The role of the tutorial system in enabling students' academic success

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Abstract

A worrying trend in South Africa has been the high attrition rate for first-time university students. At the University of Johannesburg (UJ), one intervention used to address this low throughput rate is the tutorial system. While it is important to broaden formal access to universities, it is also crucial to provide first-year students with access to the epistemologies of their discipline to ensure their academic success. This can potentially be enabled through the tutorial system. While tutorials are growing in size due to increased numbers, the tutorial still has a role to play in giving students the opportunity to engage with each other and their tutor in a smaller group than that of the lecture. For the tutorial system to enable students' academic success, however, tutors need to support their students not only in their acquisition of the target epistemologies, but also to take cognisance of their students' ontological needs.

Keywords: academic success, throughput rate, formal access, epistemological access, ontological access, tutorial system

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The decisive shift from apartheid to democracy that began with the first democratic elections held in 1994 in South Africa, resulted in a move towards the transformation and development of higher education. The aim was to redress the unfair practices of the past in terms of providing equal opportunities for a better quality of education for all students in the country (Boughey 2004, 1). Since the advent of democracy, a policy of transformation in education has taken place such that formal access to all higher education institutions (HEIs) has been opened up to include those students who were previously only given access to specified HEIs that were differentiated according to race, language and culture.

This goal of transformation has led not only to the widening of access to higher education so as to make it more accessible to a diversity of students but also to make certain that those who are granted access are also given the opportunity to succeed academically (CHE 2010a, 81− 82). The Council on Higher Education (CHE 2010a, 97) explains the notion of 'access' in this context as 'the widening of access to higher education is an equity-driven concern and relates to the strategies and procedures that an institution undertakes to make its

educational services accessible to a diversity of students'.

However, higher education in South Africa today is still suffering from the legacy left by apartheid in which the majority of the population endured marginalisation and inferior education due to social, political and economic discrimination (Badat 2009, 457). Currently, students who come from working-class or poor rural backgrounds find their access to HEIs is constrained, because, to a large extent, the dominant western hegemonic discourse prevails in most HEIs (McKenna 2004).

THE TUTORIAL SYSTEM AS A PEDAGOGICAL INTERVENTION

Against a background of increasing numbers of first-year students entering HEIs; a record of poor academic performance; a lack of success; and the low throughput rates currently being experienced at most South African HEIs (Scott, Yeld and Hendry 2007), first-year tutorials have recently been made compulsory in a number of faculties at the University of Johannesburg (UJ). The tutorial system has been introduced as a direct result of an extremely low throughput rate for first-year students, and has therefore been seen as an important intervention with regard to teaching and learning, in order to give academic support and to directly improve student success rates.

According to Scott et al. (2007), in terms of the national completion rates, only 30 per cent of the total first-time entering students for the 2000 cohort had graduated within five years of entering their HEIs. Five years later, the graduation figures for the 2005 cohort at UJ seem to show a slight improvement on these (country-wide) poor graduation rates in some faculties, although taken as a whole, the attrition rate is still unacceptably high. For instance, in the 2005 cohort for the *professional* first B-degree at UJ, on average, only 36 per cent of students had graduated within five years, and on average around 40 per cent were still registered after five years. Similarly, in the 2005 cohort for the *general academic* first B-degree at UJ, on average, around 45 per cent of students had graduated within five years and approximately 50 per cent of the students were still registered after five years.

These 2005 UJ statistics are not dissimilar to those found across HEIs in the sector in the 2000 cohort researched by Scott et al. (2007). In terms of achieving both equity of access and equity of outcomes, the statistics show that on average, the ratio of black to white students' completion or graduation was still weighted in favour of white students. The average ratio of black to white students in terms of graduation of first-time entering students after five years in *professional* first B-degrees at UJ for the 2005 cohort indicates that the white completion rate was 1.7 times higher than the black completion rate. Similarly, for the same cohort, the white completion rate was 1.2 times higher than the black completion rate after five years in *general*

academic first B-degrees. This general trend is unfortunately also reflected in national statistics and is not peculiar to UJ.

It was in direct response to this worrying throughput rate, that UJ introduced the tutorial system with particular focus on first-year students as a practical intervention to facilitate their academic success. This has been constructed as providing additional academic support, supplementary to the lectures, so that students can be given an opportunity, in smaller groups, with the guidance of a dedicated tutor, to engage more thoroughly with their course work, so that their academic success and throughput rate can be increased. It has been argued that the close relationship that is set up between students and their tutor can support them not only in their acquisition of proficiency in specific academic content areas but also in increasing their 'soft skills', like study strategies and time management, as well as learning how to seek assistance (Sanchez, Bauer and Paronto 2006).

The higher education tutorial system has had a very long history as a pedagogical mechanism. Conventional understandings of what constitutes a tutorial may still be largely influenced by the traditional tutorial system originating from the collegiate system at Oxford University and Cambridge University in the United Kingdom (UK) in which students are taught either individually or in very small groups of two or three. The tradition of the discussion-based tutorial, following the teaching method of Socratic dialogue, was introduced as the general pattern at Oxford University in the mid-19th century when Professor Jowett became the Vice-Chancellor in 1882 (www.greenes.org.uk). Over the centuries, this model has developed and transformed so that today, the concept of a tutorial has many interpretations and formulations in practice and the system itself has been questioned. In fact, in the UK in the 1960s, the tutorial method of instruction was thought by some to be too elitist and not relevant in the context of the modern university where large lectures were seen to be more efficient and appropriate. However, the tutorial system was vigorously defended by Moore (1968, 20), who argued that 'the tutorial method's individual focus and unique ability to foster dialogue, argumentation, and independent thought outweighed any criticism against it' (www.greenes.org.uk).

Even today, at some privileged institutions, one or a few students meet with a tutor, who may actually also be a lecturer, where they are given individual attention and have the opportunity to engage in in-depth critical discussion. The tutorial at these institutions exists in a rather elite educational environment where the benefit of receiving such individualised attention is paid for through extremely high tuition fees. This system therefore cannot be practised in quite the same way at other institutions which have different fee structures and very large intakes of first-year students from diverse social and educational backgrounds,

exemplified in the South African context.

The tutorial system as it is practised at Oxford University has been characterised as being 'a pedagogical gem, the jewel in Oxford's crown' and the best way to 'challenge, stimulate and truly educate Oxford's high-quality "young" in the crucial "lifelong-learning" skill of sound analysis and critical thinking' in the context of a liberal education (Palfreyman 2008, i). Palfreyman (2008) goes on to question what constitutes the notion of 'higher' education and distinguishes it from simply tertiary education. He makes the point that if only narrowly vocational skills are taught and students are merely expected to memorise lecture hand-outs and opportunities are not given for direct involvement in an academic discourse (such as that afforded by small group discussions), and face-to-face feedback (such as that of a tutorial), then higher education could become merely a continuation of school and be regarded as 'tertiary' only, rather than 'higher' (Palfreyman 2008, 3). The tutorial process has at its core, the 'critical interplay between the student's and the tutor's conception of learning' (Palfreyman 2008, 4). It is in this interplay between both tutor and student's prior understanding of what constitutes knowledge that many tensions can be experienced – but it is within the kind of forum afforded by the tutorial that the gaining of epistemological and ontological access can be supported.

In the UJ context, the typical tutorial is also characterised by a group of students meeting regularly in a classroom with their tutor. However, due to the increasingly large numbers of first-year students entering the institution, who are perceived to be in need of academic support, this exerts a great deal of pressure on the university's resources in terms of venues and available tutors; thus, tutorial classes can sometimes range from 25 students to as many as 50 in some departments. Despite the fact that the average class sizes of tutorials increasingly resemble what used to be considered the average size of a class in a lecture hall, the pedagogical premise behind the holding of tutorials in South African universities today, is still relevant. That is, the tutorial class, being considerably smaller than the much larger classes of the lecture hall, can still afford students a better opportunity to gain epistemological and ontological access to the knowledge of their disciplines, if conducted in an optimal way by well-trained tutors.

It has been claimed that good small group teaching improves the teacher-student relationship and encourages a collaborative approach to learning as well as providing a model for teamwork typical in the workplace (Griffiths, Houston and Lazenbatt 1996). Furthermore, teaching in small groups such as tutorials, helps to fulfil Chickering and Gamson's (1987) seven principles for good practice in undergraduate teaching (Cook, Macintosh and Rushton 2006, 8) in that it:

- encourages contacts between students and staff;

- develops reciprocity and cooperation among students;

- uses active learning techniques;

- gives prompt feedback;

- emphasises time on task;

- communicates high expectations; and

- respects diverse talents and ways of learning.

Granted, the above-mentioned principles would hold true only if they were implemented correctly, and this article argues that both epistemological and ontological approaches are needed to ensure students' academic success.

EPISTEMOLOGICAL AND ONTOLOGICAL ACCESS

There is a tension created between the notion of 'formal' access – which simply allows for widening physical access to the university – and that of 'epistemological' access – which should ensure student academic success. In order to ensure academic success, students also need to be given access to the specific epistemologies of the discipline being studied. The article argues that the tutorial system, which is a teaching intervention that is practised in order to provide supplementary academic support and to improve throughput rates, also needs to be constructed specifically as being for the enabling of epistemological access. Furthermore, it is argued that the ontological aspect also needs to be considered in order to provide meaningful support for epistemological access.

The term 'epistemological access' was first coined by Morrow (1994, 77) who writes that 'learning how to become a participant in an academic practice might also be described in terms of "gaining access" to the practice in question' and that since these academic practices have 'developed around the search for knowledge, we might say that what we have in view here is "epistemological access"'. Epistemological access therefore would imply access to knowledge.

However, epistemological access as it relates to higher education also implies access to *ways* of knowing that are valued in the different disciplines. In this context then, epistemological access naturally incorporates issues of the structure of the knowledge, the expectations of the lecturer and the tutor, as well as the norms and ethos of the institution itself. Gaining access to how to make knowledge in any particular course or discipline entails both understanding the rules of the particular discipline as well as understanding the

expectations of the university at that particular cultural-historical time and space. The notion of epistemology of the discipline is not a monolithic generic structure, but is culturally and historically bound. It is not enough to allow formal access to universities without ensuring that all students are supported with epistemological access. As Jonathan (2006, 26) writes, 'mere formal equality of opportunity for access, measured by representivity, would be hollow without due attention to the proper progress of all students admitted'.

The issue of epistemological access has been characterised as being both political and educational because it not only focuses attention on the uncontested and naturalised processes of the acquisition of knowledge and the formation of concepts, but also on certain underlying assumptions about how teaching should happen in a university (CHE 2010b, vi). Many universities still construct students as autonomous[1] subjects who can achieve success and make the most of the opportunities provided simply by virtue of having been given access to higher education; however, viewing students as autonomous learners prevents them from achieving their full potential and deprives them of the enriching benefits of gaining true epistemological access (Boughey 2005; CHE 2010a). It has been argued that in order to achieve epistemological access, a different way of approaching teaching and learning at university is vital (CHE 2010b, vii). This new approach also needs to consider who the students are, with regard to issues of diversity of cultural, social and educational background. In other words, educators need not only to provide support for epistemological access but also to support the gaining of ontological access with regard to the changing identity of the student.

The premise that academic success is dependent on epistemological and ontological access, which in turn depends on students being supported in taking up discipline-specific practices, suggests that student support structures would need to be constructed to this end. In order for the student to be given the right kind of access, both epistemological and ontological, the student's *agency* should be acknowledged and enabled. Epistemological and ontological access is not something that can be 'done' to a student. The student (as the agent) needs to achieve this through actively engaging with and learning how to participate successfully in academic practice. This involves the student having a level of respect for the practice itself as well as acknowledging the authority of the practice.

This also means that the student needs to be supported in ways that develop a certain amount of self-reflection and self-knowledge. Gee (1996) argues that discourses are 'mastered' not by overt instruction (learning) but through a process of 'enculturation' or 'apprenticeship' into particular social practices (acquisition). Even though discourses are not taught, they can be enabled and the context in which the student finds him/herself will have

enormous impact on the ease or difficulty with which he/she acquires the target discourses.

Enabling the provision of epistemological and ontological access is also much more than just the imparting of so-called autonomous skills and strategies for coping with academic practice, but instead requires 'engagement with content' such that students are able to construct academic knowledge in an 'appropriate'[2] way (Boughey 2005, 240). Therefore, there also needs to be an appropriate kind of relationship established between the students and their teachers which makes it possible for the kind of teaching that will help enable students to achieve epistemological and ontological access. In its role in facilitating academic success, the tutorial system is thus fundamentally entwined with these issues of access. Thus, those tutors who are responsible for conducting tutorials need to be trained accordingly, so that they can take cognisance of both their students' epistemological and ontological needs.

First-generation students from previously disadvantaged backgrounds currently entering HEIs, are in many instances characterised as being 'under-prepared'. According to Slonimsky and Shalem (2010, 83), a great number of first-time students are under-prepared for university studies by their schooling because they have not been sufficiently exposed to the experience of working with or creating text-based realities; thus, they do not have an understanding of how to approach texts or the epistemic practices expected of them. Much of today's schooling still uses the rote-learning approach, which is premised on the idea of knowledge reproduction rather than that of knowledge construction (Moll and Slonimsky 1989). Indeed, inequalities persist in the schooling system in South Africa today, such as poorly trained teachers, a lack of resources and an inferior infrastructure, which place many black students at a disadvantage and have created a lack of access to higher education due to their poor school results. This has created a difficult position for universities that need to maintain certain standards and require students to gain access on the basis of their prior educational success while at the same time realising that broad access to higher education is necessary for social transformation (Bradbury and Miller 2011, 1).

The difficulties that many first-time university students experience, in engaging with academic discourse, often have to do with their underlying assumptions in terms of the ways in which their prior knowledge has been framed. It has been argued that the 'question-and-answer mode' of academic discourse requires students to also understand the 'rules of the game' in which the particular types of questions asked are posed specifically in order to trigger a certain kind of analysis or critical response. However, unless the student shares an understanding of the discursive rules or epistemological assumptions made by the teacher, the student's response will not be the appropriate or expected one (Bradbury and Miller 2011, 2). This means that teaching practices need to make the rules of academic discourse more overt to

students (Boughey 2002b, 306).

It has been argued that epistemological access is crucial to students' academic success (see, e.g., Boughey 2002b, 2005; CHE 2010a; Gasman and Palmer 2008; Morrow 2007, 2009). Similarly, Williams (2012) claims that 'examination of learning as an emergent phenomenon ... demands recognition that learning goes far beyond any mere acquisition of skills, facts, information'. In order to achieve the goal of academic success, it is not enough to provide students with mere formal access to university education, or even simply the acquisition of factual information and skills. Teaching and learning, at first-year level, and in the context of the South African university of today, should provide students with both epistemological and ontological access, that is, access to knowledge and the particular ways of making it that are valued in different disciplines. This means that students need to be supported in their transition to a new identity or way of being and doing things at university level. It is not enough merely to allow formal access to universities without ensuring that all students are supported with both epistemological and ontological access.

There also seems to be a tension in terms of differing conceptions of what constitutes epistemological access and it has been argued that the focus in higher education in South Africa has more recently shifted from its purpose of creating social equity through the meaningful development of students towards the goal of achieving economic efficiency (Boughey 2002a, 69). Subsequently, epistemological access is increasingly being understood in a narrower form in the context of an outcomes-based and a market-oriented educational approach which focuses on producing graduates with vocational skills and competencies that can best serve the country and the global economy, rather than also on a deeper development of new academic identities and true educational and social equity.

Thus, it is crucial that the university structures – and those lecturers and tutors responsible for teaching within those structures – enable, rather than obstruct, real epistemological and ontological access. Increasingly, the demographic profile of students entering university in South Africa reflects a great diversity in terms of language, socio-cultural background and educational advantage. This means that students enter higher education institutions (HEIs) with diverse notions of and approaches to literacy, and this will naturally have a bearing on how they approach and make meaning within the discourses of the university itself. University students need to make a transition from their prior way of being and doing in terms of their literacy practices in order to succeed in a new academic environment which necessitates the adoption of its academic literacy practices.

There is thus a strong link between literacy practices and identity. Literacy practices have social meaning which can determine how someone is positioned in a particular linguistic

community. It is through language that an individual can negotiate a sense of self or gain access to a particular (dominant) linguistic community (Norton 2010, 2). In the South African context of higher education, due to the legacy of apartheid and the dominance of the discourse which privileges western literacy practices, many of the students now entering HEIs 'may not have easy access to the linguistic codes or cultural practices of the academic communities' (McKenna 2004, 274).

The student's academic success will therefore depend largely on whether he/she has access to the particular kind of 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu 1986) that is valued by the dominant social structures (such as schools and universities). Different 'capital' is valued in different situations. A student who has 'done well' in a rural school may be appreciated as being a kind of hero in that environment, but the same student may come to a higher education environment with what might be seen as being the 'wrong' kind of capital, that is under-valued by the system, and which may lead to a lack of academic success.

Traditionally in higher education, concerns about epistemology have overshadowed concerns with ontology which has meant that the major focus has been on transferring knowledge, skills and competencies in the various disciplines rather than taking into account the ontological reality of students (Dall'Alba and Barnacle 2007, 679). In higher education, it is not enough to simply attend to the students' epistemological needs, there are also important ontological issues that need to be addressed. If university educators construct epistemological access only in terms of providing students with the knowledge, skills and strategies they need to 'crack the code' (Ballard and Clanchy 1988) in order to gain academic success, and do not also take into account the ontological reality of who students actually are and are becoming, this constitutes a significant shortfall in the fulfilment of the true purpose of higher education.

According to Barnett (2005, 795), there needs to be an 'ontological turn' in higher education so that 'instead of knowing the world, being-in-the-world has to take primary place in the conceptualisations that inform university teaching'. It is thus also important that the diversity of students needs to be acknowledged in order to enable epistemological access for all students and not only for those whose 'cultural capital' is more closely aligned to the dominant discourse. Instead of labelling certain students as being 'unprepared' for university life, it might be more useful to acknowledge the different socio-cultural influences that have affected the development of particular literacies and to take cognisance of this, as well as to become familiar with the profiles and identities of the students currently entering HEIs.

Students need to be guided to 'enter the distinctively discursive world of academia' (Bradbury and Miller 2011, 2). This can be effected through the provision of epistemological and ontological access. This means that the learning-teaching task of university study needs to

be framed in such a way that the main focus is more on the *form* of the construction of knowledge rather than mainly on the *content* of a particular discipline. In this way, students can develop the ability to think critically and independently so as to become contributors to and creators of knowledge in their fields of study (Bradbury and Miller 2011, 2).

CONCLUSION

In the article I have noted that there is a tension between increasing students' formal access to HEIs and finding ways to support their academic success by enabling epistemological and ontological access. I have argued that at UJ, the tutorial system is a pedagogic intervention specifically constructed to improve throughput and to support students' academic success. As such it also needs to give students ontological access and access to the discipline specific epistemologies in their particular field of study. I have argued that while increasingly large tutorial classes can have a constraining effect on the provision of support for epistemological and ontological access, they still can fulfil an important role in providing opportunities for interaction in groups smaller than those of larger lectures. In addition, I have highlighted the fact that there is often a challenge for tutors as educators in acknowledging the prior literacy practices or primary discourses that students bring with them while trying to induct these students into the academic discourse of the university. In order to make the most of the opportunities that tutorials can provide to facilitate students' academic success, tutors therefore need to be trained appropriately to support students with regard to both epistemological and ontological access. It is vital for tutors not only to pay attention to what students need to *know* (the epistemological) but also to who their students *are or can become* in the world (the ontological). This has a bearing on the relationship between literacy practices and identity. Given the ongoing need for transformation in higher education in South Africa through the widening of formal access, my underlying argument is that there is an opportunity for the tutorial system to enable both epistemological and ontological access. Therefore, the tutorial system as a pedagogical intervention has great potential to greatly facilitate students' academic success.

NOTES

1   The 'autonomous' model (Street 1984, 1993, 2003) sees literacy as being neutral and universal – having inherent qualities to produce beneficial social and cognitive effects. This view masks Western hegemonic assumptions about what literacy is (Street 2003, 77). The notion of the autonomous student draws from this theory and assumes that students are neutral absorbers of knowledge unaffected by their socio-cultural backgrounds (Boughey 2002b).

2   Of course the very notion of what is 'appropriate' can be contentious. Here it is understood to include that which is expected by the academy.

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