

## Undergraduate Support and Success

**Chrissie Boughey**

Common sense tells us that it is school which prepares learners for higher education. Schools develop literacy and numeracy and introduce learners to concepts in a wide range of subject areas. Provided learners are equipped with an appropriate degree of intelligence and are motivated to work hard, the assumption is that attendance at a functioning school will allow a young person to prepare him/herself for tertiary study.

Evidence from education systems across the world challenges this sort of thinking. In the United Kingdom, for example, where the schooling system is widely accepted to function in ways which are far superior to those in South Africa, access to and success in higher education still tend to be the privilege of some social groups rather than others. The same is also true of the United States where donor-funded initiatives such as 'Achieving the Dream' aim to bring 'minority' students into higher education and support them once they are there.

What is it about higher education that includes some and excludes others? What is it that schools do not necessarily teach? A brief look around our own homes provides some insight into these questions. How many of our own children have grown up experiencing intellectual consensus? Has their experience been of one answer to the problems, one approach to the topics they have heard discussed at the supper table or from the back seat of the car? How many of our children have grown up watching us read books – and even write them – and, as a result, have come to understand reading and writing as positive activities rather than as chores? How many of our children have heard us disputing a text even if the text in question is only a newspaper article we disagree with?

All of these practices, everyday occurrences in our homes, provide a basis for what we want from our students. How many of our students, however, have grown up in very different sorts of homes – homes with very different views of knowledge, with views of text as something to be revered and believed, with understandings of reading and writing as 'studying' rather than something enjoyable? An ever-growing body of research identifies the role of the home, and the contexts in which the home is located, as critical in preparing students for higher education. This is all the more the case when schooling itself is considered. Schools prepare learners for a wide range of experiences in life and, in South Africa, fewer than 20% of learners will go on to higher education. Schools which focused only on preparing students for the narrow range of learning-related activities associated with higher education would fail the large sector of the population for whom a university education is not an option. Yet the idea that it is *schools* that prepare students for university continues to dominate much of our thinking around what it means to be 'underprepared' and what is appropriate as student support.

Contemporary understandings of literacy offer further insights into the topic of student support and development. These argue that, as well as being

'technologies', or ways of encoding and decoding into and from print, reading and writing also involve socially embedded dispositions to read and write certain kinds of texts in specific ways. From this perspective, literacy then becomes a multiple rather than a singular phenomenon with many different literacies, each specific to a different context. 'Academic literacy' then refers to ability to read and write certain kinds of texts in ways valued by the academy.

The idea that literacy involves a *disposition* or willingness to read and write in certain ways is important in relation to student support and development since it signals that work needs to be done at the level of identity. Someone who is academically literate does not simply have the 'skills' to read and write certain kinds of texts in certain ways, but is disposed to these practices. Developing this disposition might involve, for example, giving oneself permission to question and be sceptical of what appears in a printed text. Identity work is hard work – it is also work which can involve profound and discomfoting change at an individual level. On the basis of this sort of understanding, Taylor *et al.* (1988), in a book aptly entitled *Literacy by Degrees*, argue that the sorts of abilities most academics expect of students on arrival at university should be seen as the *goal* of tertiary study rather than the starting point.

Appreciating the development of a disposition to view knowledge and learn in certain ways as *identity work* calls on an understanding of student support and development which takes in the 'whole' student. This has profound implications for the way we conceptualise student support and development, who is responsible for it and how it takes place.

At this point, I would like to use an example of my own experience of working in academic support to illustrate what I am trying to argue in this 'think-piece'. In the early 1990s, I worked in the Academic Development Centre at UWC as a 'language practitioner' – a role intended to support the development of students' language and academic literacy. In this role, I was asked to provide some support for writing in a second year Biochemistry class. The lecturer teaching the class set aside a double practical period per week for this, provided a writing task and identified a number of journal articles for students to read. His willingness to use some of his teaching time to develop his students' writing in this way was because of his own understanding of the role of writing in 'being a biochemist'.

Along with a colleague, I taught the class for a term using what the literature terms a 'process' approach to developing writing. At the end of the term, we evaluated the intervention by asking students for feedback. The following comment was particularly significant:

*The presentation by the people from the English (sic) department was quite excellent, but I wonder whether it was necessary to do it. I mean when I entered myself for Biochemistry at the beginning of the year, well I didn't quite think that I would be doing writing skills during my practical period. Say I got employment from an industry and they ask me to*

*perform an experiment, what am I going to do? Told (sic) them that we did writing skills during our prac session?*

This student does not see writing as part of the biochemist's 'role' or identity. For him, 'being a biochemist' is about standing at a bench conducting experiments and writing is something done by the 'English department'. Even though the lecturer had endorsed the writing development intervention by setting an assignment and giving up practical time, this was not enough to allow the student to appreciate the role of writing in his life as a graduate. Without an understanding of this role, what chance was there of the student taking on board the sort of writing behaviours my AD colleague and I had tried to introduce to him?

Over the years, attempts to provide student support and development at this University have taken a number of forms and not all have been informed by the sort of thinking identified above. My concern in any discussion about the future of student support would be to avoid reinventing the wheels of the past – of drawing on the common sense assumptions and understandings which informed earlier initiatives and not learning from what we have abandoned. And at this point it is worth pointing out that, as a University, we have indeed abandoned as unsuccessful many of the approaches to student support I continue to hear advocated in 2011. The abandonment of these approaches was not due to a stance taken by CHERTL (or the ADC as CHERTL was formerly known), but was rather the result of a series of reviews which have taken place over the last twenty five years or so.

Since 1999, CHERTL/ADC has worked with academic staff rather than students (although some direct student development work does take place in Extended Programmes). Again, it is worth pointing out that the decision to do this was informed by a review, conducted in 1998, which was critical of the work the ADC had been doing until then.

Work with staff is underpinned by an understanding of the need for 'alignment' – or the idea that all the elements of a curriculum should be coherent. Pushing these elements into shape can result in huge improvements in a student's learning experience. Some of this work has also been informed by shifts in the University itself and in the context in which it exists. The current Commerce Curriculum Project, for example, aims to address growing student numbers as well as the literacies students bring with them as they begin to study. We are all aware, for example, of the disposition to engage with a text on a cell phone or computer screen rather than the journal article or book we want students to read. The question for the project is thus how Information and Communication Technologies can be used to address large numbers and enhance teaching without 'dumbing down' the academic project. And, as Jen Snowball could tell you, significant developments have been made in this respect *by the academics* involved in the Project – developments which support students' learning in very positive ways.

Institutional data shows that increased diversity in the student body has resulted in small decreases in success rates. My own examination of data as part of a piece of research on five South African 'research intensive' universities (Boughey, 2009) shows that, of the five (UCT, SUN, UP, Rhodes & Wits), the university which had made most gains in increasing diversity of access (Wits<sup>1</sup>), had lost most in terms of success rates. Following this example, if efforts are made to diversify the student body further at Rhodes University, we could expect more reductions. Of concern equal to that directed at the possibility of any further reduction in success rates is the observation that large numbers of students in all faculties 'only just' pass the courses in which they are enrolled. Appendices I and II provide an indication of passes between 50% – 55% for the years 2006 and 2010.

Attempting to maintain success rates and improve the rate at which relatively large numbers of students are passing their courses represents a very narrow view of teaching and learning challenges, however. A more important challenge relates to the ways in which we would want students to be successful and to the kinds of graduates we want to produce (and here the comments above are relevant). Recent work on teaching and learning across all South African universities (Boughey, 2009, 2010; Boughey & McKenna, 2011a, 2011b) shows that the idea of 'aligning' the kind of learning expected of students to the mission and vision of the university or the purpose of a programme and then of using teaching as a means of developing this learning is not common practice. In this University, 'alignment' of this nature would mean thinking about *the implications of a focus on research and postgraduate enrolments for supporting and developing learning at undergraduate level*. More practically, this might involve consciously considering how we can support understandings of learning at university as a process of knowledge making rather than knowledge reproducing. At programme level, aligning teaching and learning to the purpose of the programme might involve thinking very carefully about, for example, the sort of professional writing expected of pharmacists and supporting and developing students to achieve just this rather than understanding the development of writing as generic. A similar challenge relates to the idea of Rhodes University being a place 'Where Leaders Learn'. Recent research (Andrews, 2011) shows that dominant constructions of leadership at this University have the potential to constrain rather than enable 'transformative' leadership. If we do decide that this University should be a place 'Where Leaders Learn', Andrews' research suggests we should interrogate what we assume are leadership opportunities and look rather to the curriculum to challenge our students in their thinking about their country and their role as critical citizens.

In thinking about future support for students at this University, therefore, I would argue that we need to focus our thinking around the following broad principles:

---

<sup>1</sup> Student demographics at Wits largely represent those of the population of the greater Gauteng region.

- Research-based reasoning. Any future support initiatives should be based on an analysis of where students are not succeeding as well as they might alongside an attempt to identify theoretically informed reasons for this lack of success. As a University, we pride ourselves on the rigour of our thinking. Much of our historical work in the area of student support has lacked this rigour.
- An understanding of student support as *support for mainstream teaching*. In this 'think-piece' I have argued for the need to acknowledge the role of social context in understanding 'preparedness' alongside the need to understand the learning practices we value as specific to academic contexts. Cutting edge work (which includes the work of Judith Reynolds of Extended Studies) shows how this context differs according to discipline. All this means that it is only the experts who can develop their students' learning in ways appropriate to the discipline. Addressing challenges in student learning will therefore involve providing more resources for academics in their teaching. These resources could include more tutors/graduate assistants, better training for tutors, more pay for tutors, teaching relief to develop student support mechanisms (such as online learning) and so on. The Faculty of Humanities is currently considering a Writing Centre. An understanding of support for mainstream teaching would entail embedding the work of a Writing Centre into mainstream teaching perhaps by building a 'ladder' of 'writing intensive' courses in which academics consciously worked to contribute to the development of their students' writing and were supported by the Writing Centre in doing this.
- An acknowledgement of the limitations of academic development practitioners. Academic Development practitioners are *not* experts in the disciplines in which they are expected to work. Their role can thus only be one of attempting to make sense of the learning expected of students (Jacobs, 2007) and in setting up systems to support the teaching of disciplinary experts.
- An acknowledgement of the limitations of the work done by my colleagues in Extended Studies who, in many respects, continue to have to work within outdated understandings of student support. Although approaches such as 'augmented' courses in the Humanities and the *Introduction to Scientific Concepts and Methods* course in the Science Programme see staff working closely with mainstream academics, the extent to which they can prepare students for academic learning without even closer collaboration is questionable.
- An acknowledgement that teaching and learning should be crafted to support where we want to go as a university.
- The need to 'join up the dots'. In the self evaluation portfolio produced for the 2005 Institutional Audit, we made much of the overall experience offered to students, noting the residence system, the wide range of societies and so on. Since then, the Dean of Students Division has made enormous strides in

raising students' awareness of social issues on campus. All this aims to contribute to the development of the graduate. While we aim to develop more mature understandings of social issues appropriate to 'graduateness' in the undergraduate years, at the same time 'Swot Week', a concept arguably more appropriate to school, appears in the calendar. Consideration is being given to the development of 'social' learning spaces – spaces where the academic and the social come together in ways we would all recognise from our own lives. At the same time, arguments are made for another 400 seat lecture theatre in which, for the most part, students will be 'lectured'. How does all this fit together as a means of getting students to engage in the sort of learning and, more importantly, 'being' we value as academics?

For some years now, a system of Teaching Development Grants has been in operation in South Africa for universities which do not meet DoE targets in relation to teaching and learning. This has involved withholding some of the subsidy payable to universities and earmarking it for the enhancement of teaching and learning. The system has not been working well for a number of reasons and, in 2008, a Task Team was convened to make recommendations regarding the future of the Grant. One of these recommendations was that all universities, regardless of performance, should be eligible for a Teaching Development Grant as teaching needed to be continuously updated if universities were to be relevant. A Ministerial Statement on Funding made in November 2010 (DoE, 2010) indicated that the Minister wished to implement the recommendations of the Task Team but would seek advice from the CHE before making a final decision in this respect. To date, no further information has been received regarding the implementation of a new policy on Teaching Development Grants. Enquiries have suggested, however, that if the recommendations are accepted, up to an additional R4million in funding would become available to the University to support *teaching*.

Spending that money, if it comes, in a way which truly can provide the support and development our students need and which will serve this University well into the future could be one of the most significant challenges we will face in the next decade. The meta-analysis of teaching and learning in all South African universities noted earlier in this document (Boughey, 2009, 2010; Boughey & McKenna, 2011a, 2011b) identifies 'culture', where 'culture' refers to the ideational realm from which teaching and learning emerges, as a problem across all universities. How we understand students, their learning, ourselves and our learning and what we do as teachers often is not coherent. As a result, a great deal of what is done in the name of teaching and student support does not achieve what it aims to achieve.

I believe that we do need to think about providing more student support in this University. My plea is that as we think about doing this, we consider carefully how common sense assumptions about the forms student support should take cannot make sense when interrogated by what we prize most in our own disciplinary work – theory and research.

## **List of references**

Andrews, R. (2011) *'Where Leaders Learn': An analysis of discourses constructing leadership development at Rhodes University*. Unpublished MBA dissertation, Rhodes University, Grahamstown.

Boughey, C. (2009). *A meta-analysis of teaching and learning at the five research intensive South African universities Not Affected by Mergers*. Pretoria: Council on Higher Education.

Boughey, C. (2010). *A meta-analysis of teaching and learning at four universities of technology*. Pretoria: Council on Higher Education.

Boughey, C. & McKenna, S. (2011a) *A meta-analysis of teaching and learning at four comprehensive universities*. Pretoria: Council on Higher Education.

Boughey, C. & McKenna, S. (2011a) *A meta-analysis of teaching and learning at five historically disadvantaged universities*. Pretoria: Council on Higher Education.

Department of Higher Education and Training, (2010). *Ministerial Statement on Higher Education Funding 2009/20010 - 2010/2011*. Pretoria: DoE.

Jacobs, C. (2007). Towards a critical understanding of the discipline-specific academic literacies: Making the tacit explicit. *Journal of Education*, 41, pp. 59-81.

Taylor, G. B. (1988). *Literacy by Degrees*. Milton Keynes: SRHE & Open University Press.