interest and intent of the sign-maker. This view of the sign-maker as agentive places students very differently than does a theory of learning based on acculturation or 'fit'. The emphasis focuses on students' interests and motivations for the uses of particular forms, rather than on incompetence and error. Rather than conforming to a narrow sense of appropriate behaviour, a dialogue needs to be set up between what students bring with them on entering the tertiary environment, and the norms and conventions of the institution.

By advocating a curriculum that sets up a dialogue with students' resources in order to 'harnesses' them, I do not mean simply using these resources, but encouraging students to critically interrogate them (Archer 2006). For instance, one could identify the underlying classification structure in texts (such as binaries) and look at how these function ideologically. The binaries in the Pants on Women poster structure the tension between 'change' and 'stasis': the individual as agent embodying change, or the collective as a 'conserving' force which perpetuates traditions and regulates individual freedoms through notions of propriety. The questions of convention and change that the Symbolic Object projects raise are important to explore in a course about rural development in a country like South Africa. 'Change' need not necessarily mean 'loss', but needs to be conceived of as additive. Cultural norms and values need

to be known and respected, but at the same time, we need to begin to look at these critically. So, rather than look at a topic like Pants on Women with a consumerist lens, including notions of 'fashion' and global culture, it is important to look with a critical lens that tries to understand patriarchal and societal structures. This implies reading in a different way.

## Conclusion

Although my context was an 'academic literacy' course for engineering students, I would like to propose that a project like the Symbolic Object project could be adapted to the needs of a specific course and discipline in other contexts that engage with identity, relativity of meaning, or material culture. Discussing everyday objects can be a catalyst for enabling student narratives and understandings to emerge and a way of exploring tensions between convention and change in cultural practices. This 'cultural studies' perspective is important in a globalizing world where change and diversity are the norm.

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## Biography

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