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Successful first-year learning: a social cognitive view of academic literacy

A B S T R A C T The research data used in this article are drawn from a study conducted in a business faculty at a Historically Black South African University during 2009 and 2010. A comparison was made in the study between two groups of first-year students: a group that had passed all their modules and a group that had failed some of their modules at the end of their first year of study. The aim was to investigate factors that had an impact on the successful completion of the first year of study by problematising the perception that those students from disadvantaged backgrounds or under-resourced schools are necessarily disadvantaged and destined to fail. In this article the focus is on the successful group of students and their mastery of academic discourse situated in the complexity of social and academic interaction. The findings indicate that the inter-relatedness of personal, academic, social and institutional factors mirror the inter-related way in which the students had experienced them. These findings further underline the fact that successful learning is a complex and multi-layered process that is ongoing and that needs to be monitored, sustained and evaluated throughout students' study careers. The students' personal perspectives on academic study provided not only evidence that the development of academic literacy is socially situated and constructed but also showed how successful students manage their academic learning to mitigate under-preparedness and adverse personal circumstances.

Key words: Students, successful learning, academic literacy, interrelated, socially situated.

1. Introduction

The support and academic development of first-year students in higher education is a world-wide concern and particularly so in the South African context (Van Schalkwyk, Leibowitz, and Van der Merwe 2009). The concept of academic literacy is often used to typify interventions that attempt to address a wide variety of perceived problems. In describing academic literacy, Leibowitz (2001:2) suggests it "can be summarised as a culturally specific set of linguistic and

discourse conventions, influenced by written forms utilised primarily in academic institutions". Knowing and understanding these conventions enables students to participate appropriately in a particular academic discourse (Boughey 2000) and therefore they have the potential to be successful in their studies. This is the view which we support in this article.

This article reports on one set of results drawn from a larger study where a group of successful (in terms of passing all their first year modules) and a group of unsuccessful students (in terms of failing one and more modules in the same period) were followed through their first year of study to track the factors that led to their success or failure. Our focus here is on the successful group and on the what, the why and the how of successful learning for new first-year students in a business faculty at a Historically Black University (HBU) in South Africa. This institution caters mainly for students who have been exposed to so-called 'disadvantaged' and 'underprepared' schooling. Such students predominantly come from marginalised and poorly resourced education environments and socio-economic backgrounds (Letseka and Maile 2008). As a result, the institution acknowledged that it had to provide 'an adequate bridge' from school to university for the students in order to better their chances for academic success and provide them with quality education reflected in the attainment of standards deserving of respect from fellow universities and industry (Baijnath 1997; Volbrecht 2002; Walker and Badsha 1993).

The study was undertaken against the backdrop of the wealth of research that has already been conducted on students' learning and dropout rates, nationally and globally. The findings from these studies indicated that it was mostly Black South African student cohorts that were failing and leaving higher education at an alarming rate (see for example Bunting 2004; the DoE 2004, Louw 2005; Scott 2006, 2009). Bunting (2004) and Webb (2002) are of the opinion that the effects of *apartheid* on the economic, social and political situation of many Black South Africans is the main reason why this is the case (see also Letseka and Maile 2008). They argue that these students entering higher education remain 'disadvantaged' and 'underprepared' and therefore are still in need of academic support (Bunting 2004; Letseka and Maile 2008; Webb 2002). In this study 'black' includes Indian, Coloured and African black students, thus referring to groups who were previously marginalised.

Apart from having been affected by the legacy of *apartheid*, these students are often further 'disadvantaged' because they have to learn and construct knowledge in English. Many of them are additional language speakers of English and therefore may not have the academic language proficiency in English that Cummins (2000) argues for, or more specifically, they would not necessarily understand "the way in which language is used to structure experiences within the University" (Boughey 2002:299). Furthermore, given the fact that learning a discipline implies learning to use language in "disciplinarily approved ways" that involve "a specialized discourse" (Hyland 2006:39), and that these students often do not have the academic language proficiency as a starting point for more specialised discourses, they could find learning and constructing knowledge in English more difficult. To be successful in their studies is therefore a considerable challenge for many Black students and gives some explanation why many of them are failing and dropping out of higher education.

However, while much research had been conducted on the reasons why Black students are failing and dropping out, a review of the literature did not reveal any studies that had been

done to look specifically at Black students who were successful in completing their studies at institutions of higher learning in South Africa, nor at the role that the acquisition of academic literacy might play in this success. This is exactly what our study was concerned with: Black students who did succeed in their first-year of study at a HBU. The aim of the study was thus to investigate factors that had an impact on the successful completion of the first year of study by registered Black first-year students in the three-year degree programme in a business faculty, with a focus on their mastery of academic discourse. As such it problematised the perception that students from disadvantaged backgrounds or under-resourced schools were necessarily disadvantaged and destined to fail.

2. Theoretical orientation

The theoretical orientation of the study is drawn from Vygotsky's (1979, 1994) social cultural theory and Bandura's (1985, 2001) social cognitive theory which acknowledges that learning is socially situated and constructed. Vygotsky (1979:131) views learning "as a profoundly social process," explaining his theory as being centred on the notion that the environment in which human beings live and function is the source of development of their personalities and characteristics which ultimately reflect their historical and cultural contexts. He (1994:176) also explains that the development of human beings gave rise to the underpinnings of capitalism: the division between intellectual and physical labour, the separation between town and country, the exploitation of child and female labour, poverty and the unequal development of human beings' potential as one extreme thereof. Vygotsky (1994:178) concludes by stating: "As a result of capitalism, the development of material production simultaneously brought with it the progressive division of labour and the constantly growing distorted development of the human potential." It is this "constantly growing distorted development of the human potential" that is evident among most of the undergraduate students admitted to this institution, in that they are still entering higher education as 'disadvantaged' and 'underprepared' (Bunting 2004; Letseka, Cosser, Breier and Visser 2010; Webb 2002).

For the purposes of this study, particularly with a view to distinguishing both social and personal factors that may impact upon academic study, it was decided to augment Vygotsky's societal focus with Bandura's (1986, 2001) social cognitive theory that takes cognisance of individual's agency in human development. Bandura (1986:18) explains human functioning "in terms of a model of triadic reciprocal causation in which behaviour, cognitive and other personal factors, and environmental events all operate as interacting determinants of each other." He (1986:51) argues that "[l]earning is largely an information-processing activity" and that human beings acquire behaviour patterns from people whom they observe. His theory "subscribes to a model of emergent interactive agency" which in turn differentiates among three different modes of agency, namely personal, proxy and collective agency (Bandura 2001:3) which human beings use to develop and learn.

Vygotsky's view of society therefore, acts as a foundation from which Bandura's perspectives on individual agency, within society in general and the university society in particular, can provide additional insight and explanatory power for the findings of this study. While we acknowledged the different approaches of human development in these two theories, it is our contention that they assisted in demonstrating how learning is socially embedded and how the factors and

issues identified by the students were inter-related and inter-dependent, driven by social and individual enablers.

These theories have also shaped current views of academic support, literacy and academic literacy in particular (see for example Barton 1994, 2007; Gee 1990, 2008; Street 1995, 2001). Barton's (2007) ecological approach to literacy acknowledges the social situatedness of learning where he explains how literacy "is embedded in human behaviour and its environment and its place in history, in language and in learning" (Barton 2007:32). Barton (2007:34-35) explains that an ecological approach to literacy and learning takes into account that literacy is a social activity; that there are different literacies people make use of and these are situated in broader social relations; that literacy acquisition is based upon a system of symbols and is part of people's thinking processes; that people have awareness, attitudes and values with respect to literacy and these attitudes and values guide their actions; and that literacy events have social histories because current practices originated from the past. The way in which these points of view have shaped academic development can be seen in critical approaches to academic literacy as promoted by Gee (2008) and Street (2001). These views have also had an influence on current debates about the role of English in the academy, as demonstrated by Hyland (2006).

Drawing on these theories, an argument could be made for a fully integrated and holistic approach to academic literacy (Van Schalkwyk 2008). The data obtained from this study shows how the development of an ecological approach to literacy is embedded in personal, academic and social experiences and is therefore supportive of this holistic approach.

3. Research design

A case study research design was used for this interpretive study. It focused on a specific faculty and a specific cohort of students (Leibowitz 2001; Holliday 2001; Yin 2009). Although this article reports mainly on the successful students, some references will be made to the unsuccessful students as a foil for the strategies used by the successful ones. Using a case study research design enabled the identification of the first-year students' specific needs in the learning environment, and the factors that enabled them to overcome their challenges to learning and to pass all their first-year modules. By comparing the two cases (the unsuccessful students were referred to as Case 1, while the successful students were referred to as Case 2 in the bigger study) it was possible to isolate and highlight the factors and practices that distinguish the successful students from the unsuccessful ones. The factors that had an influence on the unsuccessful students' academic careers will be discussed in a follow-up article.

The successful students comprised a group of twelve students during their first eighteen months of study. Eight of the students were registered for the B.Com. (General) degree and four students were registered for the B.Admin. degree. Both are three-year programmes. These students were purposively selected based on their successful results at the end of Term 1, 2009. Both degree programmes (B.Com. and B.Admin.) required first-year students to register for eight modules, four in the first semester and four in the second semester. Six of these modules are compulsory and two are electives (Undergraduate Faculty Calendar 2009).

Multiple data selection methods were used, resulting in three quantitative data sets and four qualitative data sets collected in the timeframe from April 2009 until March 2010. The

quantitative sets consisted of the students' biographical and geographical information as recorded on the university database, the first seven questions of a questionnaire in which the students indicated their biographical and geographical information themselves, and their final results for the 2009 academic year. The qualitative sets consisted of the following documents:

- Two written reflective pieces (Written Reflection 1 in April 2009 during the first semester, and Written Reflection 2 in July 2009 at the beginning of the second semester) in which the students had to respond to questions about what they perceived their challenges to learning were and what they think could be done to overcome these challenges, reasons as to why they have passed their modules and reasons why they have failed their modules, and what they would do differently in order to pass their remaining modules in the second semester.

- The remainder of the questions in the questionnaire (in October 2009 in the second semester) focused on whether or not they received support from their family and friends, if they still had financial difficulties, whether or not they still had the same or other challenges to learning, and what they could do to overcome these challenges.

- Written responses to questions asked in individual interviews conducted during March 2010 during the first semester. The interviews elicited their views on whether or not they were first-generation students, if HIV/Aids had an impact on their academic progress and what advice they would give to prospective students as to what they should do and not do to be successful in their studies.

The responses from the group of successful students generated rich, in-depth data which were analysed and interpreted by comparing and correlating the quantitative and qualitative data. Content analysis, using Henning's (2004) "open coding" process, was used to organise, sort and group the written information in the four qualitative data sets. The information was sorted and grouped under two main categories: what the challenges to learning were, and how the students dealt with and overcame these challenges. These two categories were further sub-divided into four themes, *personal factors, academic factors, social factors and institutional factors*. The discussion below is presented under these categories and themes to show how academic literacy development is embedded in the students' experiences in the learning process.

4. Challenges to learning

Initially all the successful students indicated that they had experienced challenges to learning, but that the challenges decreased as the year progressed. The analysis of the challenges to learning also revealed that these students dealt with two or more challenges simultaneously; emphasizing the complexity of the context within which students were studying. The sub-themes reported under *personal factors* challenges included not having adequate financial means, travelling as a result of not having on-campus accommodation and one student who had a disability. The challenges under *academic factors* were difficult modules, insufficient resources at home, not managing their time effectively, procrastination, a perceived heavy workload and the transition from high school to the university environment.

Under *institutional factors*, the challenges highlighted by students were insufficient tutorial support provision and the teaching methods and style of a lecturer. They did not report any challenges under the *social factors* theme.

5. Overcoming the challenges

5.1 Personal factors

During the early data-collection phase (April 2009) the successful students reported experiencing financial challenges pertaining to the purchasing of textbooks, travelling and living expenses. The students did not explain how they dealt with and overcame these financial challenges, but one could infer that they managed to deal with and find a way to overcome them because they did not raise this issue again in the later data (October 2009).

One of the two students who reported travelling long hours felt that he should try and find accommodation closer to the campus as a solution to the travelling challenge. However, this solution had financial implications and was therefore not a viable option.

The student who identified and reported on her disability as a challenge to learning was partially sighted (she only had 30% vision) and reading and studying were her biggest challenges. She explained that she started to work harder, talked to people, she joined a study group and that she attended the extra support classes that were offered in the residence where she stayed. All these actions assisted her to overcome the barriers and be successful.

It is worth noting at this point that all twelve students identified the support which they received from their families as an important enabler. Together with support from their families, the students also highlighted the need for support and encouragement from their peers and they explained how their friends and peers supported them academically. It seems as if they understood the importance of having a support system in place as Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt and Associates (2005) and Strydom and Mentz (2010) argue for. Moll (2007:274) brings a different dynamic in understanding family support systems to the fore in his discussion of "funds of knowledge" and how these socio-cultural dynamics of students' households function as social networks. These networks share or exchange essential social cultural practices, bodies of knowledge and information that households use for existence, development and advancement, in this case supporting the academic development of the students in their midst.

5.2 Academic factors

There were two main trends that emerged under this theme: on the one hand students described how they organised themselves to overcome their transition from school to university, time management and workload challenges; and on the other they described their interaction with tutors, lecturers and peers to maximise their understanding and therefore, successfully manage the modules they experience as academically challenging.

In the case of the first trend, seven students reported in detail that they worked harder by putting in more time and effort; that they "prioritised their work" and that they started with assignments early; that they "improved their time management techniques" by drawing up a time table and following it through. The detailed explanations revealed the students' attitudes, dedication and commitment to how they approached the academic work and everything related to their learning. In adopting these learning strategies the students proactively found ways to deal with their workload, demonstrated that they understood the learning goals and adjusted successfully to the demands made by academe. What happened to them is what Pascarella and

Terenzini (2005:608) advocate: "… the greater a student's engagement in academic work or in the academic experience of college, the greater his or her level of knowledge acquisition and general cognitive growth".

One of the students in the group was a typical example of a self-regulating student. She wrote about her experience of on-campus accommodation (she came from Port Elizabeth in the Eastern Cape and was fortunate to have had accommodation in one of the residences on campus) and how she benefited from that. She explained that living on campus made it easier for her to attend class and concentrate on her studies. She wrote (quoted verbatim):

> Being on campus means that I do not have to travel, deal with family dramas and all the everyday issues surrounding our townships and communities. It therefore helped me to concentrate on what is most important at this time in my life (my studies). I wake up every day thinking of nothing else but going to class, even though sometimes I am tempted not to go. But the fact that I live on a campus residence kept me grounded and reminded me of those who have to travel and deal with a lot just to get to campus, and that makes me realise how lucky I really am to be at university.

She could work late at night and did not have to worry about travelling at that time of the evening. In addition, the residence offered support programmes that she benefited from. She explained (quoted verbatim):

> There are also specialised programmes for first year resident students designed to assist them with regard to their academic work, adapt to the new environment and ways to overcome the challenges which arise. These residence benefits have contributed a lot to the positive choices I make for my future. The study material made available in campus residence helped me to keep focus and utilised my free time effectively in order to prevent the unknown.

Having on-campus accommodation proved to be beneficial to students coming from other provinces. It eliminated issues such as private accommodation which may not be conducive to learning, travelling long hours (especially at night) and additional expenses. The student also explained that having on-campus accommodation helped her avoid other challenges, such as "family dramas" and issues in the community. It enabled her to focus and concentrate on her studies. She made use of the support programmes that were offered in the residences and she benefited from these programmes because they contributed to her passing all her modules. It is clear from her response that she was self-regulating and did not give in to distractions, but instead realised that it was a privilege to be at university (as she reported in written reflection no. 1), particularly when she thought of the many learners and other young people who did not make it to university. Her 'will to learn' (Barnett 2007) was strong and she did what was necessary to achieve her goal of succeeding in her studies.

The second trend relates to the interaction between students and lecturers. Eight students reported that they "paid special attention in lectures"; seven of them were not "afraid to ask questions, to find help when needed" and "to go for consultation." These were important actions assisting them in understanding the content of the different modules and in clarifying difficult concepts and language issues. Thus, all these students employed different strategies to optimize opportunities for interaction and additional support, thereby actively becoming part of the ways of 'being' and 'doing' at university level (Mckenna 2004).

The students' responses to how they attempted to learn and understand the academic discourse indicated that they not only identified the problem, but also found a solution to the problem. They were not afraid to ask for help, they stayed behind after lectures to seek further clarification on content covered in the lectures and went for consultation. They were actively doing something to foster their integration into the academic structures and to become familiar with staff members. This aided their academic integration as Strydom and Mentz (2010) and Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) suggest would happen when there is interaction between students and lecturers outside of lectures and when students perceive lecturers to be caring and supportive (see also Van Schalkwyk 2008).

5.3 Social factors

Although the successful students did not report any challenges under this theme, all of them reported on the type of friends they made and how that was a contributing factor to their success. They explained that the 'right' friends ensured that they not only received general support and encouragement, but also received academic support and this helped them to avoid 'negative' peer pressure. Although making friends was seen as a *social factor* it also relates to, and forms part of the other three themes – *personal, academic* and *institutional factors*. Choosing friends when one is in a new environment is a personal matter; supporting and encouraging one another is both a personal and social matter that could assist with the social integration of students and the transition from school to university (Tinto 1975, 2000). When students work together in study groups and assist one another, it becomes an academic matter which contributes to their success in the learning process, which then becomes an institutional matter. The likelihood that they will follow the same pattern for their second and third year is strong since they laid a solid foundation for successful learning (Scott 2009). This sub-theme aptly exhibited the inter-relatedness and inter-dependency of the socially situated learning context (Bandura 1979; Vygotsky 1986, 2001).

5.4 Institutional factors

The students were asked to make suggestions on what they thought the Faculty could do to assist them in the learning process. Based on the fact that some of them identified tutorial support and insufficient resources at home as challenges, they suggested that the Faculty could assist them by providing more financial and technological resources, more academic support through the appointment of more lecturers and tutors, and that lecturers should provide more moral support, encouragement and professional support.

The students provided detailed explanations of how they dealt with and overcame their learning challenges. Their explanations and the actions they took revealed that they had a strong 'will to learn' (Barnett 2007) and that their will became even stronger when the challenges arose, which assisted them to persevere and not give up. As their will to learn became stronger, it could be argued that they were becoming self-regulated students with intrinsic motivation (Biggs 1999; Cohen and Dornyei 2002; Oxford 2001). They displayed a positive attitude using problem-solving and empowering language in their explanations on how they overcame their challenges. This strengthens our problematising of the perception of 'under preparedness' and 'disadvantaged' because it appeared that the students could explain, argue and conceptualise

their thoughts. For example where they explained what they have done to overcome their challenges to learning, they wrote (quoted verbatim):

> I need to start talking to people. […] I wrote a list of reasons why I am at university.

> Writing down exactly what needs to be done and recoding the dates of assignments.

> I paid close attention in class and practiced my exercises over and over.

> Staring [i.e. reading] at the Dean's list and hoping our names will be on it.

Their responses indicate a sustained and out-of-class engagement with writing, reading, speaking and listening in an academic context and not only with successful problem-solving strategies. It could also imply that the "talking to people" for example, was not necessarily always done in English, or the "writing down" necessarily in an academic register. These findings are similar to those of Van der Walt and Dornbrack (2011) on successful multilingual students at another South African university, where such students reported how they used various languages to interact with family and friends when discussing and completing academic assignments. It further exemplifies Barton's ecological approach to literacy as well as the theoretical orientation in that it demonstrates the inter-relatedness of human activities and the human environment and how it influences and is influenced by that environment.

As indicated earlier, some comparison with the unsuccessful students is useful at this point to highlight the factors that counted in the successful students' favour. In the bigger project, the successful students were contrasted with unsuccessful students and there were clear differences in their problem-solving language. Some examples of the differences in language used between the two groups show not only the problem-solving nature of the successful students' language usage but also the difference in the extent of their language usage:

Table 1: Differences in language usage between the two groups

Unsuccessful group: Negative / disempowering language	Successful group: Problem-solving / empowering language
I am alone and not coping. Sometimes I feel like I go through these things alone.	I thought that I will not make it, I did not talk to anyone about it, and I suffered in silence. I then realized that I was no longer at school. I am at university therefore I needed to start talking to people.
I do not have the resources to complete assignments on time.	I prioritised my work and started to work on assignments earlier. Drawing up a schedule and writing down exactly what needs to be done and when it needs to be done by. By doing this and following this set out schedule it will ease the pressure of trying to keep up with all my deadlines and ensure that my work is done on time and still have enough time to study and be well prepared for my tests and exams.
I do not see anything good about my studies because I am failing and panicking about it.	I failed my first QSF 131 and ALC 131 test. I cried for two nights in a row. For the first time in my life I failed a test, it was frustrating. I remained a hard working and competent student. I studied six hours a day and that was on a normal day.
To be honest, there is nothing positive or good because of the modules that I failed, they just make me feel that I stupid and dumb.	Try studying by associating theory to something you are familiar with. This really helped me to enjoy studying as I could understand things better and simpler

The unsuccessful group seemed to have been so overwhelmed that they could not move from negative and disempowering utterances to problem-solving strategies. The successful group on the other hand, expressed themselves in a positive and empowering manner, they provided detailed learning strategies, they went into action when the challenges arose and they came out victorious in the end. The students in the successful group have demonstrated that they used their self-regulatory and self-reflective capabilities to be integrated into the academic system by accessing and relying on academic processes and staff and support from the other role players (Bandura 2001; Beyer, Gillmore and Fisher 2007).

In addition, it appeared that the students took responsibility for their own learning, as Leibowitz (2009) (among others) suggests students should do. Their actions demonstrated the way in which they dealt with the three modes of agency as described by Bandura (2001), namely personal, proxy and collective agency, as well as the way in which they applied self-regulated learning strategies (Zimmerman and Martinez-Pons, 1992). The fact that the students managed to overcome their transition, time management and procrastination of their workload challenges, demonstrates the level of their cognitive, motivational, affective and choice abilities.

Proxy agency refers, in this instance, to the institutional practices of having to do and submit assignments, studying and preparing to write tests and examinations, which affect a student's life directly because these practices are part of the assessment methods used in learning. However, proxy agency also revealed the inter-relatedness and inter-dependency of the learning context and provided proof for the theoretical orientation that learning is socially situated and constructed (Bandura 1986, 2001; Vygotsky 1979).

The students further realised that they could not be successful in the learning process on their own and this directs the attention to their collective agency (Bandura, 2001). Their suggestions for what the University, lecturers and tutors could do to assist them in overcoming their learning challenges, together with the fact that they were in need of support from their families, friends, peers and the institution links up with the degree to which they (a) managed their integration into academic life and (b) managed their time for studies and social contact. It also demonstrates "that every aspect of the students' experience of university life influences their chances of achieving success" (Van Schalkwyk, Leibowitz and Van der Merwe 2009:7) and that successful learning is dependent on other role players or households with "funds of knowledge" as referred to by Moll (2007).

Lastly, the suggestions made by the students for the Faculty exhibits the inter-relatedness and inter-dependency of the multitude of factors and variables in the learning context and the fact that learning is socially embedded (Bandura 1979; Vygotsky 1986, 2001). For example, because of the institution's context and ideology, it would only be able to provide more comprehensive financial aid to students if the Department of Higher Education provides more financial assistance to the university as a whole. Likewise, in order to appoint more qualified lecturers, more funding from the education department is needed, or a higher increase in the tuition fees would be required. However, increasing the tuition fees would result in increasing the students' already identified financial challenges even further and would also have a knock-on effect on other environmental factors, such as having enough funds left to purchase textbooks, pay rent and transport costs, not to mention food and living expenses.

6. Conclusion

This study challenges us to shift our thinking with regard to the potential of our first-year students to be successful in their studies. It also underlines the fact that successful learning requires students to know from the start of their academic careers that they should take responsibility for their own learning. For the students in this study it emerged that a strong will, commitment and hard work supported their efforts to resolve problems and become successful students.

The use of consultation and communication among students and academic staff outside formal lectures emerged as an important enabler. The analysis revealed that when this happened, it assisted not only in relationship building between lecturers and students, but also helped with the students' social and academic integration. It thus implies that if more lecturers could build positive relationships with their students, the social and academic integration of more students could be enhanced and their chances of successful learning strengthened.

Moreover, successful learning requires that students receive support and assistance from all the role players in the learning process. The data indicate that families and friends may be the most immediate source of support, followed by the academic institution (all the staff and the institutional practices and regulations) and their peers; who in turn require support from the education department and the higher education community.

7. Implications for the development of academic literacy

The inter-relatedness of personal, academic, social and institutional factors mirrors the inter-related way in which students experience them. This study signals that factors for success are not only located in the student, the institution and the higher education department, but they also require the participation of the other role players, especially the students' family and friends.

Successful learning is an ongoing, complex and multi-layered process that needs to be monitored, sustained and evaluated throughout (Beyer et al. 2007; Pascarella and Terenzini 2005). The way in which the students identified and reported on their learning paths in this study highlights the need for a more integrated and holistic approach that recognises this multi-layered process. For the students in this study, all these factors played out on a very personal level and the need for a safe and supportive learning environment in which their affective needs were being met was evident. Therefore, successful learning would only occur when all or most of the factors and variables are in place for the students (Killen 2000, 2005; Kuh et al. 2005; Strydom and Mentz 2010).

The sub-themes under the themes *personal factors, academic factors* and *social factors* were the most important factors in achieving success and were identified by the successful group of students at the end of 2009. It therefore would be fair to say that not only personal attributes, but also academic and social factors enabled them to be successful. The students' striking personal perspectives on academic study provide not only evidence that the development of academic literacy is socially situated and constructed, but it also qualifies the current view of academic literacy development as disciplinary socialisation. Students' literacy practices and

literacy decisions outside of classroom contexts seemed to have been a powerful impetus to successful scheduling and completion of assignments. It is obvious that they would not have succeeded if they had not mastered the academic content and register in their work, but they needed the oral interaction with lecturers, tutors and peers as well as applying effective time management which enabled them to be successful.

By enumerating the enabling factors for successful learning to occur at first year level it becomes possible to look for integrated programmes whereby all students could be guided. Executing these enabling factors would result in a decrease in the failure and dropout rates and an increase in the pass and promotion rate nationally. The successful group of students in this study demonstrated that success in higher education is possible for students from marginalised and poorly resourced education environments and socio-economic backgrounds.

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