Discourses of students and their writing in a South African vocational university: problematising the 'gaps'. (0381)

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Like many other national higher education (HE) sectors worldwide, the South African HE system is characterised by systemic and persistent inequality. In South Africa, low participation and high attrition rates particularly amongst black students are further compounded by apartheid legacies which negatively impact on their chances of success in the system. Historically, research attention and intervention strategies aimed at addressing participation and success rates often focused on black multilingual students' individual 'language deficiencies' and 'language problems' in a predominantly English-medium higher education system. Alongside this, a vigorous alternative academic literacies discourse has gained currency in academic and literacy development communities in South Africa. Proponents of this critical discourse argue that, rather than focusing on filling the 'gaps' in students' competencies on arrival at university, "effort [should] be directed at the curriculum and staff development, which would bring about institutional change" (Boughey 2007:20). However, despite an intensive focus by researchers and academic development practitioners on these issues over a period of at least twenty years (Boughey, 2013), participation and success rates amongst black students in South African HE remain at stubbornly low levels (CHE, 2016). Boughey (2013) argues that this may in part be because critical discourses have made little headway in challenging the common sense framing of students as simply lacking transferable language and literacy skills (see also Boughey and McKenna 2016). In South Africa as elsewhere, rather than signaling transformative approaches (Lillis and Scott 2007; Lillis et al. 2015) the term academic literacy/ies has "come to give expression to the primarily instrumental focus of ensuring that students are able to 'meet the demands of writing in the university'" (Lillis and Scott 2007: 6) Arguably, this instrumental focus has intensified through association with the employability agenda, with strong emphasis on ensuring students possess the necessary transferable skills to meet the demands of writing in employment beyond the degree.

This paper seeks to explore this puzzle of the apparently low 'uptake' of transformative approaches by drawing insight from an empirical study conducted in a vocationally oriented South African university. The aim of the study was to explore lecturers' perspectives on student writers and their writing and on the pedagogies through which they enact these perspectives. Despite the primacy of the teacher's role in student writing development, empirical attention focusing on university teachers' understanding of this role has been curiously limited. Early pioneering work by Lea and Street (1998, 1999) included detailed consideration of teachers' perspectives as well as those of students, but this focus has surfaced only intermittently in subsequent academic literacies research e.g. McKenna (2004) in South Africa, Bailey (2010) Author 1 (2018). This research therefore recognizes the central role lecturers have in shaping the learning contexts of higher education and their tacit knowledge of the institutional and discursive conditions which in turn shape their practice (Tuck, 2018).

The site of the study was a South African University of Technology (UoT). In South Africa, vocational and career-orientated undergraduate diplomas are almost exclusively accommodated within the UoT sector. In support of this strong vocationalist agenda, curricular and pedagogic attention is often directed towards the development of industry-specific skills and competencies that have currency

within the professional field (Du Pré, 2010; Author 2, 2013). Over a six-month period, seven subject lecturers working in two different disciplinary areas participated in a series of multiple interviews characterised by their dialogic and ethnographic orientation. The interviews explored participants' biographical and academic histories, their views and understandings of student writing in the university, their writing pedagogies and assessment practices and finally, their insights and perceptions about wider institutional conditions that framed their academic activities. A range of textual data were also gathered comprising lesson plans, curriculum statements, learner guides and marked written assignments, along with screenshots and photographs. This in-depth qualitative approach foregrounded the inherent complexity of pedagogic activity around student writing, enabling a nuanced understanding of the different choices made by individual teachers but also of the constraints on those choices.

In presenting findings here we will draw attention to the different framings of student writing which emerged in the study. These different framings entail not only models of writing, but also have implication for student identities and for pedagogic relations (Ivanič, 2004). We focus respectively on three ways in which writing pedagogies are constructed as "filling gaps" in students' language deficits, "bridging gaps" between students' perceived vernacular language practices and those of the academy and professions, and more rarely, as "closing gaps" between institutional and students' literacies through an emphasis on meaning-making and on students' epistemological contribution. We show that while some lecturers had found ways to move away from a purely instrumental, skills-focused and normative approach to student writing, a transformative approach was more difficult to discern. Data analysis suggests some reasons for this, highlighting that writing pedagogies cannot be extracted from the influences of dominant and 'readily available' (Turner 2011) discourses of language as a decontextualized skill, or from institutional and social conditions.

These insights point to the need to rethink the nature of institutional responses to the student writing 'problem', and to reconsider the role of the individual teacher as part of this response, both within and beyond South Africa. In particular, we argue that there are serious limitations on what can be achieved if the burden of change is placed solely on individuals. Transformative writing pedagogies can only flourish in certain conditions, some of which can only be achieved through bold, imaginative and properly resourced change on an institutional, sectoral and wider social scale.

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