Avoiding deficit conceptualisations of students and their learning: methodological considerations

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Abstract

The current climate of change confronting the higher education sector offers researchers unique opportunities to reflect on and review their research approaches and methodologies. Particularly in the South African context, where inequalities and racially defined disparities linked to student success continue to constrain other transformative gains, there is renewed urgency to reconsider how research agendas can show sensitivity towards avoiding deficit conceptualisations of students and their learning. This paper illustrates the research design and methodology of a recent ethnographic research study, which brought together an academic literacies perspective with Bernstein's curriculum theory of knowledge recontextualisation. The distinct dual focus of the design and analysis framework, attending to both the student and the curriculum context, allows for exploring the student experience of assignment production without neglecting the influence of the curriculum on this activity. The existence of an interrelationship between students' assignment production practices and curriculum decision making is shown, drawing on empirical data from the recent study. The ethnographic framing of the research methodology, with its emphasis on providing rich and detailed accounts, was further able to illustrate students' agency as they worked with the assignment requirements. This paper demonstrates that when the research approach attends to the students and their learning, in ways that validate and affirm their perspectives, but also brings the curriculum into view, a credible way of explicitly avoiding deficit conceptualisations of students is possible.

Introduction

The 2013 conference theme, *'Higher Education in a shifting landscape: emergence, fragmentation and convergence'* foregrounds the notion of a higher education (HE) environment confronting change. This theme suggests that traditional practices and approaches within the HE sector are coming under pressure to adapt more responsively to an increasingly diverse and changing socio-economic and political environment. In response, this paper suggests that this shifting landscape presents a unique opportunity for HE researchers to reflect on and review what we do, how we do it and the research methodologies we choose to use when interrogating our practices. A key consideration is the degree to which our research activities, especially when they are focused on students and their learning, display sensitivity towards avoiding deficit conceptualisations of the student. The research design discussed in this paper is offered as a contribution towards exploring new methodological lenses more appropriate to the shifting HE landscape. In this paper, I describe the research design and analysis framework of a recent ethnographic study that explored assignment production in two visual communication and media courses at a local university of technology. The theoretical framework and methodological approach of this study had a distinct dual focus; it paid attention to the students and their experiences of assignment production, while at the same time exploring curriculum decision making. This dual focus is positioned as a valuable way of ensuring that research about students and their learning can avoid deficit framings, by taking cognisance of the influence of the broader learning environment and especially the curriculum, in determining what counts as successful learning. The study's findings illustrate the complexity of the vocational HE environment and show how the curriculum incorporates professional content and knowledge, signalling this primarily through the assignment practices students are required to utilise. Also illustrated are the approaches students adopt when completing their assignments, which highlight the flexible, multiple and agentive ways in which they engage with the requirements of these tasks.

The methodological approach described in this paper finds points of connection between an academic literacies framework (Blommaert, Street & Turner, 2007; Lillis & Scott, 2007; Lea, 2008) and Basil Bernstein's (1975, 1996, 2000) curriculum theory more generally, and the concept of knowledge recontextualisation in particular. The empirical research of Moss (2000; 2002) and Coleman (2012; 2013) demonstrates that meaningful analytical insight into the influence of the broader curriculum context on students' experiences of their course environments can be gained when these two frameworks are brought together.

The key argument made in this paper is that research can be designed to pay attention to the student while simultaneously acknowledging the broader curriculum context and its influence on student learning. Thus, greater emphasis is placed on how the

curriculum and broader institutional structures influence student learning and success. The study described here focused attention on providing rich, descriptive accounts of students' experiences of their assignment production that were free of evaluative judgement. At the same time, the focus on the curriculum decision making allowed for data collection that provided insight into how the curriculum was influenced by professional and institutional directives and values. When methodological approaches are framed to accommodate both these equally important objects of enquiry, in a manner that validates the student perspective, a credible challenge to deficit thinking can become incorporated into the research agenda.

The paper starts by discussing the notion of deficit discourses and how it has become expressed in the South African context. The particular contours of the South African HE landscape are then described, highlighting the specific necessities that are driving calls for renewal and critical self-reflection. This description helps provide reasons why our research agendas should show more sensitivity towards avoiding deficit conceptualisations of the student. The research design and analysis framework are then discussed. Drawing on data collected in two courses, Film and Graphic Design, specific examples from Film course are used to illustrate how the overarching methodological approach of the study accommodated a dual focus on the student and the broader curriculum and institutional context.

Deficit discourses and understanding 'disadvantage' in the South African context

Haggis (2006) has highlighted and critiqued the dominance of psychological conceptualisations of learning in HE, claiming that such conceptualisations place the burden of responsibility on the student for their success and adaptation to HE. When students experience problems with learning and adapting to HE, it is often assumed to be a result of their (lack of) cognitive or intellectual abilities or inadequate preparation for university. Students are therefore perceived as not having the necessary and prerequisite cognitive, social and cultural abilities needed to fit in and do well in the HE learning environment. When students are viewed in this manner, such conceptualisations are imbued with a deficit framing. As a result the spotlight is effectively turned away from the values, assumptions and practices of HE and how these might be creating barriers to learning and success for the student (Haggis, 2003). In the SA context, deficit thinking is epitomised by the use of the label 'disadvantaged'. While masquerading as a term which indexes structural accounts of inequality, 'disadvantage' has disturbingly become a means whereby the socio-economic position of the majority of black students has become 'refracted' or recontextualised as low academic ability' (Smit, 2012: 372). A concerning consequence of the widespread use of the 'disadvantage' label is the "strengthening

of stereotypes" (Smit, 2012: 372), which reinforce and perpetuate inequalities (Pym & Kapp, 2013). My research design offers a model that turns the spotlight onto the student without neglecting the structuring and influencing role of the curriculum and broader learning environment. Furthermore, when attention is placed on the student using ethnographic methodologies, rich and detailed accounts that validate the students' experiences of their learning activities and environment are created.

The South African context: imperatives for adopting a different approach

After two decades of democracy and various attempts to systematically confront the legacy of the past, South African HE scholars and practitioners have had to acknowledge that persistent problems constrain the quality of the learning and therefore limit the success experienced by students in most of its institutions (Badat, 2009; Boughey, 2004; Chisholm, 2004; Jansen, 2004; Shay, 2012). These acknowledgements have resulted in calls for bold, creative yet systematic solutions that interrogate the 'what' and 'how' of the sector's core functions and practices (Boughey, 2007; Council for Higher Education (CHE), 2013; Fisher & Scott, 2011; Scott, Yeld & Hendry, 2009). Of particular concern in the South African context are the racially skewed participation rates (Case, 2013; CHE, 2013; Leibowitz, 2012). Despite the increased numbers of black[i] students currently participating in the HE system in South Africa, continued racial disparities in the completion rates for most undergraduate programmes remain (CHE, 2013; Scott et al., 2009; Fisher & Scott, 2011). According to Fisher & Scott (2011: 10), this trend has effectively neutralised "the growth in African access and severely constrained overall graduation rates".

Boughey's (2007) research into the educational development movement in South Africa has shown that HE institutions have actively attempted to confront the problems created by inferior schooling for black students during apartheid. Academic Support Programmes were a key focus of these initiatives, which provided additional tutorials and remedial courses in language and study skills to mostly black students who were "deemed to lack the language proficiency and conceptual background or 'skills' necessary to engage with higher education" (Boughey, 2007: 6). Increasingly, institutional initiatives modelled on such programmes have become the subject of critique (see for example Boughey, 2007; Shay, 2008). Marshall and Case argue that these remedial interventions have contributed to the creation and pervasive use of 'an essentialised 'deficit' model' of the student (2010: 492). In a bid to avoid turning the spotlight primarily onto students and their deficiencies, which in turn contributes to deficit conceptualisations, calls have been made to refocus the attention onto the 'universities themselves' (Haggis, 2009: 377). These calls suggest that the underlying structures, socio-cultural values and principles and knowledge practices of universities

also play a significant role in whether or not students succeed. Adding her voice to this debate, Case (2013) argues that teaching and learning research has seldom given attention to the broader context of such activities.

Other SA scholars have also been vocal in their assertion that the barriers to improving student success are primarily systemic and institutional, rather than being located in the student (CHE, 2013; Boughey, 2007; Fisher and Scott, 2011; Scott et al., 2009). These commentators point to systematic curriculum reform as the only viable way in which the particular contextual problems can be reasonably addressed, especially with the glaring racial distortions in graduation rates experienced within the South African system (CHE, 2013; Leibowitz, 2012). The arguments presented here suggest that there is value in designing research that actively seeks to avoid deficit conceptualisation of the student. It demonstrates the importance of putting institutional structures and systems under the research microscope while also showing sensitivity towards students and their learning.

A research design that challenges deficit frameworks

Boughey (2007) and Shay (2008) contend that particular concerns and limitations have become visible in research that focuses only on students and their inadequacies or that only recommend remediation options. Cognisant of these concerns, my research also sought to bring the broader learning, curriculum and institutional environment into view, by focusing on the student and exploring the curriculum context. This dual focus resulted in an overarching methodological approach that showed sensitivity towards avoiding deficit conceptualisations of the student. The discussion that follows explains how the research design, and in particular the analysis framework, attended to both the student and the broader curriculum context, using data from the study as illustration.

Brief overview of the research study

The ethnographic study was conducted at a South African vocational HE institution, exploring how students produced assignments in two visual communication and media courses, namely Film and Graphic Design. The research was conducted over a six month period and this allowed me to spend one academic term, on a full time basis, in each of the two courses that were part of the study. The ethnographic approach guiding academic literacies research (Lillis & Scott, 2007) provided a strong grounding for the data collection strategies employed in the study. The study aimed at gaining insight into the kinds of assignments students were required to produce, how they were produced and the underpinning social and cultural values and principles that

determined which assignment production practices were seen as valid in the different course environments. Data collection was therefore guided primarily by participant observation of the daily activities of teachers and students. A range of interactional, documentary and textual artefacts in visual, audio-visual, written and digital formats were also collected and generated. These resulted in rich and highly detailed accounts of the assignment production practices that Film and Graphic Design students were required to engage in. These ethnographic accounts were also able to situate assignment production within the broader learning environment, providing details of how curriculum content and structure were directly implicated in these assignment practices. In order to explore curriculum decision making, specific interviews were undertaken with staff and lecturers directly involved in curriculum development and design in both courses.

The analysis framework (Figure 1, below) incorporated two analytical lenses, drawing from the academic literacies and Bernstein's theoretical frameworks. These lenses, one of literacy practice (Barton, 1994) and the other of knowledge recontextualisation (Bernstein, 1996, 2000), were focused on the assignment production processes of the Film and Graphic Design courses. The analysis framework looked in two directions: towards the literacy practices associated with assignment production and towards the knowledge recontextualisation processes implicated in curriculum decision making.

The concept of literacy practice describes the social ways in which reading and writing are used in different contexts. When used analytically, literacy practice is able to indicate accepted ways of doing 'things', how appropriate and inappropriate activities are regulated and how situation and contexts determine different types and approaches to reading and writing (Barton, 1994). Within the HE context, Lea (1999) asserts that literacy practices are at the heart of studying and learning, and how students learn new subjects and develop their knowledge about new areas of study.

The concept of knowledge recontextualisation describes the process through which knowledge and practices that typically reside outside the educational context, in the disciplines or in professional environments, become transformed, adapted and re-appropriated to constitute subjects and the curriculum (Bernstein, 2000; Shay, 2011; Wheelahan, 2010). By analysing recontextualisation rules, the provenance of knowledge can be identified. However, the particular ways in which this knowledge is reconfigured and transformed into course content and assignment topics and tasks are also significant. Using the concept of recontextualisation, this approach provides insight into how the professional contexts and their privileged values and knowledge become implicated in curriculum decision making. Simultaneously, the analysis framework also indicates how values relevant in industry are reflected in the literacy practices associated with students' assignment production processes and the kind of assignment texts given status in the courses.

Figure 1: Representation of the analysis framework
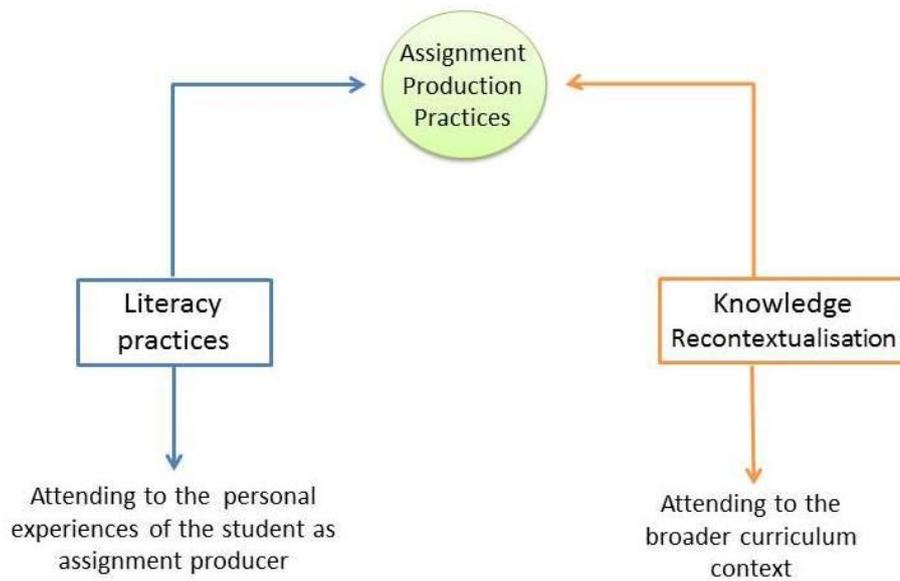
Attending to the student and the broader curriculum context

Including the academic literacies perspective as part of the research design ensures that the students and their experiences of producing assignments are a central feature of the research methodology, as illustrated in Figure 1. The ethnographic framing favoured by academic literacies research (Lillis & Scott, 2007) reinforces this principle of devoting empirical attention to the students and their perspectives of the assessment requirements. Lea (2004; 2013), a leading academic literacies scholar, asserts that the ethnographic methodology also ensures that the voices of students producing assignment texts are foregrounded in a manner that avoids judgement and evaluation of the practices they have employed. A hallmark of this research approach is producing research accounts which are highly situated and provide rich descriptions of the multiple, conceptual language and literacy resources and practices students bring to their learning environments and their encounters with institutional practices (Gough, 2000; Kapp & Bangeni, Pym & Kapp 2013).

In both course environments detailed individual and participant-centric accounts of the assignment production practices were described. The descriptions focused on how students went about producing their assignment texts while illustrating how the broader learning and curriculum environment supported, regulated and directed appropriate strategies for assignment production.

In the Film course strong emphasis was placed on ensuring that students were provided with practical opportunities to produce the kinds of film products that the film industry recognises as legitimate and relevant. During their three-year diploma, Film students typically worked on at least 10 short film productions and the study's data collection focused on how students approached these assignments. Short film assignments were always completed in groups, with each group member required to fulfil a particular industry-specific role associated with being a filmmaker, for example, director, producer, cameraperson or editor. Groups of first year students were observed while producing their first short film assignment and then interviewed. The analysis illustrated how students start to use the film production process, an industry model for producing films, to guide their activities when producing this assignment (see Figure 2 of a pre-production meeting). Also highlighted was how students explore and enact the different filmmaking roles associated with the film production process, use filmmaking equipment (Figure 3) and produce the necessary supporting documentation required, such as the shot list (see Figure 4 and storyboard).

When students were interviewed about this assignment, they noted how the theoretical descriptions of the different production roles taught in class were not always enacted during their film making assignments. Groups often adopted more collaborative approaches that provided group members with opportunities to take responsibility for multiple production roles. One group mentioned how their script for their short-film was developed collaboratively:

> *We had lots of ideas…which was good…we brainstormed our ideas for the script. It was best to give it to everyone, not just one person, who is responsible for doing the script or the story because then the others might not agree (1st year student, Film)*

Such collaborative approaches were accommodated despite contradicting the orthodoxy of the film industry where production roles are clearly delineated and bounded, and relationships between different members of the film crew are organised in a hierarchical fashion.

Students were also able to identify why this more egalitarian approach was adopted for their first filmmaking project, as one of the first year students explains below:

> *I think everybody actually helped with every job, which was important at this point of our student career, because we must still learn the different production roles, and how to go about doing it. So at this point we kind of, you know, learnt, but I mean later on I'm sure, when you have your particular role then you will stick to it. (1st year student, Film)*

This short description shows how students followed the film production process taught in the course and required by the assignment prescriptions, but also exercised a degree of agency by adopting a more co-operative and egalitarian approach towards the production roles associated with filmmaking.

The theory of knowledge recontextualisation was used analytically to explore and understand how the broader curriculum context, including the implicit and explicit values and principles operating at institutional level, influenced and shaped assignment construction. Scholars using Bernstein's theories have highlighted the importance of turning attention to the knowledge structures of the curriculum and exploring how choices about curriculum content and structure influence student learning experiences (Ashwin, 2009; Luckett, 2009; Shay, 2011; Wheelahan, 2010).

When the aims of the Film course were analysed, a clear vocational orientation was identified. This orientation was articulated by both staff and students, who suggested that the main aim of the course was to prepare students for a future role in the South African film industry.

> In general it is to prepare students to work in the South African film industry. (Film course co-ordinator)

> They do prepare us fairly well for what's out there in industry. (3rd year Film student)

The participants' foregrounding of a vocational education philosophy resonated with the dominance of a vocational ethos promoted at institutional level and throughout the wider university of technology sector. The rationale guiding the curriculum and subject syllabi is therefore framed by the importance ascribed to developing the kinds of knowledge, skills and competencies required in the film industry. The Film course co-ordinator reiterated this focus, when says that the course "*provides students with all the skills that a filmmaker needs, like directing, producing, lighting, camera, research skills, scripting and writing skills…".* A key way in which the curriculum, and especially assignments, facilitated development of these filmmaking skills and competencies, was through the incorporation of the film production process – the primary structuring mechanism used by the film industry to organise film production.

Analysis of the Film curriculum and the decision making that informed its structure, using knowledge recontextualisation as analysic lens, emphasised how the film production process was adapted, transformed and refashioned when brought into the course. The recontextualisation of this industry process was visible in the subject naming conventions used, the nature of the content taught in each subject and, importantly, in the kinds of assignments students were required to produce. Especially at the first year level, the topics discussed in the different subjects often focused on

encouraging students to develop a detailed conceptual understanding of the film production process and how it was typically applied and used in the film industry. In order to reinforce this understanding, many of the assignments, especially the short films, required students to demonstrate their ability to apply the process in their practical filmmaking projects, show adherence to the sequencing of the film production process, and produce the necessary documentation linked to each stage of the process (as shown in Figures 2–4). These short film projects were thus an important way of providing opportunities for students to enact the film production process and gain 'on-set' experience in the different production roles linked to the different stages of the process.

The analysis of the Film course data demonstrates how insights were gained into students' experiences of producing a short film assignment, while also highlighting how these assignments were influenced by imperatives that impacted on curriculum decision making. The underpinning curriculum values of industry relevance, also promoted at institutional and sectoral levels, shaped students' responses to assignment production and ultimately their learning. Significantly, when attention was placed on the students and their assignment production experiences, the intention was not to cast an evaluative gaze over whether or not students followed or deviated from the assignment prescriptions, but rather on providing a detailed and rich account of their learning experiences. This crucial realignment of the focus away from an evaluative stance on the student learning experience, while seeking to understand how the curriculum was implicated in directing student assessment activities, avoids deficit conceptualisation of the student.

Figure 2: Students during a pre-production meeting of a short film assignment

Figure 3: Students working 'on-set' during a short film assignment

Figure 4: Documentary evidence: the shot list for a short film

SHOT LIST

Place	Scene	Shot no.	Description
Room	1	1	Radio is put on. Doctor flips the bed sheet
Room	1	2	Flipping of sheet from another angle. Sheet falls on bed.
Room	1	3	PAN room, camera rests at the DR doing the last touches on bed.
Room	1	4	CU of hand making bed
Room	1	5	Doctor walks out of room. Camera zooms in on him.
Outside Room	1	6	Door opens on the otherside of room. (Sound of radio gets softer)
Room	3	7	Enters Room.
Room	3	8	Get's bag under bed
Room	3	9	Gets up from under the bed and looks for file. Sound of opposing team scoring.

Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that HE researchers should respond to the challenges presented by the changing contours of the HE landscape, by reframing their research methodologies so that these display an acute sensitivity towards avoiding deficit conceptualisations of students and their learning. The paper offered an illustration of how the research design and analysis framework of a recent ethnographic research study undertaken in South Africa was able to achieve this goal. The research design incorporated the theoretical frameworks of academic literacies and Bernstein's curriculum theorisation. In doing so, the design allowed the empirical and analytical activities of the study to focus on students' experiences of assignment production while also exploring curriculum organisation and decision making. A representation of the analysis framework was presented in Figure 1 and this showed how the concepts of literacy practice and knowledge recontextualisation were used as analytical lenses to

give attention to both the student and the broader curriculum context. Using data from the Film course, the manner in which industry-relevant knowledge was recontextualised into the curriculum was illustrated. Also emphasised were the unique and agentive experiences of some first year Film students who worked with, but also refashioned the film production process. The dual focus on the research design and its ethnographic methodology was able to capture the interrelationship between curriculum decision-making and student assignment practices, in ways that validated and affirmed, rather than judged the practices used by students.

The methodological approach presented in this paper, and in particular the analysis framework, is of particular significance to researchers in the South African context. If, as a sector, we are serious about providing equitable opportunities for success to all students who enter our institutions, then we have to mount a serious challenge against the negative impact of our pervasive use and internalisation of deficit conceptualisations of our students. One way to work towards achieving this ideal is to ensure that our research focuses on the students and their learning without neglecting the influencing role of institutional structures and values on this learning.

Notes

i) Black here is used as a generic racial category for all people regarded as not white. However, common usage of the term in South Africa still alludes to the apartheid defined categorisations of African, Coloured, Indian and White, with the use of the term black only referring to Africans.

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