

## **Texts, practices and student learning: A view from the South**

**Chrissie Boughey**  
**Rhodes University, South Africa**

### **Abstract**

This article uses ‘close-up’ ethnographic research to provide an account of students’ engagement with learning in a South African university. Broadly based on Halliday’s (1973, 1978, 1994) understanding of texts resulting from contexts, the account challenges dominant constructions of the problems students encounter as stemming from the use of inappropriate ‘approaches’ to learning, the lack of ‘study’ and other skills or problems with proficiency in areas such as writing or language and shows how students’ unfamiliarity with the context of the university leads them to draw on ‘other’ contexts in order to engage with the texts they must read, write and listen to in the course of their studies. This drawing on ‘other’ contexts then results in the texts produced by students, and the practices which give rise to those texts, being inappropriate to the context of the university. Although the research on which the article is based took place in South Africa, it is argued that the theoretical perspective it provides has relevance across other contexts given the increasingly diverse student bodies which characterize higher education across the globe.

### **Introduction**

I work at a university. The building which houses my department is located on one of a series of quadrangles which comprise the main campus and is entered through an arched cloister. On the ground floor of the building is a large lecture theatre where lecturers lecture and students listen and take notes although sometimes the lecture theatre is also used as a venue for tests and examinations. My department has a seminar room which we use for teaching purposes but in which we also sit and drink tea because its large table not only makes the passing of milk and sugar particularly convenient but also because it facilitates the kind of academic discussions which characterize much of the time we spend together as colleagues. Across the quadrangle on which my department is located is the library, repository of thousands of books and bound volumes of journals many of which contain the work of the academic staff of the university. Students often sit in the quadrangles of the university and sometimes, especially in hot weather, tutors take their tutorial groups out to sit cross-legged in circles on the grass. What I haven’t said until now is that I work in a university in Africa or, more precisely, in South Africa. This means that not only are the quadrangles and cloisters which make the campus recognizable as a university alien to African soil but so too are many of the practices which constitute the university itself.

Comparatively little is known of indigenous learning practices in Africa although a number of authors (Blacking, 1961; Cole-Beuchat, 1957; Ishengoma, 2005; Nakene, 1943), for example, have pointed to the way riddles and stories told around the fire in traditional African cultures are rich sources of educational development. What has

become clear in recent years in South Africa, however, is that, as the number of black students from a diverse range of social, cultural and linguistic backgrounds has increased on campuses across the country, so too have problems related to attrition and graduation rates. Figures released by the Department of Education (DoE, 2006) show, for example, that 38% of students entering South African universities in 2000 had dropped out by 2004. In the same cohort, 12% had not completed their degrees and 50% had graduated. The figures for technikons, the South African equivalent of polytechnic institutions elsewhere, are even worse since they show that 58% of students institutions in 2000 had dropped out by 2004, 10% still had not completed their qualifications and only 32% had graduated.

Popular discourses often attribute problems of attrition and poor throughput to the school system. South African schools, it is argued, still carry the legacy of apartheid and, as a result, the educational experiences available to millions of black school children are of an inferior quality (see, for example, McFarlane, 2006). Other discourses locate problems in students themselves pathologising those students in the process of doing so (Boughey, 2002). Because of their status as speakers of English as an additional language and because English is the medium of instruction in higher education, for example, students are deemed to lack the 'language competence' to engage with their studies. Drawing on what Frances Christie (Christie, 1993) terms the 'Received Tradition of English Teaching', 'language competence' is then constructed as dependent on mastery of English grammar, spelling and punctuation. These same discourses construct language as a transparent medium, or what Christie (1985) terms 'language as an instrument of communication'. The idea that language is a vehicle for communicating pre-made meanings to others contrasts with what Christie (*ibid*) also calls 'language as a resource' or the idea that language shapes experience and thus constructs meanings themselves.

Other discourses relate to printed texts constructing them as 'autonomous' in the sense that meaning is contained in them and that therefore what students require are the skills and strategies to be able to 'extract' or decode that meaning (Boughey, 2002, see also, Olsen, 1977). Failure is then attributed to the lack of these 'skills'. The discourse of the autonomous text contrasts with other understandings which perceive texts as socially embedded artifacts which do not carry meaning itself but rather clues which allow meanings to be constructed through interaction with the knowledge of the social contexts in which they were created (Boughey, *ibid*). Since the term 'text' can be extended to include other artifacts such as the lecture, the essay or assignment, the test and the examination, discourses constructing texts as autonomous therefore construct students as deficient in listening 'skills', notetaking 'skills', writing 'skills' and the more generic study 'skills'.

The focus of this article is the relationship between students and the texts which constitute the university. The article provides a 'close-up' examination of that relationship in order to problematise the texts which constitute the university themselves, the pathologising of students through the privileging of the texts which have traditionally comprised the university and, importantly, the measures taken to address 'problems'

located in students. These measures effectively constitute an enormous 'skills' industry involving publishers and the practitioners who claim to develop the 'skills' themselves.

Although the article draws on South African research and South African contexts, a central underpinning idea revolves around the idea of difference. While the black South Africans who now comprise the majority of student bodies on most university campuses are 'different' to their white middle class peers of European descent who historically dominated participation in higher education in South Africa, are they 'different' to other pathologised groups on other campuses in other parts of the world? The 'close-up' examination presented here is therefore also offered as a challenge to readers to examine their own contexts in the light of the insights it aims to provide.

### **Another text, another context**

This article began by describing the quadrangles and cloisters of an elite, historically white South African university. It now shifts to another context, a historically black campus located in a former 'homeland'. Some of the texts which comprise this university are very different to those found at the former. Quadrangles and cloisters draw on a context of historical monasticism and of the roots of dominant understandings of the university in mediaeval Europe. At this university, the organization of buildings designed to block the movement of large numbers of students draws on the context of control of the apartheid regime. Some texts are nonetheless the same. Lecturers lecture, tutors tutor and students write essays, assignments, tests and examinations drawing on books and articles in order to do so.

Lunch at this university is served in what is called the 'tea-room'. Food is prepared in a central kitchen and arrives in the tea-room in polystyrene containers which are then heated up in a microwave oven by the tea-room assistant. Each day, there is a choice of two main meals and a large menu on the wall announces the meal schedule. By 12h30 there is always a queue of people waiting to buy lunch so there is ample time to read the menu. My black academic colleagues ignore the menu however and choose instead to negotiate a verbal display of both meals on offer before choosing and paying for one. As I stand in the queue waiting to place my order, I wonder (see Boughey, 1998) why my colleagues don't speed up the process by reading the menu on the wall. My answer to my question lies in the work of ethnographers such as Heath (1983, social anthropologists such as Street (1993,1995) and social linguists such as Gee (1990) which perceives language related acts such as reading not as neutral, a-social, a-cultural, a-political 'skills' but rather as deeply embedded in social contexts. Heath (*ibid*:386), for example, writes of a set of 'social interactional rules which regulate the type and amount of talk about what is written and define ways in which oral language reinforces, denies, extends or sets aside the written material'. In this context, then, the social interactional rules' on which my black colleagues draw because of their own social histories, determine that texts such as menus should be 'set aside' and oral interaction privileged in the social space of the tea room. My experience of working with black students in the same university suggests to me that these students also prefer to 'set aside' written texts in favour of oral communication. When I give out carefully designed written assignment rubrics, for

example, I am confronted by student after individual student who asks the same question ‘What do we have to do?’ My efforts to direct their attention to the rubric are fruitless and I too am forced into an oral explanation of the task on a one-to-one basis even though I have already explained it in the class. My colleagues at the university claim that the students lack reading ‘skills’ and, indeed, an entire service course has been set up to teach a whole suite of academic ‘skills’ alongside the English language proficiency they are also deemed to lack.

My understanding of the situation is somewhat different, however. For me, the ‘setting aside’ of written texts is a result of students drawing on a context with which they are familiar. In their home communities, oral communication is privileged over the written because of values attributed to orality and the *social* interaction associated with it. In those communities, it is entirely appropriate to set aside written texts. However, the university, a different context, requires that they should engage with them. My black academic colleagues are able to distinguish between the contexts. In the tea room, they recognize its closeness to contexts outside the university along with the fact that, if they did not engage in social interaction with the tea-room worker, they would offend her. In other social spaces in the university, they recognize other contexts and draw on ways of behaving which are appropriate to them.

### **A theoretical perspective**

The field which has become known as ‘New Literacy Studies’ provides a theoretical perspective on the observations noted above. Street (1984), for example, makes a distinction between what he terms ‘autonomous’ and ‘ideological’ models of literacy. The autonomous model of literacy draws on the sort of understandings noted earlier in it assumes that literacy is an issue involving the decoding and encoding of print. Literacy is thus a unitary phenomenon and the development of literacy dependent on teaching individuals a set of technical skills. The ideological model, on the other hand has a much wider view of literacy in that it acknowledges that values and attitudes towards print, and the socially embedded understanding of the purposes of a text these values and attitudes give rise to, then result in multiple ways of engaging with texts. Understandings of the status and purpose of a text are thus seen to be derived from its context and are not inherent to the text itself. The multiplicity of statuses and purposes which can be accorded to texts then give rise to multiple ways of engaging with them. South African research (McEwan & Malan, 1996) notes for example that, in one rural community, the status and purpose of a totem is accorded to a hymn book. Community members, who could not necessarily encode or decode (and who therefore were ‘illiterate’ in terms of the autonomous model) lined up to touch the book before leaving their home for a religious service. This is identified as a literacy practice associated with one kind of literacy. If a multiplicity of ways of relating to and engaging with texts is acknowledged, then literacy becomes a multiple rather than a unitary phenomenon.

In the context of the ideological model, once diversity in contemporary student bodies is acknowledged, then the multiplicity of literacies within that student body also needs to be acknowledged. This is because students will arrive at university with very different

literacy histories, different experiences of understanding the purpose and status of texts and different experiences of ways of engaging with them. Within the university, those students are required to work with one particular set of literacies, academic literacies, which in turn require them to engage with the texts on reading lists and in libraries in very specific ways. The idea that these new ways of engaging with texts is a matter of the acquisition of a set of 'skills' is something this article will go on to question in more detail using 'close-up' research.

Yet another theoretical perspective informs that 'close-up' research - that of Halliday's (1973, 1978, 1994) 'Systemic Functional Linguistics' (SLS). SLS rests on three basic assumptions (see, for example, Eggins, 1994; Bloor & Bloor, 1995):

- the function of language is to make meanings which make sense of the world (cf. this understanding with Christie's (1985) 'language as an instrument of communication' noted earlier);
- these meanings are influenced by the social and cultural context in which they are exchanged;
- the process of making meanings is semiotic and involves making linguistic choices.

In this process of using language to make sense of the world, three kinds of meanings can be distinguished: meanings about the 'reality' being referred to (*experiential* meanings); meanings about the relationships between people interacting through language (*interpersonal* meanings) and meanings which refer to the way the text is organized (*textual* meanings). These three kinds of meanings are sometimes termed *metafunctions* (Bloor and Bloor, 1995:9). Certain aspects of the grammatical system of the language realise each of these metafunctions. Since these aspects of grammar operate in conjunction with each other, all three types of meanings are fused together in linguistic units. Because language is a semiotic system involving choosing, each linguistic unit comes into being because a set of choices has been made in relation to each of these metafunctions.

Key to SLS is the understanding that these choices are made against a cultural and situational background which determines their appropriateness. For example, in the sentence 'Kids from broken homes turn to crime'<sup>1</sup>, the language user was able to choose from at least two alternatives in naming the subject of her sentence. The word she chose to use, 'kids', is more appropriate to some contexts than others. In the university, the context in which she is writing, the alternative 'children' would have been more appropriate. Given that the writer knew the word 'children', one can assume that an 'inappropriate' choice was made either because she was unfamiliar with the context of the university and did not appreciate the ways in which it differed to other contexts with which she was familiar or because she was deliberately flouting the conventions of that context. Understanding realisations of language as the result of a set of choices allows us to talk about elements of those realisations not as 'right' or 'wrong', but as 'appropriate'

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<sup>1</sup> This example is taken from the work of my students.

or 'inappropriate' (Eggs, 1994:145). Critical linguists working within a systemic framework are then able to go on to challenge the notion of 'appropriateness' because of its socially constructed nature.

When the broad ideas informing SLS are placed alongside the construct of multiple literacies, then an entirely new perspective on what happens when students from diverse contexts engage with the texts of a university becomes possible. Many of these students will draw on understandings of the purpose and status of a text which have been derived from their home or school communities. These understandings will then lead them into specific ways of engaging with those texts. The choices they make in terms of dealing with a text are therefore 'inappropriate' choices in terms of the dominant context of the university. An understanding of the text as something to be revered and remembered, for example, will lead to ways of reading, listening and of speaking which accord the text the status of 'fact'. These students will then try to remember and repeat the text, or engage with what 'approaches to learning' research (see, for example, Marton *et. al.* 1984; Biggs 1978) names 'surface' learning, rather than engage in the practice of using other texts to critique it. The idea, then, that students who engage in these kinds of literacy practices are simply using an inappropriate 'learning approach' or that what they need is a set of 'critical reading/thinking skills' fails to acknowledge the complexity of the processes involved in making a shift to a set of practices which allow students to interrogate a text and to reconstruct it in the process of doing so. Such understandings also fail to acknowledge that the development of new ways of engaging with texts necessarily impact on *identity* – on the 'who' of the reader, speaker or writer. It is this point in particular that the 'close-up' research described below aims to illustrate.

In order for this to happen, it is necessary to turn to SLS for one more framing idea. As already noted, SLS rests on the assumption that language use involves a series of choices which are made against an understanding of the context in which language is used. These choices can be divided into three main areas: choices about what is being spoken or written about (the field of a text); choices about the relationship between the language uses in the context in which the text exists (the *tenor* of the text); and choices about the role language plays in this interaction (the *mode* of the text). Although all three constructs of field, tenor and mode can be used to understand what is going on when students read, write or speak (see, for example, Boughey, 2005), the focus here will be on tenor or, more particularly, what can be gleaned from an examination of texts produced by students in order to inform an understanding of the way those students relate to the texts which dominate the university as an institution.

### **More texts another context**

This article now shifts to a more specific context in the historically black university described above – a first year class in Political Philosophy. The focus of the class was the political philosophies of Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) and John Locke (1632-1704). Hobbes and Locke both use a method termed *resolutivo compositivo* to answer the question 'What are the functions of a legitimate government?' This involves breaking the larger question down into a series of smaller questions. The larger question is thus

answered by asking ‘What is the nature of man<sup>2</sup>?’, ‘If man is like this, what would life be like in a state of nature (i.e. in a place with no government)?’, ‘Why would man therefore choose to leave a state of nature and be governed?’ and ‘What would the functions of the government man established to address the reasons for leaving a state of nature be?’ The two philosophers’ understandings of the nature of man give rise to very different conceptions of a legitimate government. Hobbes, for example, argues that man’s egocentric nature and unbridled natural urges would mean that life in a state of nature would be ‘solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short’ (Hobbes, 1946:82). In his *Of Civil Government: Two Treatises*, Locke (1924) on the other hand, constructs man as an essentially ethical being with the ‘laws of nature’ written in his heart. These laws of nature then allow him to distinguish between right and wrong and to act altruistically. For Hobbes, man’s egocentric nature means that a legitimate government is autocratic with absolute powers. Locke, on the other hand, is able to argue that man’s knowledge of natural laws means that a government must have minimal powers.

The close-up research mentioned earlier focused on an ethnographic engagement with students in the Political Philosophy class which I joined as a participant observer/researcher, a role which occasionally required me to team-teach with the lecturer responsible for the class from my perspective as a specialist in the development of academic literacy. The course in which students were enrolled required the production of three formal pieces of written work and the submission of ‘end-notes’ or informal responses to questions posed at the end of some classes. All written work was photocopied in order to produce a data base for analysis. In addition to analyzing written work, the research design also allowed for close-up engagement with three groups of students who agreed to participate in the research process. Interaction with these groups of students was both formal and informal. I spoke to these students informally before and after classes and conducted a series of focus group interviews with them throughout the course. I also had access to all student feedback elicited during the course.

The point of the analysis of students’ writing was not merely to look at the products of their efforts but, rather, through an examination of their writing and discussions about it, to look at the way they engaged with their own texts and the texts of others.

### *Didactic relationships*

One of the most significant points to emerge from the analysis was that students appeared to understand the purpose of the texts produced by the philosophers as essentially didactic in nature. In a piece of work summarizing Hobbes’ position, for example, one student wrote:

Hobbes says everyone *must* be equal and is capable to get what he/she wants. In other words he says that if someone own a business if you want that shop you *must* use the power to take it . . . (my italics)<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> The use of the generic ‘man’ here follows the philosophers’ own usage.

<sup>3</sup> Students’ texts appear exactly as expressed in the original. Grammatical and other errors have not been corrected.

In this example, the use of the word ‘must’ is an indication of an understanding that Hobbes is advocating certain kinds of behaviour rather than hypothesizing about an abstract ‘nature of man’. Later on in the same piece of work, the student expresses the same understanding using other words, thus contesting the idea that the word ‘must’ is used because of a lack of vocabulary items:

Hobbes says nobody *is allowed* to own a property.

Similarly, another student writes:

According to Hobbes and as the state of nature is concern, there is nothing such as mine and thine. Everything is acquired by force. If you want to obtain something, you have to be brutal and strong and because you are *supposed* to fight in order to get it. According to my own it is not right, if you need something that you do not have to go to those who have it and ask him to give it if he refuses just leave him because its belong to him and not to you.

In this example, the student’s understanding of Hobbes’ advocacy of aggression (‘you are *supposed* to fight’) is then opposed by her own opinion (‘According to my own [opinion], it is not right . . .’) and by her own version of an appropriate way to behave derived from her own understanding of social context.

In the following extract, the student also provides evidence of an understanding of the purpose of Hobbes’ text as being essentially didactic by first critiquing the very idea of a state of nature before going on to call on her own context and citing the Bible (an authoritative, didactic text) to substantiate her opposition to Hobbes:

There is no government or ruler:- people do not live the better life if there is no government. Even in the Bible we find that in every country there is a ruler and God work with and even sent him to the people and the country became prosperous.

Students’ understanding of the texts of the two philosophers as essentially didactic is also evidenced in their approbation of Locke in contrast to their condemnation of Hobbes:

Locke suggest that people should be genuine concern about others and this is good for in community communication and sharing is successful community.

In this example, the student once again draws on popular discourses in the contexts with which she is familiar outside the university to support Locke’s position.

For the students in the study, therefore, Hobbes and Locke appear to function as preachers advocating ways of behaving. Their familiarity with texts such as the Bible and school textbooks (probably the only texts the majority would have been exposed to) and of preaching as one of the few ‘elevated’ forms of discourse they would also have



experienced before coming to university led them to understand the purpose of all texts as didactic. This understanding of the purpose of the text then meant that they were unable to deal with the hypothetical and abstract nature of the texts they were required to engage with in the class.

Shifting to the oral text of the lecture, it also meant that students were unable to appreciate their lecturer's shifts in position. When their lecturer was explicating Hobbes' philosophy, students understood that he was advocating it. When he then went on to explore Locke's position, students' response was one of 'But you said...' This is an important observation given the primacy of the lecture as a mode of teaching in the university and, in this context, of students' and lecturers' contrasting understanding of its purpose.

Regardless of problems related to the perceived shifts of position on the part of the lecturer, students' understanding of the lecture and of the course learning guide and other handouts as texts to be remembered and repeated is evident in comments such as the following elicited in student feedback surveys:

As for me, I sometimes get discouragious when you tell me the facts i.e. about Hobbes and Locke, I then write down what you say respectively, and answer your questions through the notes you have provided me with, but when my work comes back, I find that you reject most of the facts that I have derived from you.

In this comment, the student's confession of getting 'discouragious' attests to the impact of what the university requires him to do on his own understandings of what he needs to do at a deeply personal level. The university's solution to this problem is usually to teach him 'skills' effectively ignoring this young man's experience as a social being in an alien context.

#### *Drawing on familiar contexts*

The idea that students in the class were drawing on familiar contexts in order to make sense of texts in an alien context was also affirmed by the examples they used in order to substantiate points they wanted to make in their own writing. In the following extract, the student is trying to enrich his explication of Hobbes' argument that man is driven by unbridled desires:

For an example, a person who is owning a big supermarket, ten taxis . . . butcher and double story house but he can't stop now I had it enough then I must stop and leave for others but he still need more and more.

The examples he uses (a big supermarket, ten taxis, a butcher's shop, and a double storey house) are redolent of values in his home community however and sit uneasily in a class taught by a white, middle class lecturer.

The same drawing on familiar contexts is also evident in another student's use of Archbishop Desmond Tutu as an example of egocentrism:

According to Hobbes, all men are egocentric e.g. Bishop Tutu.

When I asked the student why he thought Tutu, a Nobel prize winner and renowned humanitarian and activist in the face of apartheid, was egocentric, his answer followed the following argument: 'Everyone knows the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (the South African attempt to heal the wounds of apartheid, chaired by Tutu) was useless. Tutu was therefore in it for the money. Therefore he is egocentric.' In responding in this way, the student was drawing on popular discourses in his home community – discourses which might well have gone unchallenged there but which would be contested in the university. The implication of such challenges for the identities of students so deeply implicated in such popular discourses cannot be overestimated.

### *Multiple voices, a single text*

Students' understanding of the relationship between themselves and their texts and of their relationship with the authors of other texts is also evident in the following extract:

State of Nature is whereby there is no police, no government, no law. The people will be nasty, poor, brutish and life will be short. Imagine in the boxing ring with two fighters without referee. It will be nasty people will do what they like sometimes the supporters will get into the ring and fight the one they do not support.

This text is written as a single 'voice' even though it effectively manifests several 'voices'. The first 'voice' belongs to Hobbes who says that life in a state of nature will be 'nasty, brutish and short'. This 'voice' was marked (through referencing, the use of quotation marks and other devices such as 'According to Hobbes') in the learning guide provided to students in the class. The second voice in the extract above belongs to the lecturer who used the analogy of the boxing ring to try to explain Hobbes' vision of life in a state of nature. This analogy is not acknowledged in the student's text by the use of a device such as 'Life in a state of nature could be compared to ...' In this text, as in many others, the university requires the student to weave a number of voices together using a number of rhetorical devices including referencing.

In the following extract, the student introduces the voice of the course learning guide (which states 'According to Locke, all men are made by God and are sent into the world to do God's business', 'men have equal moral worth' and 'This means that no man exists for the use of another man'), Locke's own voice ('All men are the workmanship of one omnipotent and infinitely wise maker') and, interestingly, voices which presumably come from the student's experiences of religious services ('all of us we are the children of God, all men are created by God'):

According to Locke's point of view, all men are made by God and are sent into the world to do God's business because all of us are the children of God, all men are created by God they are equal and have equal moral worth. This means that there is no man which exist for the use of another man. All men are the workmanship of one omnipotent and infinitely wise maker. They are sent into the world about his business. No man is made for the use of another man . . .

Once again, the multiple voices evident in the text to an experienced eye are not marked by the student with the result that the text is written in a single voice which, importantly, is not even his own.

In the extracts provided above, have students failed to acknowledge the multiple voices I have identified because they do not have command of the rhetorical devices needed to indicate them or because their previous literacy experiences have not developed an understanding of the multivocal nature of texts? My work in the philosophy class leads me to privileging the latter understanding and thus, to questioning the value of 'study skills' classes which teach these devices as a fairly superficial set of rules without investigating whether students perceive a multiplicity of voices in academic texts and their own need to weave them into their own texts.

### *Taking a position*

My observation of the class noted the lecturer's frequent attempts to exhort students to take a position (and indeed to develop their own voice in relation to the learning which formed the focus of the class) by 'giving their own opinion'. Students followed this advice as the following example shows:

For Locke I do not think that he is right about people having an inborn sense of good or bad, because he cannot even be sure or positive that are altruistic. He fails to describe people as altruistic because I don't think there are such people. I have never heard of people who share their clothes or give food or whatever good to help poor people because they think they are all valuable to God so they should also be valuable between ourselves.

In this example, the student opposes Locke by drawing on her own experience of life in a South African urban township. The university does not require her to draw on this context in order to inform her text but rather to draw on other texts in order to substantiate her argument as, ideally, the student should have drawn on philosophical critiques of Locke's notion of altruism as a characteristic inherent to humankind. The student's previous experiences of substantiation in her home community are not of intertextuality, however, but rather of the use of commonsense experiences. Consider, for example, how often the text of the sermon (probably the most common experience of elevated discourse available to students in the philosophy class) draws on listeners' experiences in their home context either to substantiate a point the preacher is making or to explicate a point taken from the Bible. Because the student draws on home contexts rather than academic contexts in order to write her text, her authorial 'voice' comes

across as honest but nonetheless disarmingly naïve and ‘un-academic’. This then impacts on her relationship with her academic reader who expects her to draw on the same contexts as she, the reader, does.

## **Conclusion**

The close-up research described in this paper offers an alternative perspective on students’ encounters with the texts that comprise the university outlined in the introduction. This alternative perspective challenges constructions of these encounters that centre on students’ use of inappropriate ‘approaches’ to learning or their lack of ‘skills’ or proficiency in areas such as language or writing and rather shows that students’ engagements with texts are based on understandings of a context which differs to the context of the university. The actions undertaken by students to learn, therefore, are deeply related to their identities as individuals *outside* the university and how they understand ‘outside’ contexts. Although the students in this study were black working class South Africans, the university is arguably just as alien for millions of students across the world whose home contexts provide them with experiences which are ‘other’ to those offered, and valued, by the university. For how many other students, then, is the university a place which, to borrow from the participant in this study, makes them ‘discourageous’?

While arguments related to the privileging of some contexts over others should be sufficient to motivate a shift towards trying to understand students’ experiences as they enter the university, other, more pragmatic, arguments are also available. The development of a globalised economy with a thirst for ‘knowledge workers’ has brought increased pressure on higher education across the world. This pressure has not only resulted in more students being admitted to universities but also, to use a popular phrase, in more ‘non-traditional’ students entering higher education. If higher education is to meet the demand for knowledge workers, it not only has to provide formal access to the university but also what Morrow (1994) terms ‘epistemological access’ – access to the processes of knowledge construction which sustain the university since it is only through an understanding of the processes of knowledge construction that new knowledge can be produced.

In this globalised context of the need for efficiency and improved student learning, and as Haggis (2003) notes, research into learning tends to focus on ‘approaches to learning’ (Marton *et. al.* 1984; Biggs 1978) in order to make universities more effective and more efficient in terms of both the number and the quality of graduates they produce. As Haggis (*ibid*:101) also points out, however, such research is ‘restricted’ since its “‘construction” of the learner avoids any real engagement with the complexities of location and context’. This article, then, takes up Haggis’ call for engagement with context and shows how such engagement can result in more nuanced and socio-culturally sensitive understandings of what it means to engage with learning in higher education than those available until now.

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