Understanding and responding to student learning difficulties within the higher education context: a theoretical foundation for developing academic literacy

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ABSTRACT

Higher education in South Africa is challenged to promote the academic success of students through quality teaching and learning. This article provides a sound theoretical understanding of student learning difficulties as difficulties of accessing and mastering the cognitive processes entailed in the groundrules of the specific academic disciplines within higher education. Based on this theoretical groundwork, the article argues for the integration of academic development into the mainstream teaching and learning activities of specific disciplines where the tutorial system is used to develop the specific academic literacy required for success within the discipline.

INTRODUCTION

The core function of universities is student learning. In reality though, higher education institutions in South Africa are challenged to develop effective and independent learners of students who are simply unable to engage in typical university tasks successfully or in a manner which has come to be regarded as appropriate for higher education (Craig 1989).

This article argues that students do not necessarily lack the inherent abstract cognitive capability necessary for success in the higher education context. Rather, they have not learnt to mobilise the particular cognitive processes embraced in the groundrules of each discipline. Consequently, student academic literacy needs to be developed if they are to be successful within higher education. This academic literacy needs to be developed not as an adjunct "skill" but by and through engagement with learning in the mainstream disciplines themselves.

LEARNING EXPECTATIONS IN THE HIGHER EDUCATION CONTEXT

In the university context, students face what Strohm Kitchener (1983) and Churchman (1971) respectively refer to as ill-structured problems or dialectical problems. These are problems for which there is no single, unequivocal solution which can be determined at the present moment by employing a particular decision-making procedure. Ill-structured problems are typical of the type of problems where there is seldom a single, right or wrong answer which is available to students. Rather, students are confronted with opposing or contradictory evidence and opinion which requires that they consider alternative arguments, seek out new evidence and evaluate the reliability of data and sources of information. Strohm Kitchener (1983) distinguishes these problems from puzzles, which are well-structured problems with only one correct final solution, which can be guaranteed by using a specific known and effective procedure or formula.

To deal successfully with ill-structured problems, sophisticated forms of cognitive activity are required. These are characterised as the cognitive processes (units of structure in some combination necessary to complete a particular contextualised task) an individual commands to monitor the epistemic nature of problems and the truth value of alternative solutions (Strohm Kitchener 1983). Strohm Kitchener (1983) points out that three levels of cognitive processing must be distinguished to account for the complex monitoring which adults engage in when faced with