

Offsetting deficit conceptualisations: methodological considerations for higher education research

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Abstract

This paper contributes to the current introspection in the academic development community that critiques the persistent conceptualisations of students as deficient. Deficit discourses are also implicated in many of the student support, curriculum and pedagogic initiatives employed across the higher education sector. The argument developed here, unlike most of the existing debates which focus on pedagogic or institutional initiatives, explores how the research interests and methodological choices of academic developers and researchers could incorporate sensitivity against deficit conceptions and foster more contextualised accounts of students and their learning. This article uses an ethnographic study into the assignment practices of vocational higher education students to show how certain methodological and theoretical choices engender anti-deficit conceptualisations. The study's analytic framework uses the concepts of literacy practices and knowledge recontextualisation to place analytic attention on both the students' assignment practices and the influence of curriculum decision making on such practices. The significance of this dual focus is its ability to capture the complexity of students' meaning-making during assignment production, without remaining silent about the structuring influence of the curriculum. I argue in this paper that the focus on both students and curriculum is able to offer contextualised accounts of students' interpretations and enacted experiences of their assessment and curriculum environment. Exploring the multidimensional nature of student learning experiences in ways that accommodate the influence of various contextual realities brings researchers and their research agendas closer to offsetting deficit conceptualisation.

Keywords: deficit discourses, higher education, knowledge recontextualisation, literacy practices, research design.

Introduction

Over the past two to three decades, academic development and higher education (HE) research communities have given significant attention to strategies to extend opportunities to a more diverse student body in the context of university massification. However, little

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progress has been made to curb the inequality of experiences and outcomes that many students still encounter (Clegg, 2011). Understandably, researchers have noted their concerns and frustrations about this area of stasis (see for example Boughey, 2007; Clegg, 2009; Haggis, 2006; Leibowitz, 2012; Shay, 2012). In South Africa (SA), given the enormous challenges created by a racialised, deeply inequitable socio-economic and political past, such voices have necessarily become amplified (see for example CHE, 2013). South African HE scholars and practitioners have also acknowledged that despite two decades of democracy and various attempts to systematically confront the legacy of its apartheid past, persistent problems continue to constrain the quality of learning and limit the potential for student success at most of its institutions (Boughey, 2010; Leibowitz, 2012; Leibowitz and Bozalek, 2015).

Addressing these stubborn challenges therefore demands critical reconsideration of some of the traditional assumptions held about students, their learning and the role played by lecturers, the curriculum and the institution. This paper is aligned with and builds on the critical reflexive efforts currently underway in segments of the academic development and HE research communities more broadly, and academic literacies research² specifically. In South Africa, these communities are especially concerned with challenging deficit conceptualisations and discourses regarding students and their learning and the ubiquitous remediation student support strategies that often accompany this viewpoint. At the core of this community's challenge lies a strong social justice argument (see for example, Cooper, 2015; Leibowitz and Bozalek, 2015) for creating institutional cultures and contexts able to support and nurture all students to achieve equitable levels of learning success.

Social justice is understood as an underpinning value that suggests that all students, irrespective of their social class, race, gender or disability, should be afforded the opportunity to participate as equals in the learning spaces of HE. In this paper, rather than focusing attention on critiquing existing deficit thinking, and offering alternative pedagogic and institutional models, I show how choices about research design can be more sensitive to deficit discourses and act to offset such framings, by challenging the decontextualised manner in which students are perceived and represented. To illustrate this argument, I offer a self-reflective review of the research design and analytic framework of an ethnographic study that explored the production of student assignments in two courses at a South African university of technology. The aim of this research was not to empirically investigate or report on constructions of deficit in the research sites. Rather its theoretical and methodological stance sought to engender contextualised understandings of students and their learning in order to understand how they approached assessment.

The study incorporated a dual focus: it paid attention to students and their experiences of assignment production, while also exploring how the curriculum affected these assessment practices. This offered a more balanced view of the multiple, personal, curricular and institutional factors that converged and influenced the practices students used when producing assignments. The research design and analytic framework described and illustrated

² In this paper I use the terms academic literacies research, academic literacies perspective, and academic literacies interchangeably to refer in general to the critical field of enquiry which has offered theoretical and methodological insight into student writing development in higher education. A more detailed exploration of this field is provided on pages 6-7.

in this paper, found points of connection between the academic literacies perspective (Blommaert, Street and Turner, 2007; Lillis and Scott, 2007) and Basil Bernstein's (1975, 1996, 2000) theory of 'knowledge recontextualisation' in the development of curricula. The academic literacies focus allowed the analysis to pay attention to rich, descriptive accounts of students' experiences of their assignment practices. It showed the layered ways in which students navigate assignment requirements in which professional, academic and institutional values were embedded. The analytical lens of knowledge recontextualisation helped to provide insight into how the curriculum, influenced by various values and prescriptions from the professional and institutional arenas, plays a crucial role in directing what type of assignment practices are validated. This article represents an attempt to offer a reflexive and self-evaluative reading of the research design and methodological choices made, while also illustrating specifically how the analytic frame actively provided a contextualised view of students, their course environment and their assignment practices.

The article starts by describing how student support interventions that seek to compensate for students' perceived lack of preparation for their HE studies are, for the most part, underpinned by a conceptualisation of students as being deficient. It considers the contribution made by academic literacies research in highlighting how these courses reinforce and sustain deficit discourses. The article suggests possible ways of challenging deficit constructions through offering methodological avenues that show the highly situated and contextual ways in which students learn and engage in meaning-making activities associated with their studies. I discuss what is commonly meant when students and their learning are conceptualised as being in deficit. The article focuses on how such conceptualisations are expressed in SA while highlighting the importance of challenging them in the HE setting.

I then introduce the research design and analytic framework and locate it within the larger research study of which it formed part. I explain how the lenses of literacy practices (Barton, 1994; Barton and Hamilton, 1998; Street, 2000) and knowledge recontextualisation (Bernstein, 1996, 2000) were brought together in the analytic framework and illustrate this using example from one of the research sites, namely a Film Production course. The findings explain that assignment practices are highly situated and determined by particular social, cultural and structural influences, and are not simply a product of a student's innate capacities or skills. The findings further show how the curriculum promotes certain knowledge, values and practices and how these become implicated in the ways in which students are required to demonstrate their learning through the creation of certain assignment texts. The illustration of the workings of the analytic framework of the larger study is used here to substantiate my claim that methodologically an anti-deficit stance was taken. It is not the intention, however, to illustrate whether or how deficit discourses circulate within the Film Production course.

Remedial student support and deficit constructions of the student

Responding to diverse student bodies, often perceived as unable to cope with or adjust to the various learning and socio-cultural demands of HE, institutions have typically offered additional tutorial and remedial courses, commonly referred to as 'bolt-on' approaches (as quoted in Wingate, 2007: 457). These courses permeate the student support landscape at many SA universities (Boughey, 2007; Leibowitz, 2012) and elsewhere (see for example

Black and Yasukawa, 2013; Haggis, 2006, 2009; Ivanič and Lea, 2006; Jones et al., 1999; Lillis and Turner, 2001). Boughey, commenting on support offered for the development of student writing within the South African context, suggests that the emphasis of these courses on what Lea and Street (1998, 2006) call ‘study skills’, results in them focusing primarily on black students who are ‘deemed to lack the language proficiency and conceptual background or “skills” necessary to engage with higher education’ (2007: 6). Within the contemporary setting, these perceptions and assumptions about black students persist (Coleman, 2013; Smit, 2012; Thesen, 2014). The study skills approach (Lea and Street, 1998, 2006) sees writing in academic environments as a technical skill with generic features that are transferable, reflecting a model of literacy separated from its social context. This view of the writing programmes and courses carries a false assumption that new students’ perceived language, writing or thinking problems are ‘temporary’ in nature (see Thesen and van Pletzen, 2006) because they can be rectified through remedial interventions aimed at providing students with the necessary skills needed for their university studies. Lecturers and university administrators have concluded that these courses, typically offered in the first year of university, create a gateway to students’ automatic and smooth transition to success in their encounters with disciplinary and institutional contexts (Ivanič and Lea, 2006). However, this conclusion is based on a false assumption, because students need continued support as they navigate the differential and varied disciplinary, course and assessment demands encountered during their studies, and is thus problematic.

Despite their widespread utilisation, institutional initiatives modelled on such ‘bolt-on’ approaches have, more recently, become the subject of critique in South Africa (see Boughey, 2007; Marshall and Case, 2010; Shay 2008), the United Kingdom (see Barkas, 2011; Blommaert, Street and Turner, 2007; Lillis and Turner, 2001; Wingate, 2007) and Australia (Black and Yasukawa, 2013). Importantly, Thesen and van Pletzen (2006) have emphasised that the inherent remedial underpinning of these courses feeds into deficit views of students. Deficit discourses of students and their learning typically conflate problems experienced with adaptation and success with assumptions about either students’ cognitive or intellectual abilities, or their socio-economic and cultural backgrounds (Clegg, 2011; Haggis, 2003, 2006; Smit, 2012). Students are therefore perceived as lacking the prerequisite cognitive, social and cultural abilities needed to fit in and thrive in the HE learning environment. Crucially, when focus is placed only on the student it allows attention to be deflected away from the role that institutional cultures, practices and structures play in student learning and success (Boughey, 2010b; Clegg, 2011; Haggis, 2003).

Researchers and practitioners aligned to the academic literacies perspective (Blommaert et al, 2007; Lea and Street, 2006; Lillis and Turner, 2001; Thesen and van Pletzen, 2006) have been at the forefront of challenging deficit conceptualisations of students, particularly with respect to their academic writing. The academic literacies perspective, as a field of enquiry, emerged from practitioners who were researching their work with student writing development (Lea, 2004; Lillis, 1999; Lillis and Scott, 2007). These practitioners sought to critique and problematise institutional discourses about student writing ‘problems’ which focused predominantly on ‘fixing’ the seemingly incorrect ways that students produced written texts like essays. Instead, these researchers and practitioners viewed academic reading and writing as socially situated practices rather than as decontextualised

technical and cognitive skills (Baynham and Prinsloo, 2001; Lea, 2004; Lea and Street, 2006); Lillis, 2003). Challenging these discourses and interventionist approaches, they instead focused on student perspectives of writing tasks and activities and in so doing attempted to ‘turn the spotlight off student inadequacies’ (Lillis and Turner, 2001: 57). In South Africa, research conducted broadly under the academic literacies banner has challenged the understandings of poor academic performance that perpetuate ideological assumptions about the cognitive abilities of black students (Boughey, 2007; 2010b; McKenna, 2010; Paxton and Frith, 2013; Thesen and van Pletzen, 2006). Such research has sought more contextually grounded understandings of the challenges that students face in attempting to gain access to their disciplinary and academic communities, often laying bare the institutional and curricular impediments to such access (see for example Jacobs, 2005, 2007a, 2007b).

Constructing students as deficient

When university students from diverse educational, linguistic, socio-economic and cultural backgrounds encounter difficulties or failures, blame is often levelled at the individual student (Boughey, 2010b; Burke, 2008; Clegg, 2011). Commenting on how students are discursively constructed in the South African HE sector, Boughey and McKenna (2015) assert that the ‘student as deficient’ remains dominant. Additionally, they argue that in South Africa the ‘discourse of the decontextualised learner’ is built into the view ‘that education is asocial, acultural and apolitical’, while ‘success in education is dependent on factors inherent to the individual’ (Boughey and McKenna, 2015: 7). Such deficit conceptualisations focus on the student’s inadequacies and seek to remedy, ‘fix’ or compensate for the perceived problems believed to reside with the student (Boughey and McKenna, 2015; Burke, 2008; Clegg, 2011; Smit, 2012).

Critical reviews of the major theorisations and discourses of student learning in HE by Haggis, in a range of publications (2003, 2006, 2009, 2011), has convincingly shown how the predominance of psychologically informed conceptualisations of learning has fuelled the widespread use of deficit discourses. Thus, the burden of responsibility for being successful is unduly placed on the student (Haggis, 2003), ignoring how HE itself may create barriers for student success (Boughey, 2010b; Haggis, 2003; Thesen and van Pletzen, 2006). Deficit discourses therefore create conditions conducive for institutions and individual lecturers to relinquish any responsibility or requirements for a close examination of their role or obligation towards student retention and success (Lawrence, 2002). This might account for the uncompromising nature of these constructions of students and the predominance of ‘bolt-on’ interventions (Street, Lea and Lillis, 2015). This is despite a rich body of research (especially in the South African context, see for example Boughey, 2007, 2010a, 2010b; Kapp and Bangeni, 2009; McKenna, 2010) which has challenged the decontextualised ways in which students and their learning are conceptualised, and called into question the value and efficacy of these stand-alone courses (Boughey and McKenna, 2015).

Deficit discourses in South African higher education

In SA, deficit thinking has come to be epitomised by the use of the labels such as ‘disadvantaged’ (Boughey, 2010a; Marshall and Case, 2010; Thesen and van Pletzen, 2006) and ‘underprepared’ (Thesen, 2001). Although it is assumed that ‘disadvantage’ typically references black students (used here in an inclusive manner to include African, Indian and coloured race groups), Leibowitz and Bozalek (2015) have highlighted how it often means different things in different university, faculty or departmental settings. When applied to students, Smit (2012: 370) contends that ‘[d]isadvantage has become an umbrella term to cover a wide array of perceived shortcomings’ that these students bring with them to the university context. 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 and the notions of ‘low academic ability’ (Smit, 2012: 372) or ‘pedagogically disadvantaged’ (Marshall and Case, 2010: 492) have become conflated.

The use of sanitised terminology like ‘disadvantage’ as a stand-in for a whole range of characterisations and labels applied to students, attempts to signal a move away from historical racialised discourses and language (see Pica-Smith and Veloria, 2012). However, such language use can paradoxically act to reinforce stereotypes especially racialised ones steeped in our apartheid past. Unsurprisingly, a major negative response to the typically unquestioned and uncritical, but ubiquitous, use of the ‘disadvantage’ label has been the ‘strengthening of stereotypes in the minds and thoughts of educators, policy makers and students themselves’ (Smit, 2012: 372) and the reinforcement and perpetuation of inequalities (Pym and Kapp, 2013). Whether used intentionally or not, Smit points out that a disturbing consequence of this particular construction of deficit in SA, has been that it

allows generalisations about student ability to be made and supports a laziness to grapple with the complex issues around student difficulties. In the process, people who are already disenfranchised are labelled and further stigmatised (Smit, 2012: 372).

South African scholars have argued that the manner in which these discourses feed into existing discourses of stigma and stereotyping, cannot be dislocated from the continued realities and challenges evident in the contemporary university landscape. Of particular concern are the continued racially skewed participation and success rates (Case, 2013; CHE, 2013; Cooper, 2015; Leibowitz, 2012). Thus, black students are continually subjects to the type of ‘bolt-on’ interventions which are inadequate for creating the kinds of support mechanism needed throughout their studies, but are more likely to exacerbate the already entrenched racial stereotypes and discrimination in the sector and broader society. Within this context there is a clear imperative for a firmer stance against deficit conceptualisations. This paper shows that HE researchers can take up the challenge against deficit discourse through the choices they make about research design and methodology. The section below illustrates this argument, that a methodology and analytic framework that seeks to contextualise student

learning and assignment practice as an interrelated part of broader curriculum structures, offers a way to challenge deficit conceptualisations.

The research site and the focus on assignment production

The two research sites of the larger study were the Film Production and Graphic Design departments at a South African university of technology (UoT). In South Africa, universities of technologies offer mostly undergraduate vocational and career-focused diploma programmes. Data was collected in situ from the three-year diploma qualifications in both departments. The primary aim of the research was to explore and understand the processes and practices students engaged in when producing assignments.

The significance of using assignments as the object of enquiry in this study was twofold. Firstly, creating assignments is commonly regarded as a fundamental activity through which students can demonstrate their learning (Ramsden, 1992; Shay, 2008). Secondly, by focusing on assignments and how students produce them, a window is created to the underlying curriculum structures, teaching and learning approaches and the specific activities that both lecturers and students undertake as part of this process. In my study, assignment tasks were the core mechanism through which students' experiences and perceptions of their key learning tasks and the course, in general, could be explored. At the same time, paying attention to how students produced various assignment texts (including digital, multimodal and written artefacts) allowed the study to investigate curriculum issues, in particular how curriculum content and structure came to be represented in these assessment tasks. The assignment therefore functioned as a nexus through which the dual focus of the research design and analytic framework could be constructed.

Research design

The research was ethnographically framed, aligning it very closely with the study's theoretical location in the academic literacies perspective. This alignment is built on synergies that exist between the academic literacies perspective that sees literacy as a social practice and ethnographic methodologies which accentuate the situated and contextual intricacies that shape people's lives. Academic literacies researchers therefore regard literacy, writing development and learning as a social practice in the HE setting. They recognise that these activities are shaped by social and cultural practices associated with reading, writing and other communicative practices in the multiple disciplinary and/or course contexts of the university (Lea, 2004, 2013; Lillis and Scott, 2007). The ethnographic orientation of the study ensured that data collection strategies focused on the daily experiences of students and lecturers, while also maintaining that the voices of those intimately involved in using and creating the various learning texts were foregrounded. This resulted in highly descriptive and layered accounts of the research context, student assignment practices and influences on curriculum decision making, curriculum content and structure. The findings therefore described the intricate ways in which students navigated and engaged with the various prescriptions around assignment production, instead of seeking to present simplistic or reductionist depictions of student success or failure.

With text production regarded as a function of social practice, data collection was guided primarily by participant observation of the daily activities of students and lecturers. Guaranteeing a holistic view of the educational processes and activities, participant observation activities were structured to capture events and activities that a) occurred at different times and on different days of the week, b) were routine (like daily lectures), or extraordinary (for example, the orientation social event for first-year students), and c) attempted to achieve adequate representation of the participants in both research sites, (for example, participating in the classrooms of different lecturers, subjects, and/or cohorts at different levels of study). The fieldwork period of six-months helped to achieve this coverage and allowed me to spend one academic term of roughly eleven weeks in each research site.

Additional data was generated from a range of other sources including interactions and interviews, and in audio-visual, visual, written and digital formats. Interviews were used together with participant observation and documentary sources such as lesson plans and subject guides, and helped to elicit, explore and understand participants' perspectives or articulation of particular events or experiences (Fontana and Frey, 2005; Mason, 2002). The formal and informal interviews helped me to explore insights and understandings about the general features of the courses, the curriculum and assessment environment, how students produced specific assignments, the nature of the curriculum structure and the decisions informing this structure. The choice to use an ethnographic methodology and the dual structure of the analytic framework offered a strong antidote to decontextualised descriptions of participants, their assignment practices and their enacted experiences of the curriculum.

The workings of the analytic framework

The analytic lenses, one of literacy practice and the other of knowledge recontextualisation, were focused on the assignment processes and practices used in the research sites. This dual focus on student experiences of creating assignment texts and how the curriculum structured these practices, offered a multi-layered view into how students approached their assignment activities. Locating the curriculum as an active influence on student assignment practices enabled the research to highlight how students navigated often competing values, norms and prescriptions as they made sense of assessment requirements in their course. The capacity of this dual focus to offer these kinds of contextualised insights about students and their learning environment is the primary means through which the analytic framework was able to offset deficit conceptualisations. What follows is a brief description of each analytic concept and an illustration, based on data from the Film Production course, of how, when used together, a rich and detailed picture emerged of student meaning-making linked to assessment. Also captured is the influence of broader regulative imperatives.

The concept of literacy practice explains the ways in which reading and writing are influenced by different social contexts, thus suggesting that meaning or value attached to literacy use is infused with the setting in which it is used. When used analytically, literacy practice is able to indicate accepted ways of 'doing things', how appropriate and inappropriate activities are regulated and how situations and contexts determine different types and approaches to reading and writing (Barton and Hamilton, 1998). Social and cultural spaces therefore provide the basis from which various literacy practices are given meaning.

These spaces can also act to sustain, privilege or devalue certain reading, writing and multimodal communicative activities (Street, 2000). Within the HE context, literacy practices can be seen as directly involved in how students learn new subjects and develop their subject and disciplinary knowledge associated with their studies (Lea, 1999). Literacy practices in the university therefore account for

different practices of reading and writing which students engage in within a number of contexts in order to make sense of their studies, and they are the ways through which students make meaning from the written texts that are part of their learning (Lea, 1999: 111).

Both the focus on literacy practice and the ethnographic methodology of the study meant that attention was directed not only to the types of assignment texts students were required to produce. It also allowed for the exploration of the ways in which lecturers, assignment prescriptions and the curriculum, more generally, exerted influence on students to adopt certain values, attitudes, conventions and models when creating assignment texts. This exploration was able to lift out how different reading, writing and communicative practices associated with assessment were given status and promoted within the course curriculum. Therefore the methodological attention placed on literacy practices helped to provide a wealth of descriptive detail of the layered social, cultural and historical processes within which student assignment production was located.

The picture of students' assignment practices that emerged was able to show the at-times intricate interactions between the individual student's content knowledge, practical skills and the broader conventions around assignment text creation. Placing attention on the social and cultural basis of these conventions meant that embedded influences from multiple sources, could also be explored analytically. These sources included the professional field of film production, general academic values and prescriptions, lecturers' personal values and views about the profession and/or the curriculum and the course setting more generally. Drawing the broader context into the analysis of students' assignment practices helped to forge a complementary connection point between the two analytic lenses of literacy practice and knowledge recontextualisation. In particular, knowledge recontextualisation enabled the findings to describe in more concrete ways why certain literacy practices were given more status and value than others in the assessment regime.

Knowledge recontextualisation explains how knowledge produced outside the educational context, in either the disciplines or in professional practices, is transformed, adapted and re-appropriated into educational contexts and especially the curriculum (Bernstein, 2000; Horden, 2014; Shay, 2011; Wheelahan, 2010). By attempting to trace how knowledge 'gets into the curriculum', recontextualisation - as an analytic concept - essentially offers insight into the choices made about curriculum content and structure and the various ways that these choices might be restricted and constrained.

Knowledge in the curriculum is very different from what might be called disciplinary or workplace knowledge (Muller, 2008), primarily because recontextualisation processes are ideologically mediated. As knowledge moves from its original location in the discipline or field of practice and comes under specific ideological influences, it is stripped of its original

social, positional and power base (Bernstein, 2000). Decisions about what knowledge or content to include in university curricula commonly become the responsibility of lecturers and these choices continue to be ideologically mediated and subject to various social, moral, political and regulative prescriptions (Wheelahan, 2010). In this way, recontextualisation processes therefore involve and are ‘influenced by both social and epistemic factors’ (Horden, 2014: 35). Vocational HE lecturers’ choices about curriculum content and structure will be constrained by multiple considerations operating at local departmental levels or reflecting regulative prescriptions which define and structure the broader institution or the sector itself. These prescriptions set out what knowledge is privileged, they outline the general purposes that courses should fulfil in relation to the greater societal roles graduates should play and finally, they accommodate employment needs defined by industry and professional dictates.

The knowledge recontextualisation lens was used to explore what influenced lecturers’ curriculum decision-making choices. This allowed the findings to lay bare the provenance of some of the social, cultural and structuring values, norms and principles which became embedded in the curriculum and in turn influenced classroom and assessment prescriptions and practices. As a result the findings were able to offer insights into why and how certain literacy practices associated with assessment came to have value and status in a specific course environment. The inclusion of the knowledge recontextualisation lens extended the explanatory value and depth of the analytic frame. In addition to offering insight into the social and cultural conventions shaping the assessment regime and highlighting student experiences of making sense of these conventions, explanations could be offered about how these conventions were connected to broader structures both internal and external to the course environment.

Significantly, for the claim that the methodological choices showed sensitivity to offsetting deficit conceptualisations, combining the knowledge recontextualisation lens and that of literacy practice helped ensure that while the student learning experience was central to data collection, a multidimensional portrait of this learning experience was also possible. The analysis thus highlighted the influence of the curriculum as the pivotal mechanism through which certain dominant social and cultural values and conventions about the professional field and the academic context came to regulate how students go about producing their assignments. The analytic frame therefore worked against decontextualized representations of the student and their meaning-making activities and the broader curriculum context.

In the sections that follow, I offer a self-evaluative reading of the analytic framework and consider the ways in which it accentuated a more contextualised portrayal of students’ assignment practices. I provide an illustration of how the analytic framework was used to explore student activities around the production of a first year short film assignment, while also describing how curriculum choices influenced student assignment practices.

The recontextualisation lens: the film production process

Participants in the Film Production course, especially the lecturers, emphasised the vocational educational philosophy and ethos evident in both the institutional and broader UoT sectoral

discourses. The course coordinator placed particular emphasis on the importance of the course's clear vocational and industry-relevant agenda. He noted that the course interpreted 'preparation for industry' as providing students with skills that were closely linked to the roles and functions associated with film production:

[the course] provide(s) them with all the skills that make a filmmaker. Directing, producing, lighting, camera, research skills, scriptwriting skills. Students have to be competent in all those fields of filmmaking. (Interview, Coordinator)

This vocationalist agenda was not lost on students who often endorsed the sentiments of their lecturers and the course curriculum.

The course equips us with necessary skills...I know how to use a camera, I know how to write a script...I could make it [a film] happen. (Interview, Third year student)


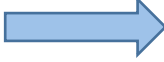
A part-time lecturer echoed the coordinator's comment, but also foregrounded how the curriculum sought to link the development and application of these practical filmmaking skills directly to the act of 'physically' making films by noting that in order 'to graduate as a film student, you have to make a film'. These comments from staff draw attention not simply to a set of skills and competencies specified by the course curriculum, but to the underpinning value associated with producing the audio-visual texts that have validity in the film industry. The importance of providing students with sufficient opportunities to produce films was a key value embedded in the curriculum and made visible in how the timetable specifically accommodated the various filmmaking assignments students completed. Students typically participated in and produced at least ten short film assignments and projects over the duration of their course.

The development of filmmaking skills and competencies was mainly facilitated through the 'film production process'. This process is central to professional filmmaking and structures all aspects of film production into four key, sequential stages, namely, development, pre-production, production and post-production. The terms for these stages have also become shorthand for the different professional roles and responsibilities associated with making films. The recontextualisation of this industry process was not only visible in the way the curriculum was structured, but also in the way subjects were named, the content taught in each subject and, importantly, in the kinds of assignments students were required to produce.

The central position of this process in the course curriculum became overtly visible in the way timetable provisions were weighted to subjects directly linked to the process. Subjects with an indirect link to the film development process, such as Communication Science and Film Appreciation, were only allocated roughly 20-30% of the timetable in the first and second year of the diploma course and completely excluded in its third year. In Table 1 below, I provide an overview of how the film production process was recontextualised and reflected in the subject names, assignment texts and assignment outcomes. The dictates of the broader educational context, especially the requirement to

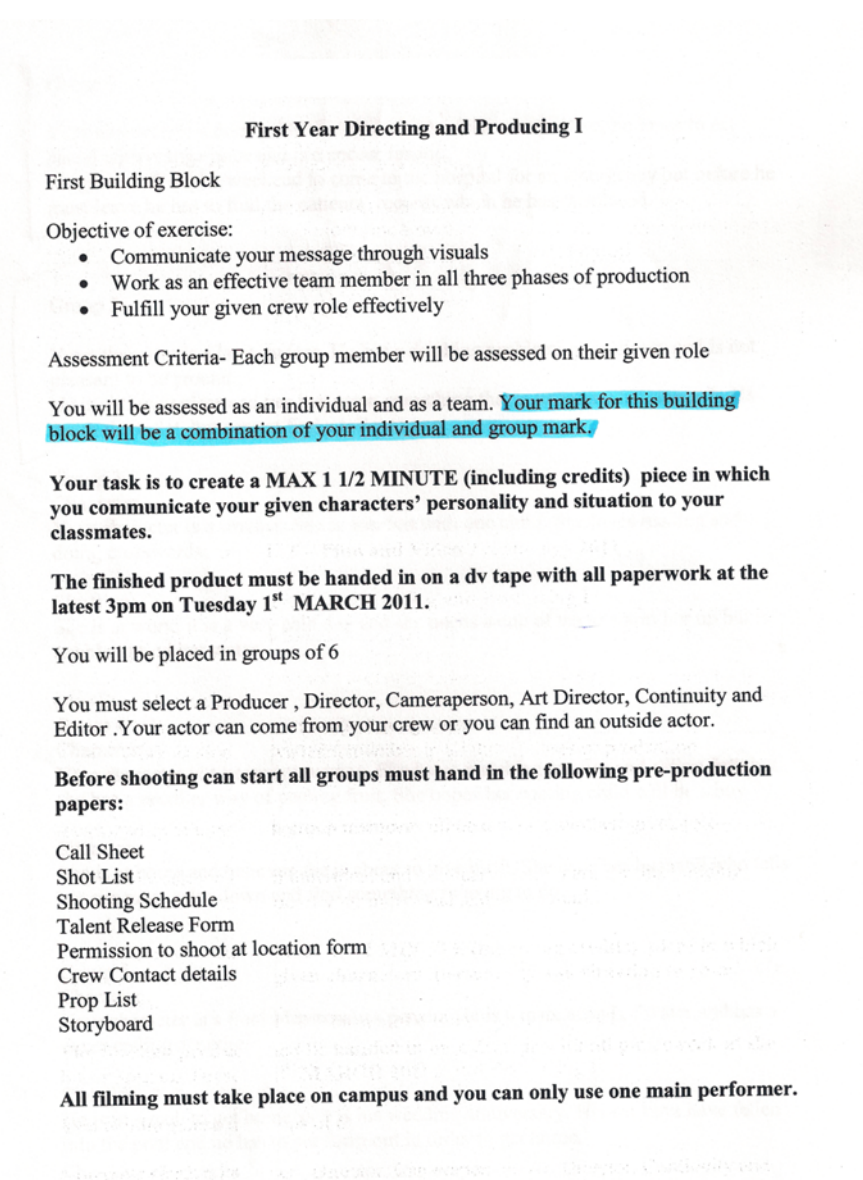
provide a balance between practical skills development and theoretical content, and the particular realities of the course setting itself (such as lecturers’ industry experiences, their teaching and learning knowledge, timetabling restrictions and infrastructure provisions) played a crucial role in determining how the transposition, reinterpretation and reframing of this industry process into the course curriculum occurred. This was especially noticeable in how the ‘development’ stage of the film production process was transformed in the course curriculum and used to accommodate the more ‘academic’ and theoretical content in the Communication Science and Film Appreciation and Development subjects. Unlike the other subjects in the curriculum, which were closely aligned to the film industry and required students to produce textual artefacts used in the profession, these subjects typically required students to produce and engage in textual practices associated with the university, like writing essays and research reports. These texts associated with the university typically relied on written literacy practices, while those associated with the film industry were primarily visual and audio-visual.

Table 1: An illustration of the recontextualisation of the film production process into subject names and assignments in the Film course

Stages of the Film Production Process	Recontextualisation Space	Subject Names	Typical assignment texts	Assignment
Development <i>Idea for film, often involving Producer or Director</i>		Directing and Producing, Film Appreciation and Development, Communication Science	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Essays • Research reports 	Film analysis essay Academic essay Research report
Pre-production <i>Planning phase involving recruitment of staff, budgets, refinement of script and all aspects related to production</i>		Directing and Producing, Screenwriting, Production Design (Set Design)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Script & Screen plays • Shot list & shooting schedule • Storyboards • Model set designs 	Short films Building Blocks
Production <i>The actual shooting of the film and enactment of the script</i>		Directing and Producing, Digital Cinematography, Production Practice (lighting, sound)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Film analysis essays • Audio-visual film clips 	End of year films (e.g. graduation film, building blocks) Reflective review of production tasks and activities
Post Production <i>Creating the film from all footage shot during Production, primarily through editing</i>		Post-Production Practice	Audio-visual film clips	Film Trailer edit End of year films

In many ways, the film production process was used within the curriculum as a socialisation mechanism helping to induct students into specific ways of filmmaking. This socialisation was particularly evident at the first-year level, where topics discussed across the subject range often focused on encouraging students to develop a detailed conceptual understanding of the film production process and how it was typically used in the film industry. To reinforce this understanding, while also produce a short film, first year students completed a series of five 'building block' assignments in their first semester in the course. Figure 1 below shows the brief for the first building block assignment.

Figure 1: First year building block assignment brief



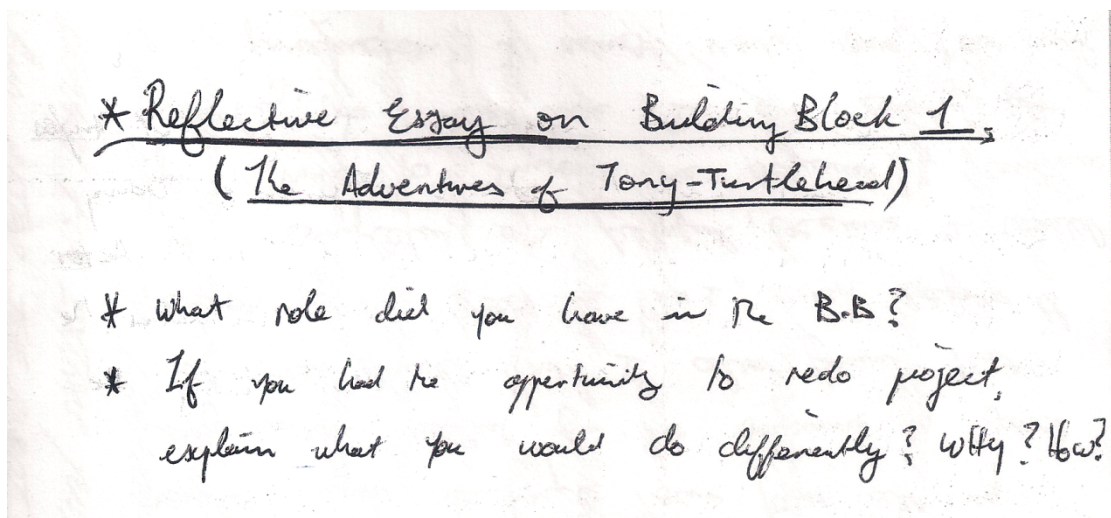
These building block assignments were a deconstructed and simplified version of a typical filmmaking project and focused on one core filmmaking principle or rule. For example, the theme or principle covered in building block 1, seen in Figure 1, was

‘communicating your message through visuals’ (while, for example, the later building block 3 dealt with the ‘master scene technique’). In addition to demonstrating their ability to successfully convey this principle in the film text they produced, students also had to show they could apply the film production process, by providing evidence of following the four-phase sequence, adopting the key film production roles and responsibilities and producing the necessary texts linked to the various stages, such as the script, shot-lists, storyboards and finally, the audio-visual film. In this way, assessment practices reinforced the curriculum aim of helping students to develop the necessary skills, attitudes and characteristics associated with the various industry roles and responsibilities, and to produce the types of texts which had legitimacy in the industry, while gaining valuable filmmaking experience.

Literacy practice lens: producing a short film assignment

First year students were observed as they produced their first short film assignment (see Figure 1). They were interviewed in focus groups about their experiences of completing this assignment and a written reflective piece that was produced as part of this assignment, was analysed.

Figure 2: Instructions for building block 1 reflective piece



Instructions for the written reflections were verbally communicated to students in class by their lecturer. Most of the first-year students' hand-wrote their reflections for the first building block they completed. Many of the reflections were structured to respond to the prompt questions of the task instructions.

In this course most filmmaking assignments were completed in groups, with each group member required to fulfil a particular industry-specific role determined by the film production process, for example, director, producer, cameraperson or editor.

The assignment brief makes direct reference to both the film production process; ‘work . . . in all three phases of production’ and the assigned roles and functions which each

group member was required to fulfil, e.g. ‘crew role’ and ‘you must select a Producer, Director, Cameraperson . . .’. The brief thus emphasises the importance of also inducting the students, into the functioning of the film production process associated with the physical act of filmmaking and specific, key filmmaking roles. The assignment brief shows strong alignment with the core curriculum aim of developing student filmmaking skills and competencies. It overtly signals the kinds of filmmaking practices that are deemed credible and identifies the types of textual practices which have industry validity, such as using the film production process to structure the production of this short film and/or creating various pre-production documents. The absence of any reference to the ‘development’ stage of the film production process reinforces this alignment to professional practice and the assignment’s distance from written textual and literacy practices associated with the academic context of the university.

The written reflection piece further reinforced the attention given to the specific filmmaking roles. The short written task asked students to compare and evaluate their own enacted experiences in these various roles as they completed the short film assignment, and the espoused notions of these roles taught in class. In their reflective pieces, students displayed a strong awareness of their own roles during the production of their short film and how these roles were enacted during specific stages of the film production process.

I was the producer, as producer I had to make many decisions for the group. I had to arrange meetings, get locations and make a shooting schedule. During post-production, I was hardly involved. I was the last person in the group to watch the building block [short film]. (Reflective piece, First year student)

As the editor, one is not required to be on set during the production phase. (Reflective piece, First year student)

While the students’ reflective commentaries appear to reference the appropriate adoption of these roles as prescribed by the officially taught film production process, some interesting inconsistencies emerged in the interview data. In particular, students noted how the theoretical descriptions of the different production roles taught in class were not always practically enacted during the filmmaking assignment. Groups often adopted more collaborative approaches that provided group members with opportunities to take responsibility for multiple production roles. One group member mentioned how the 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. (Interview, First year student)

Such collaborative approaches were accommodated by students despite contradicting the curriculum’s espoused views of the film industry and the prescriptions of the brief, where production roles are clearly delineated and bounded, and relationships between different

members of the film crew are organised along strict hierarchical lines. While the written reflections were mostly silent about such collaborative engagements, during the interviews students talked freely about their practices during the assignment process, even if they contrasted with the 'official' procedures promoted by the curriculum and the assignment brief. The possible reason for this dissonance is that students recognise the importance of demonstrating, through assessment texts, their internalisation of the specific filmmaking roles and functions as delineated by the film production process. Students thus clearly acknowledge the assessment rules at play within the course and, particularly in this assignment, what values, practices and approaches to filmmaking would be seen as admissible by the lecturers.

For the most part, the texts students produced for this assignment (including written, visual and audio-visual artefacts) sought to provide evidence of the application and enactment of the skills, attitudes and characteristics associated with the industry's film production process. Students, however, showed acute awareness of their novice status in the course and how this might have accounted for some of the choices they made during the production of their first film texts, especially the decision by one group to work more collaboratively.

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.
(Interview, First year student)

In the above extract, we see the student's own recognition that, as this assignment was their first foray into the film production process, it afforded a degree of manoeuvrability that would inevitably be lost as the assessment stakes increase, and as have to demonstrate in more overt terms their socialisation into the prized filmmaking practices. Deviation from these valued practices will become less tolerated both by the assessment regime and the scrutiny of their lecturers and peers.

The analytic framework of literacy practice and recontextualisation helped to draw attention to how values and principles circulating in the broader social context, like the promotion of an overt vocationalist agenda, have a direct bearing on curriculum choices and in turn on assessment requirements in the Film Production course. The analysis of the building block assignment presented above, offered descriptions of students' first enacted experiences of working with the film production process, which is the curriculum's primary mechanism for socialising students into legitimate filmmaking practices. The assignment requirements promote the production of texts and certain practices that demonstrate the types of knowledge, skills and dispositions that have legitimacy in the filmmaking industry.

However, through the literacy practice lens and the ethnographic orientation to data collection, the close attention placed on student assignment practices, is able to show ways in which students are creating their own meaning of these processes and practices. This descriptive detail provides insights into both the continuities and discontinuities between students' actual assignment practices and the espoused values of the curriculum and assessments. Deviations from the assignment prescriptions are presented as part of the

complex resource repertoires student draw from when completing assignments, like the building block in Figure 1. Instead of only highlighting the ways in which final assignment texts, and the practices students engaged in to create these texts, either conform or diverge from assignment criteria, the analysis unearths students' careful interpretations of, adherence to and also renegotiation of official assessment prescriptions. The decision to work collaboratively thus emphasises students' resourcefulness, creativity and agency as they make sense of the privileged knowledge and practices foregrounded in the course.

Discussion and concluding insights

The broad observations based on the data suggest that there is value in attending to the complex interrelationship between what students do during assignment production and the structuring influence of the values and principles embedded in the curriculum. These values, principles and ways of creating and producing have a powerful role in directing and informing what is considered a legitimate text and/or practice within the course context. Student assignment practices are therefore subject to what Thesen and van Pletzen (2006) refer to as the privileged voices of the university, the discipline or, as was the case in my study, the profession, that act to shape and direct student learning and meaning making activities. The ability of the analytic framework to focus on both the student and broader structural influences through the curriculum, highlights in concrete ways how the methodological approach described in this paper acts against the urge to decontextualise and essentialise participants involved in the assessment processes. This strength of the analytic framework to accentuate the multiple actors involved in the assignment production processes while foregrounding, rather than reducing the complexities involved, was enhanced by the ethnographic approach.

The ethnographic orientation offered descriptions that accentuated the deeply situated context within which students' made meaning of assignment requirements. In the one assignment task illustrated in this paper, students had to draw on a range of textual practices in the creation of visual and written print-based texts, actualise specific roles and identities associated with the film production process and deliver a short film. In order to produce these texts, students were required to enact particular literacy practices and display the adoption of values which had their provenance in multiple locations, such as industry, academia, and the course environment. In addition to demonstrating very specific physical filmmaking skills (such as, draw a storyboard, communicate a simple story through film, use a camera and editing software) students also had to make sense of and engage with the recontextualised film production process and demonstrate this understanding as prescribed by the assignment requirements.

The analysis highlights students' recognition of what counts in assessment and their ability to already discern, in this first filmmaking assignment, what knowledge, texts and filmmaker dispositions and identities will be validated through the assessment process. In the written reflection pieces, students relate their adoption of the typical and expected film production roles which the subject content and assignment prescriptions attempt to reinforce. However, when juxtaposed against students' enacted experiences of completing the 'building block' as described in the focus group interviews; a more fluid up-take of the process

becomes visible. Freed of the imposition of assessment judgement, the focus group offered a window into how multiple interpretations and resources were brought to the assignment task, including approaches and principles that contradicted those espoused in the course environment.

Other research in this field has used methodological approaches that focus only on the assignment text, on retrospective accounts of activities associated with assignments, the curriculum or pedagogic approaches or on the analysis of curriculum documentation (see for example Shay, 2011). Unlike those methodological approaches, the analysis framework presented in this paper is able to offer a layered appreciation of how students engaged with the assessment process without seeking to characterise the students, their assignment practices, the assessor, or the curriculum in simplistic, one-dimensional or decontextualised ways. An implication of this analytical approach is a clear attempt not to focus on the apportioning of blame (especially to the students) for misunderstandings or failures to follow prescribed assignment production procedures. Rather there is an attempt to increase the scope of the analytical depth and highlight the multiple meaning-making resources that students bring to the assignment tasks. The value of this approach is its capacity for highly contextualised descriptive accounts of students and their assignment practices. In the example illustrated here, the analysis lifts out how students traverse the diverse textual landscape, values and prescriptions of the assessment environment and its demands which simultaneously act to reify the physical skills and competencies associated with filmmaking yet also signal the academic location of these activities through the inclusion of the written reflection piece.

Insights derived from the illustration of the research design and analytic framework provide evidence and support for my argument that through offering deeply contextualised explorations and understandings of students, their assignment and learning activities and their course environments, academic developers and researchers can gainfully incorporate sensitivity about deficit discourses in their research activities, and work towards countering them. This argument does not, however, deny that the challenge to dethrone persistent deficit conceptualisations of students and their learning, particularly in the South African context, is both complex and formidable. The insights and arguments offered by HE scholars have also drawn attention to the ways in which these discourses have become implicated in the day-to-day institutional practices and ways of thinking about students and their learning support (Case and Marshall, 2010; Smit, 2012). This has meant that ready and simple solutions, which often masquerade as innocuous student support interventions, mask a more pernicious ideology.

As already noted, deficit conceptualisations have unfortunately become entangled with 'bolt-on' and 'study-skills' courses which have become the mainstay of institutional responses to what is perceived as poor student engagement and success (Boughey, 2007; Leibowitz, 2012). Trying to find ways to disentangle the almost symbiotic relationship between the underlying deficit thinking and these interventions, while not the focus of this paper, might go a long way to providing counter-arguments and strategies against the hegemonic power that these conceptualisations and discourses appear to wield. It is especially important to draw to the surface how this interrelationship actually reinforces deficit conceptualisation. A starting point may be to avoid bringing a decontextualised

framework to our understanding of students, the perceived problems they encounter in the university and the types of solutions offered by way of student support. At the same time, the connection between the tendency to decontextualise the student and learning and how these views become manifested in the skills-based focus of typical ‘bolt-on’ interventions needs to be fully exposed.

In this paper I have argued that the existing challenges against deficit discourses of the student and their learning in HE should become a more prominent feature influencing research agendas. I offered insight into the research design and analytic framework of a recent study which was overtly sensitised to, and challenging of, the decontextualisation of the student and the learning environment that is inherent in deficit discourses. A brief illustration of the workings of the dual-focused analytic framework showed the significance and benefits of placing attention on student experiences of assignment production. Additionally, the structuring influence of the curriculum and broader sectoral agendas and their influence on the privileging of certain assignment practices in the course environments were also emphasised. By acknowledging the multidimensional nature of student assignment production, the analytic framework, in particular, is able to suggest ways in which decontextualised and essentialist descriptions, especially of the student, can be avoided.

This paper has argued that, especially in the South African context, the continued entanglement of skills-based interventions and deficit conceptualisations has had the paradoxical consequence of reinforcing the kinds of racial stereotyping and discrimination it attempts to act against. The consequence of allowing deficit discourses to continue to operate unchecked in all spheres of the HE context exacerbates the unequal experiences and outcomes so many students already have. The argument presented here is a contribution towards finding meaningful solutions to turning the tide, in order to create a HE learning environment able to nurture and support all students through more equitable means.

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