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A longitudinal study of students' negotiation of language, literacy and identity

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Abstract: The article is based on a longitudinal, qualitative case study of 20 Social Science students at a historically 'white', English-medium, South African university. The participants in the study are all from disadvantaged educational backgrounds and/ or are speakers of English as a second language. Post-structuralist theory is used to analyse students' shifts in language and literacy attitudes and practices and in constructions of self over the course of their undergraduate years. The paper describes students' ambivalence as they attempted to constitute appropriate subjectivity and become academically successful within the discourses of the academy, whilst retaining connections to home discourses. The participants used their linguistic resources and social science discourses to process, rationalise and neutralise their ambivalence. The paper describes how they started off trying to maintain a notion of single identity, but over time became adept, self-conscious and less conflicted about shifting identities across contexts.

Introduction

This article is based on a longitudinal, qualitative case study (2002 to 2004) of 20 Social Science students at a historically 'white',¹ English-medium, South African university. The participants in our study are all from disadvantaged educational backgrounds and/ or are speakers of English as a second language.² They were (with the exception of one student) the first in their families, sometimes the first in their communities, to attend university. The project tracked their shifts in language and literacy attitudes and practices and in constructions of self over the course of their undergraduate years.

There is by now a considerable body of literature which analyses the linguistic challenges and writing development processes of first-year university students from second-language/ marginalised/ disadvantaged educational backgrounds (see for example Clark & Ivanič, 1997; Herrington & Curtis, 2000; Thesen & Van Pletzen, 2006; Granville & Dison, 2009; Stacey, 2009). These studies have shown that becoming proficient in academic literacy is intimately connected to identity. However, aside from Herrington and Curtis' (2000) path-breaking longitudinal study of student writing in the US context, such studies have tended to be confined to the first-year experience. Our study has attempted to situate students' language and literacy attitudes and practices in time and space. We trace the felt experience of negotiating the accepted ways of 'saying-doing-being-valuing-believing' (i.e. Discourses) of both the institution and home over time (Gee, 1990: 142). Our data reveal students' ambivalence as they found themselves straddling multiple, often conflicting discourses between home and the institution. In this article, we attempt to highlight key moments in students' journeys in order to illustrate how this process unfolds. Although our participants' trajectories through the institution are by no means uniform, there were discernable patterns in their language and literacy attitudes and practices that are intimately linked to their changing notions of self over the course of their undergraduate years.³

Theoretical framework

Our study draws on post-structuralist theories which view language and literacy attitudes and practices in multilingual contexts as being embedded in larger social, political, economic and

historical discourses (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004). The basic premise of post-structuralist thinking on the subject is that discourses and discursive practices provide subject positions, and that individuals take up a variety of positions within different discourses (Norton, 1995; Canagarajah, 1999; Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004). As Gee (1990) argues, primary (home) Discourses provide subject positions which always seem natural and neutral until one's concept of who one is, is challenged by movement away from home and encounters with secondary discourses which offer new subject positions.

In this conception, identity is fluid and multiple. Individuals have agency and constantly reposition themselves in relation to past and present interaction and resultant individual emotions: 'the desire for recognition, the desire for affiliation, and the desire for security and safety' (Norton, 1997: 410). However, as many post-structuralist theorists have shown, 'individual access to subjectivity is governed by historically specific social factors and the forms of power at work in a particular society' (Weedon, 1992: 95). The degree to which individuals are able to reconstruct who they are is regulated by the extent to which they are able to access the material, linguistic, social and cultural resources that are valued within dominant discourses. Such reconstruction tends to take place fairly invisibly as individuals reinterpret their biographies to seem logical, stable and singular (Herrington & Curtis, 2000).

To become accepted members of dominant discourses, such as academic disciplines, individuals are required to act, think, speak and write within the discipline's ideological frameworks (Kress, 1989; Gee, 1990). In Gee's terms (1990: xviii), '[t]here is no such thing as 'reading' or 'writing', only reading or writing something (a text of a certain type) in a certain way with certain values, while at least appearing to think and feel in certain ways'. This poses particular difficulties for first generation students and/ or those who are not fully proficient in English, and who come from print-impooverished home backgrounds and schools which have not facilitated close, critical engagement with texts (Kapp, 2004; Slonimsky & Shalem, 2004; Christie, 2008). It is assumed that students should be assimilated into the culture of the institution, and, in general, higher education institutions tend to construct students' home identities and languages as a problem that has to be fixed through the provision of academic development courses (Rose, 1990). What is hidden from the institution is that because improving language and academic writing skills becomes inextricably tied to becoming proficient in the dominant discourse, students often have to deal with challenging tensions around identity.

In 2002, when our participants first arrived, 39% of the university's undergraduate student population consisted of 'black' South Africans, and 82% of academic staff were 'white'. Although the university has a good financial aid and academic development system and there are many initiatives underway to change the institution's profile and culture, the rate of change is slow and the notion of accepting students under special admissions for academic development programmes remains contested. Besides bridging the conventional gaps faced by students from marginalised backgrounds in terms of race, linguistic, social class and cultural issues, the students have also had to engage within an institution which had actively encouraged them to enrol, but was nevertheless, ambivalent in its attitude to their presence.

In this paper we show how students used their linguistic resources and social science discourses to process, rationalise and neutralise their own ambivalence. We illustrate how they start off trying to maintain a notion of single identity, but over time adopted a notion of 'situational identity', foregrounding 'different identities at different times' (Renn, 2004: 220). They became adept, self-conscious and less conflicted about shifting identity in order to fit into particular contexts.⁴

Research methodology

Our 20 research participants were all registered for an academic literacy course designed for students considered academically 'at risk' on the basis of their performance on an entrance test and their school-leaving results. They were taught by the authors of this paper in two separate classes in their first semester in 2002. They volunteered to participate in March of that year and all remained active participants from 2002 to the end of 2004.

Thomson (2009: 16) argues that the qualitative longitudinal study is a method particularly suited to capturing the 'subject in process'. She describes interviews as 'snapshots of particular times

and places', and argues that whereas single interviews of participants tend to freeze participants' images in particular times and places, multiple interviews enable snapshots 'to be articulated, providing a timescape' that enables one to see how individuals reflect and position themselves (Thomson, 2009: 150).

We held at least four individual interviews with each student, as well as two focus group sessions and two informal gatherings. Our interviews were semi-structured, in order to facilitate comparison within each student's corpus over time, as well as comparison across the group. The questions covered the areas of students' literacy and language development, their attitudes to language and academic literacy, their relationships to their chosen disciplines, their experiences of institutional culture and their relationships to home. However, we also asked individual questions based on prior interviews and on our analyses of students' essays.

In their first-year, our interviews were relatively short, probably influenced by our position as their lecturers. Over time, the interviews became longer as participants spoke more, often reflecting on past interviews. A number of interviewees commented that they valued the opportunity to discuss their experiences and participants discussed issues raised within the interviews informally among themselves.

In addition to the interview data, we collected biographical questionnaires, three essays written for our course and essays from students' other courses (collected each semester and chosen by the students). We kept journals which document our classroom observations and informal interactions and conversations with students and between ourselves. Towards the end of their undergraduate studies, we asked our participants to write reflection papers on their undergraduate writing. We made our portfolios of their undergraduate writing available to them and participants were asked to draw on this corpus to analyse the changes in their writing and ideas over three years. We asked about their relationship to their disciplines. We also asked about their writing strategies and tried to access their notions of good writing. We compared these sources of information with what students said in their interviews at different stages.

Tracing patterns, exceptions, silences and contradictions has been essential to our data analysis. We have used the different sets of data to try to distinguish 'between how people think they ought to behave, how they say they behave, and how they are observed to behave' (Le Page & Tabouret-Keller, 1985: 207). In this way we have been able to trace their shifts in language and literacy practices in relation to how they position and reposition themselves in relation to institutional discourses and home over the course of their undergraduate years.

We used Clark and Ivanič's (1997) theory on writer identity to trace students' shifting representation of self – the conflict between what Clark and Ivanič (1997: 134) refer to as 'their former selves and their becoming-selves'. They identify three (often overlapping) aspects of writer identity, which they describe as the 'discoursal' self, the 'authorial' self and the 'autobiographical' self (Clark & Ivanič, 1997: 136–152). The 'discoursal' self refers to a writer's awareness of the discipline for which they are writing. The 'authorial' self refers to the writer's authority, the extent to which writers take ownership of their writing and the 'autobiographical' self refers to the extent to which writers draw on their personal histories.

Negotiating new discourses

From the moment of entry into the institution, students felt themselves marked as 'different'. For example, Andrew, a 'coloured', Afrikaans-speaker was verbally abused on his first day on the campus when he asked a 'white' man the time. This left him wary of speaking to 'white' people. Students were also silenced by the level and speed of the English spoken in class, and by early experiences of being judged as 'second-language' speakers and consequently stigmatised. For example, two students spoke of being accused of not doing their own work because they had produced fluent essays.

Our data also reflect students' shock at the dominance of the English language in the university's social environment – in the words of Noluthando, a Setswana-speaker, 'It's white and you don't get to speak your language very easily here'. Woolard (as cited in Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2002: 121–2) argues that 'ideologies of language are rarely about language alone, but are socially

situated and tied to questions of identity and power in societies'. It was evident that at this stage, English, power and material resources were conflated with 'whiteness' in students' minds. As a consequence of the apartheid policy of separate development, the majority of our participants grew up and went to school in urban, working-class townships and rural areas that have homogenous ethnic and language identities. They would have had little contact with 'white' people, and then only in situations where 'whites' were in control of the exchange both linguistically and materially. This is therefore an unsurprising reflection of an undifferentiated sense of otherness that characterised students' first encounters with an essentially foreign culture.⁵

For the participants from working-class township schools, the transition represented their first encounter with 'black' people from middle-class backgrounds. When they first arrived, the students were surprised to discover that some African language speakers were using English in the informal social environment. Vuyani, an isiXhosa-speaker, spoke of his fear of speaking English 'in a large crowd of whites and those blacks called "coconuts"'.⁶ Noluthando expressed anger about how 'white some black people are'. She narrated an incident where she and a friend were rebuked by an isiXhosa-speaker for laughing 'on top of our voices, saying, "Stop being so black"'. In their first interviews, students spoke of how they felt intimidated when using English among African language speakers from English medium schools. For these students, 'black' students from relatively elite English medium schools also came to be associated with 'whiteness' (see De Kadt, 2005 for a similar observation).

The data cited above illustrate the emotionally-charged nature of students' early experiences in the institution. Norton (2000: 5) argues that it is through language that 'a person negotiates a sense of self within and across different sites at different points in time, and it is through language that a person gains access to – or is denied access to powerful social networks ...'. Wenger (1998: 149) describes identity formation as 'negotiated experience': 'we define who we are by the ways we experience ourselves through participation as well as by the ways we and others reify our selves'.

Unsurprisingly, the students reacted defensively to these hostile verbal encounters which often had the effect of silencing them in class. Both in their early interviews and their first essay on 'Language and Identity,' they expressed a strong need to retain organic connections to home and home identities. Identity was generally articulated in terms of a singular, consistent ethnicity/ race threatened by possible contamination and loss/ 'forgetting' in the 'white' environment of the university. Language and ethnicity were often conflated. The students' mission was articulated as an instrumental need to succeed at university in order to return to contribute to the development of their communities.

Alongside their expressions of alienation from the institution (which often included fellow 'black' students), our participants expressed a strong investment in the university as an 'excellent' institution, in English as medium of instruction and in the discourses of the institution. They also expressed investment in the 'new' South Africa and the dominant discourses embracing diversity and uniting as a rainbow nation.⁷ For example, Sisanda, a working class student who had attended a middle-class, English-medium school, wrote of her strong Zulu identity in an early essay on 'Language and Identity': '[the isiZulu language] tells the other person who I really am, no matter where I am or what I do I still remain umZulu as I want to be recognised as that only and nothing else ...'.

However, in an interview with Bongzi a few weeks later,⁸ she spoke of how she had been influenced by a classroom discussion of Thornton's (1988) notion of a common culture which enabled her to see culture from a broader perspective than tradition and ethnicity. She intended to take this new perspective back to her community. She spoke of her perception of the environment as being 'kind of a free environment, people are more friendly; it is flexible, moving and active'. She said that she felt that she fitted in: 'they like share the same values as I do, to learn, most of the time'. Nevertheless, these assertions did not seem to ameliorate her continued subsequent assertion of Zulu-ness or her feelings of alienation from faculty and peers from social class and ethnic backgrounds other than her own.

The subjectivities apparent in students' early essays and interviews are evidence of their struggles to find a place to be as they negotiated their transition. Whilst this may appear to be an individual battle, we believe that their consciousness mirrors a 'new' South African political ideology

that is drawn from models of multiculturalism within global capitalism. The notion suggests that apartheid's policy of ethnic division and related linguistic and geographic separateness and difference should be overcome in the interests of nation-building and connecting to global markets, but also that separate cultures should be preserved and accepted under the banner of one rainbow nation (see Thornton's 1988 critique of multiculturalism).

At the university, our participants experienced daily reminders of their own disadvantage in terms of financial and linguistic indicators. Both their academic and social environments were foreign and students started to describe the limitations of their own backgrounds in terms of access to resources and the concomitant 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 1991: 230) offered by the institution. Nevertheless, as is evident in the quotations above, they saw the institutional environment as a microcosm of the transition of the broader society and retained the belief, reflected also in surveys among black working class South Africans (see Seekings & Natrass, 2005), that they and the institution were engaged in a process of transformation.

Another feature of the quotations above is the students' nascent critique of their own upbringing and prior notions of culture as fixed and static. For many students, the notion that social and cultural boundaries are constructed and can be transgressed was liberating. Both in class and in his first interview, Garth, a 'coloured' student revealed that he had been taught to despise 'black' [African] people by his 'white' grandmother who had raised him in his rural village: 'I remember that my grandmother used to say blacks stink, they never wash and you are not supposed to eat [food that comes] out of their hands'. In an early essay, Garth wrote:

Coming to [the university] represented a lot of things that I was socialised against ... I am proud to say that unlike Ramphele (1995) who 'stretches across the boundaries', I can freely cross the boundaries of another culture and find commonness within that culture with which I can communicate ... Culture does indeed change, because it is not organic but social, which means it can be unlearned and redefined.

The students' struggles with identity are visible in their early writing, albeit in emphatic or conversational tones. However, their 'autobiographical' and 'authorial' selves very quickly receded in response to negative feedback in their early essays about what is considered appropriate in the discourse in terms of values and academic register. Fear of failure loomed large. They decided that in order to pass, they needed to set aside their primary discourses in favour of uncritical mimicking of the discourse. In Sizwe's words, 'I simply reproduced what the tutors taught me about the subject, my writing was largely shaped by tutor's ideas, mine were scarce'.

Our participants learned that the social science debate is circumscribed; that they had to argue within the confines of a limited range of subject positions and that their arguments had to be modulated. For example, Belinda learned that the 'feminist tone' she had developed in Gender Studies, was considered inappropriate by a lecturer in the Department of Classics. Students also learned that personal experience is valued in some disciplines and not in others. For example, Andrew's first reflective essay for Social Work was highly confessional, as he attempted to use the theory to analyse deeply traumatic episodes in his own life. His feedback suggested that he should learn to use a 'broader vocabulary' to express emotions and that he should consider exploring some of the issues raised in a therapeutic relationship. By the time he wrote his Psychology essay, he used the first person just once (as a structuring device) and wrote of 'misconceptions in the community out there'.

The students became less invested in including their autobiographical selves in their writing. They started to separate out their notions of who they are and what they value from academic discourse. They were writing to achieve personal mobility and/ or to contribute to their communities. This is reflected in Babalwa's impatience with the academy: '... you keep on debating [in Philosophy] because there's no answer ... They [academics] say they don't look at the outcome, but in a way you are because you are using education as a means to go'.

Students' uncritical, and in some cases, instrumental attitudes to their academic writing contrasted starkly with their excitement (described in interviews) about the lively, critical debates with 'black', mainly working class, peers outside of the classroom environment.

Negotiating home

As a number of theorists have shown (Read et al., 2003; De Kadt, 2005; Walker, 2005), the process of acquiring increasing access to, and fluency in a range of institutional discourses of the academy also entails loss of connection to home. Evidence of students' growing alienation from home was present from their second interviews in the second semester of their first year. In some cases, students' increasing distance from home was the result of their growing critique of home discourses, their increasing use of English and shifts in their tastes. For example, Vuyani, who in his first interview described African language speakers from former 'white' schools as 'coconuts', was shocked to find himself labelled in this way when he returned home for the vacation: 'Back home they now say I am a coconut, they have changed their attitude towards me'. This was because he had substituted Umhlobo Wenene (an African radio station) for Metro FM, 'and as you know it's English'. Many students spoke of how their everyday conversation and perspectives had been influenced by the discourse of the academy: Noluthando said: '[my friends] think I'm not on their level anymore and some of them think I'm snobbish because now I'm out of the circle, I can look at them and I can now analyse them...'

Students often cast their home culture in terms of boredom, stasis and confinement (because of violence) in contrast to the university environment which offered choice, freedom and a lively and safe social environment. For Sizwe, the university represented the future, where we talk about 'positive things', whereas in the township, many of his friends were unemployed and/ or had become gangsters and talk was confined to 'things that affect you negatively like girls and drink'.

However, the majority of students found that they were automatically labelled as elitist and/ or 'white'. Their efforts to re-connect within their communities were rejected.⁹ Andrew's description was typical: '... people stigmatise and label you ... they label you that you think you are better than them'. The university became a refuge from the township, but remained also a site of alienation. In Andrew's words 'when I'm here, I want to be there and when I'm there, I want to be here ...'. Walker (2005: 18) draws on Braidotti's (1994) concept of 'nomadic identities' to describe the process of being 'both trapped and moving off (escaping), of being in a transitional space between the old and the new [her emphasis]'. In Bhabha's terms, our students had become 'unhomed'. The term does not imply homelessness, but signifies the ambivalent space they occupied as they straddled multiple (and often conflicting) discourses. Both the concept of being 'unhomed', and the concept of 'nomadic identities' capture the sense of occupying an ambivalent space, of 'being in two places at once' (Bhabha, 1994: 44). As in Walker's case, our data are replete with metaphors of travelling as students try (and fail) to reconcile conflicting pulls on their sense of self into a single place.

Straddling multiple discourses

Despite all evidence to the contrary, when we asked students (towards the end of their first year) whether they believed they had changed, the stock response was to assert that they had not changed, but they had 'grown'. Newkirk (as cited in Herrington & Curtis, 2000: 359) writes that students entering university:

... have a psychological need to view their lives as progressive narratives ... The literature of self-direction suggests that this future is claimable if there is sufficient personal will. It protects against fatalism, helplessness, and determinism. It transforms that which is disagreeable and painful into strategically placed obstacles that both teach and strengthen.

This discourse of achievement through personal effort and motivation is also evident in the public media in post-apartheid South Africa. Interestingly, American talk show hosts Oprah and Dr Phil were as strong a point of reference for our participants as Nelson Mandela. Students also seemed to derive a strong sense of direction from their membership of Christian organisations. Most belonged to an evangelical Christian organisation, 'His People', which has a 'cell' in most of the student residences. Membership extends beyond conventional racial and ethnic boundaries. The organisation's sermons deliver strong messages about agency, self-direction and upward mobility.¹⁰ The organisation seemed to provide a sense of community and belonging in the face of loneliness in their first year. For a student like Sisanda, religious affiliation was also in part a response to the death of seven people in her family during her first year and the fact that she was unable to attend

some of the funerals because of financial constraints. The organisation performed many of the traditional cultural rituals that would conventionally be provided within an extended family.

All of our participants passed their first year of study. From the students' second year onwards, there were noticeable differences in their confidence levels, their choices of lifestyle habits and codes of dress, as they attempted to fit into the environment.¹¹ Many had part-time jobs and were able to acquire social goods such as cell phones, computers and brand name clothing, and concomitant social habits which would have been inaccessible previously. S'busiso's comment is typical:

... when I came here first I didn't worry about getting the clothes, like maybe the Levis, jeans and maybe e-h-h, Soviet, now I wear Soviet. You know, but something like this, gents, like they never said change your outlook but they influence. Like these guys, my friends, they influence. It changed my thinking because but now I think about what guys go for.

In their senior years, the participants started using English more in their everyday social environments and became more confident and outspoken. Although they still mainly mixed with other 'black' students, this now included students from a range of ethnic and class backgrounds and there seemed to be a slow, but visible re-alignment as distinctions between 'whiteness' and 'Englishness' were made. By his second year, Vuyani said: 'I think it's crazy this year most of the time I am using English ... even with fellow Xhosa-speakers this year, ja [Afrikaans word for 'yes']'.

Although students used English more, they also deliberately code-mixed between English, Afrikaans and isiXhosa, interspersed with Kwaito-derived slang.¹² In Sizwe's words: 'People use it as some sort of in between language. People are using English but a certain style of English, they are sort of Africanising it'. Interestingly, Andrew described the code as 'Backstage' language. 'Backstage' is a South African soap opera which makes use of extensive code-switching and cultivates the notion that cross-cultural mixing is trendy and desirable, a notion that has become commonplace in the media post-1990. Nuttall (2004) has similarly described emerging hybrid cultures among black South Africans as they signal township and city identities. It seemed that this shared code allowed students to feel comfortable using English because they were simultaneously signalling their Africanness. It also enabled them to feel comfortable connecting across both conventional ethnic/ language barriers and perceived class differences.

Negotiating new spaces

Over time, the discourse of the academy came to seem natural and commonplace to the students (Althusser, 1971). In their senior years, their reflection papers and interviews revealed an intellectual 'investment' (Thomson, 2009: 60) in their academic disciplines which was certainly not evident earlier. In an unsolicited preamble to his reflection paper in his final year, Andrew wrote:

... I am in an academic discourse where it is required of one to act/ or to be the discipline, this is what I have come to realise over these past years. It is one thing to be in the discipline and another 'to be' the discipline. And each day I find more and more evidence within myself that I am at that point where I moved from being in my discipline, to where I am my discipline. This is evident in my speech, thought, and ways I approach certain things, whether in academic or formal setting.

Andrew's analysis, as well as the language in which it is expressed, reflected a growing awareness that he was not only learning the skills and content of the discipline, but was also entering into new subjectivities (see Johns, 1997; Herrington & Curtis, 2000).

Nevertheless, students' paths were by no means straightforward and linear. In her first year, Babalwa had expressed impatience with critical debate and the academy 'because there's no answer'. In her second year, the desire for clear answers and truth was still evident. This is made explicit in a review of a book (for Political Studies) about Idi Amin. Babalwa demonstrated critical awareness by drawing attention to the fact that the writer's account was based on anonymous personal experiences. She explained that the sources were anonymous because the people feared for the lives of their families in Uganda. However, she concluded that the information provided was 'reliable' and 'true' purely because it was written during the time that Amin was in power. In the review itself she treats the material as 'factual' and shows no meta-awareness about the authorial narrative. In her final year reflection paper, she wrote:

I have grown to realise that what I have been taught about God, females and males, the world is not necessarily what it is and that what I believe in is not necessarily true or wrong – not everything is black and white... I have learnt that human beings are not passive; they question things, its roots and how things become universally accepted (the norm).

This statement suggests a significant shift. However, in their interviews in their final year, Babalwa and other female students spoke of learning to question gender identity through academic discourse, but also of how they had to resume passive, gendered roles when they went home. In a focus group interview in his second year, Andrew used the discourse of one of his first-year Social Science courses to speak of '... alternating [identity] back and forward all the time'. The students spoke openly to each other and to us about the situated nature of their identities as they switched within and between contexts as they negotiated competing ideologies.

Re-negotiating voice

By the end of their final year, this process of careful negotiation seemed to play out in students' writing identities. They had moved away from the reproduction that characterised their early writing, but there was very little sense of taking authorial ownership (Clark and Ivanič, 1997). An example is Babalwa's final-year Political Studies essay in response to the question 'What were the crucial socio-political events in Rwanda which subsequently enabled an environment or realm that led to Civil War in 1994?'. The essay was well-structured and researched. She contextualised the problem through careful detailing of historical factors and through exploration of theories of political violence which look at socio-psychological factors. Unlike the second-year essay cited above, she identified opposing viewpoints and contrasted the views of two different writers on whether or not the ethnic differences served as a catalyst for the war. However, there is heavy reliance on the content and authority of secondary sources and a tendency to limit engagement in critical analysis. She signalled her agreement with Mamdani's view (that the issue at stake was more related to the questions about what constitutes indigenisation) by quoting him extensively. However, she does not actually show how this questions the ethnicity argument nor why this is a more valid argument.

Another feature of the senior writing is the use of excessively careful modality. In a Social Anthropology essay entitled 'Redefining Culture? Or dispensing with the term?', David wrote:

... Ngugi's (1993) main argument is that language is the sole carrier of people's culture and history and that if their language is systematically suppressed, so too will their culture, history and values be suppressed. This would be the case if language as an explicit form of communication determined what people know and how they could learn these things. As Bloch points out though, it is taken as a given fact 'that culture is thought and transmitted as a text through language (only), or that culture is ultimately 'language like', consisting of linked linear propositions' (Bloch, 1991: 184).

David used careful modality: 'this would be the case if ...' rather than the bold assertions of his early writing. When certainty is expressed, it is articulated via authority ('As Bloch points out; it is taken as a given fact'). The passive voice embedded within the statement ('it is taken') expresses the writer's caution and deference. Unlike Babalwa, David's essays engaged beyond the level of content and analysed the 'chains of reasoning' and rhetorical moves made by the authors in quite sophisticated ways (Geisler, 1994: 92). However, David's own 'authorial' presence is carefully marshalled through the voices of others, through comparison of sources, using one source to critique another.

Most of the participants' senior essays engaged at the level of content. Although students' 'authorial' voices were discernible, they were effaced, often appearing only towards the end. This deference seemed to play a large part in holding them back from achieving upper-second and first-class passes. For the most part, the primary feedback on their writing came in the form of ratings on marking grids developed by departments. Our participants tended to score average or above-average marks on content categories (relevance to the essay question, grasp of core concepts, comprehensiveness), as well as in the areas of coherence and planning. However, lecturers often critiqued the descriptive nature of the essays and the lack of critical or analytical engagement with

theory. Students were judged 'weak' in areas related to creativity, originality, critique, personal insights.

In students' reflections, they accounted for their failures to achieve higher marks in terms of their struggles with English, but although 'lack of precision in language' was often noted, this seemed to be a fairly minor, and sometimes non-existent, category in most departments.

Students' deference to authority reflected an insecurity that was also visible in their tendency to consult tutors rather than lecturers and in their hesitation to participate in class. Andrew, who wrote in his reflection paper 'I am the discipline', did not become 'at home' in the classroom despite his intellectual commitment to the values of the discipline and increasing fluency in the discourses of the discipline. In his final year interview, Andrew spoke of his insecurity about participating in class. Drawing on the discourse of Psychology, he names it 'the fear of the child'.

Conclusion

Whilst it is not possible to generalise about the 'ESL/ black' student experience from a small sample such as ours, nevertheless, our data are significant in illustrating students' language and literacy transitions and the complexities of their struggles to work out who they are and where they belong in relation to the institution and home. Our data show that the changes in students' language and literacy attitudes and practices over their undergraduate years were intricately related to social roles and boundaries. The students were always responding to multiple, and often conflicting, expectations of what constitutes appropriate subjectivity (George, 1996).

By tracing students' experiences over time and focusing on both their experiences of the institution and home, we are able to illustrate that their relationships with, and levels of attachment to both the university and home are characterised by fluidity, ambivalence and change. They both resisted and absorbed the discourses of the academy. Their relationship to their disciplines shifts from the instrumental, but they are still cautious and deferential in taking ownership. In order to be recognised as successful in the academy, whilst retaining a connection to home discourses, they had to reposition themselves constantly. They are not at home in either place, but they become less conflicted about this situation over time, rationalising the shifts they have to engage in as a function of living in a transitional time and in a diverse context.

Significantly, all 20 of the participants in our project graduated with undergraduate degrees as compared to 62% of their (mainstream) cohort in Humanities. On the surface, these students are very successful in the eyes of the institution and of their families. However, the fact that they achieved lower second marks rather than upper-seconds or firsts, prevented them from being accepted into the Honours degrees of their choice.

In more recent years, universities have become quite good at facilitating access for students from disadvantaged backgrounds and providing the necessary academic structures and mentorship programmes to help them at a first-year level. However, there is still a lack of support at senior levels and a lack of transformation in mainstream curricula which points to a continuing underlying perception that students need to be provided with a quick-fix skills package so that universities may continue on the same path (Rose, 1990).

As is appropriate, the students' transition enabled them to question and critique firmly held beliefs. However, institutional transformation remains mainly at the level of symbolic gesture – facilitating access, re-naming buildings or using multiple languages in institutional communication. The academy itself has a long way to go in terms of finding ways to enrich the social science debate. By acknowledging students' 'autobiographical' voices and experiences, as well as engaging critically with the effects of its discourses (see Thesen, 1997 and Janks, 2010). Academia continues to perpetuate a form of colonisation in that excellence is measured by norms set outside the country, even though its context and resources render this a fiction. The social environments in which our participants grow up are of interest and are researched by academics within the institution, but their students are not seen as participants in this process. The message to them is that if they wish to succeed, they need to assimilate to the discourses of the academy. The concepts of equity and excellence are thus polarised, and the possibility of looking within the country to enrich the academy and the international debate is lost. Their voices are muted.

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Notes

- ¹ It is impossible to contextualise fully the imbrications of South African language and educational backgrounds without using the Apartheid-era racial classification ('African', 'coloured', 'Indian' and 'white'). However to signify our own beliefs that these categories are to some degree at least, artificially constructed, we will use quotation marks. In this paper we use the category 'black' inclusively to refer to 'African', 'coloured' and 'Indian' students.
- ² English is an additional language for 16 of the students and their home languages include isiXhosa, isiZulu, Sesotho, Setswana, siSwati and Afrikaans and Chinese. Four of the 'coloured' students identified English as the main medium of communication in their homes, but they spoke a mixture of English and Afrikaans as is common on the Cape Flats.
- ³ Elsewhere, we have focussed more on individual students' experiences (Bangeni & Kapp, 2005; Bangeni & Kapp, 2006; Bangeni & Kapp, 2007; Kapp & Bangeni, 2009).
- ⁴ We are grateful to Dr Sally Frankental and Prof. Mugsy Spiegel for pointing out this notion of situational identity in our data (see Spiegel, 2007).
- ⁵ The only exception to this was Yandisa, who had attended an exclusive private school and hardly spoke his home language in the everyday environment. In his first year, he found it easier to associate with 'white' students, though this changed later on.
- ⁶ This is originally an American term used to refer to a 'black' person who is perceived as acting 'white'.
- ⁷ The university's official discourse characterises the institution as 'excellent' and, drawing on Jesse Jackson, the notion of a 'rainbow' nation is a dominant description used by politicians to describe a putative unity in the 'new' South Africa.
- ⁸ Students' writing and interview statements often contradicted each other and the contradiction worked both ways (indicating that this was not a function of the mode of data collection and their sense of audience).
- ⁹ In the case of five of our participants whose families were starting to straddle class positions, this hostility was not evident.
- ¹⁰ When we realised that most of our participants were members of this organisation, one of us attended a few sermons.
- ¹¹ One of the participants, Sisanda, stands out as an exception in our data because she maintains her strong allegiance to 'Zulu' culture and language and resists consumerism on an intellectual level and in practice. For a detailed analysis, see Bangeni and Kapp (2005).
- ¹² Kwaito is a local music form which Nuttall (2004: 433) describes as 'a potent blend of city and township sound that emerged after the democratic transition in 1994, mixing up the protest dancing and chanting known as toyi-toyi with slow-motion house, local pop ('bubblegum') and a dash of hip-hop'.

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