CHAPTER 13

RESEARCH AND THE FIRST-YEAR STUDENT OPPORTUNITIES FOR LEARNING

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Introduction and context

Students becoming researchers

The purpose of this account is to describe a foundation course in research practice presented to first-year students in the Humanities Faculty at the University of the Witwatersrand. It describes how the learning processes for students were conceptualised, theorised and put into practice. The project is conceived around the notion that one route to gaining entry into the academic community is to do what academics do – that is, engage in research and thus contribute, even in some small way, to the production of knowledge. It introduces students to the ‘processes’ that lie behind the academic texts that they are required to read at the University (Faculty of Humanities Handbook, 2000). The aim of the course, therefore, requires students to conduct small-scale research projects as a way of experiencing what it means to be a member of the academic community (Hyland & Hamp-Lyons, 2002; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Lea & Street, 1998) and to understand its ‘culture’ and its practices.

The students

The students taking part in the course come from both rural and urban contexts and are admitted to the university on the basis of special selection tests since most do not meet the normal admissions requirements. Most come from severely underprepared educational backgrounds and some are products of the ‘Model C’ schools¹. The majority of the students speak more than one African language and all have one or two African languages as their mother tongue. Because of the multilingual environment in which students are immersed, they can clearly make a real contribution to knowledge in this field. Also, they have access to many different sites for research, both in urban centres

¹ See explanation in ‘Introduction’, ‘Notes to the reader’.

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as well as in rural villages. In this way, students bring new knowledge, motivation and personal ‘investment’ (Norton, 2000:273) to the project.

Entering the community

According to Zamel (1993:28):

Students entering a new community must take on its ways of knowing and its ‘ways with words’. The idea of a culture suggests a kind of immersion, engagement, contextualization, fullness of experience that is necessary for someone to be initiated into and be conversant in that culture, for someone to understand how that culture works.

This chapter demonstrates how the research approach provides multiple opportunities for student learning to take place. This approach encourages students to become independent learners, develops enquiry-based skills, promotes creative problem-solving and fosters initiative and resourcefulness (Brown, Bull & Pendlebury, 1997). It does so in a manner that differs from the conventional ‘skills-based’ approaches adopted in many other foundation-type courses, including the academic literacy courses we ourselves teach. This does not undervalue the importance of helping students to acquire academic literacy skills, such as writing essays, constructing arguments and learning appropriate referencing procedures – these skills are integrated into the research course in the context of the research project. We argue that the strength of this particular intervention is that skills are integrated into the project, that it deepens both linguistic and cognitive development, and that it makes the more conventional academic development approach more meaningful.

The chapter is broadly framed around three overlapping theoretical perspectives, namely, academic literacy as social practice (Lea & Street, 1998), language and identity (Norton, 2000), and communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The first perspective, ‘academic literacies as social practice’, is defined by Lea and Street (1998) and draws on the New Literacy Studies (Gee, 1990; Street, 1984), which sees literacy as social practice. This model moves away from ‘skills’ and focuses on ‘meaning making and contestation around meaning’.

According to Lea and Street (1998:59):

A practices approach to literacy takes into account the cultural and contextual components of writing and reading practices and this has important implications for an understanding of student learning.

The ‘practice’ of research is central to the kind of meaning making required in university practices. Street’s model further includes a focus on ‘identities’. He argues that a student’s personal identity may be challenged by forms of writing required in different disciplines. Lave and Wenger (1991:91, 115) also emphasise the idea that learning and identity are inseparable and that ‘the development of identity is central to the careers of newcomers in communities of practice’ – learning implies ‘becoming a different person’. As newcomers to the university, students are ‘apprentices’ who gradually assemble a general idea of what constitutes the practice of the community.

As apprentice researchers, our novice students become participants in a core academic activity, which enables them to move away from their school-based understandings of knowledge production.

Beyond skills

Organisation of the course

Students are expected to investigate manageable topics concerning how language impacts on our everyday lives and to research and study the ‘social factors’ in language use. The success of the course depends on intensive teacher input and mediation. Lectures and tutorials are presented on topics relating both to the field of study and research processes. Students work in self-selected groups of four or five students and they are expected to engage in a significant amount of reading on issues relating to language use in South Africa’s multilingual society. The course is made up of highly scaffolded materials and readings related to the field, including guided tasks to support each stage of the process.

The course is designed around a fairly conventional set of steps. However, for our first-year students each phase is supported by lectures and class discussions. The phases are as follows:

- ▣ Read, think and talk about the field of language issues in South Africa.
- ▣ Identify a research question; define aims and rationale.
- ▣ Write a proposal.
- ▣ Use different research methods (quantitative and qualitative).
- ▣ Plan questionnaires, observation and interview schedules.
- ▣ Collect and analyse data.
- ▣ Interpret and reflect on findings.
- ▣ Give an oral presentation.
- ▣ Write a final report.

Research begins with questions which drive the process of investigation. This sets in motion a course of action which may finally lead to greater understanding of what has been investigated (Freeman, 1996). We have observed that students soon become challenged in the drive to answer the research questions that they themselves have defined. However, they struggle with the new concepts, with disagreements within their groups, and also with acquiring the conceptual understandings needed to push the process forward.

We describe what is taught in each phase and how students’ progress is assessed, mediated and monitored. We focus on teaching issues and reflect on the extent of student learning. Our key concerns relate to languages and to cognitive and academic development.

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Language development to promote learning

Halliday and Hasan's (1985) notion of the interacting relationship between language, context and text is particularly helpful in defining the nature of the language that needs to be taught and learnt in the project. This is a 'functional' approach which shows how 'language ... is doing some job in some context' (Halliday & Hasan, 1985:10).

An interesting paper by Derewianka (1990) entitled *Rocks in the Head* describes how Halliday and Hasan's (1985) concepts of 'field', 'tenor' and 'mode' are used as a framework for putting into practice a whole thematic unit on the study of rocks with a class of seven-year olds. Within any context of situation, the 'field' (the content and subject matter), the 'tenor' (the relationship between the participants in the discourse) and the 'mode' (the form of the language, whether it be spoken or written) interact to produce text. Each phase of Derewianka's project produced language appropriate to that phase. In terms of the 'field', her students became familiar with the technical language relating to the study of rocks. Children produced different forms of written and spoken texts ('modes'). These moved across a range of genres, from simple recounts, personal narratives and field notes to more demanding tasks, such as classification, structuring a written report, writing a 'big book' and giving a final oral presentation. Her description takes the reader through the process: from a class excursion into the countryside to examine rocks, to the presentation of a final report on the project. This helped us to understand some aspects of the language learning taking place in our foundation research course and of the potential of Halliday and Hasan's concept for recognising and advancing the multiplicity of linguistic competencies students need to develop in order to complete the project effectively.

In our project, the 'field' is language study – language issues in South Africa. In terms of 'tenor', learners and tutors take on different roles throughout the project, with each role producing different kinds of language and reflecting different power relations. At various phases, students are learners, researchers, team workers, presenters or 'experts', as were the tutors. In terms of 'mode', students have to learn to use the different genres of spoken and written language required by the range of situations they have to engage with (proposals, abstracts, reports, graphics, questionnaires, interviews, oral presentations, etc). As with Derewianka's project:

The adopting of these roles aim[s] at empowering the children, encouraging them to see themselves as responsible learners, apprentice learners of the discipline, moving from a tentative grasp of the field towards a more definite, more confident control. (Derewianka, 1990:200)

In this sense, the research project enables our students to move 'beyond skills' both in terms of the genres they need to control, the independence as well as the interdependence they need in order to work with peers, and the responsibilities they must assume in order to compete the project.

Topics and texts that matter

The course lectures include topics relating to language policy issues, language use in different South African contexts, naming practices, literacy practices, code-switching, multilingualism, and language attitudes arising from various factors such as gender, power and ethnicity. These topics lead to questions, such as, 'Is Tsotsitaal a real language?' 'Are names important?' 'Is South Africa's eleven languages language policy viable or feasible?' These and other questions are intended to open up the 'field' for our students so that they recognise their own interests in language in order to draw on their own 'rich and full histories' (Zamel, 1993:35).

Zamel (1995:519) has used the phrase 'strangers in academia' to describe the sense of cultural and linguistic alienation felt by her ESL students at the University of Massachusetts-Boston. We attempt to take this seriously by introducing topics that matter to our students. The fact that students live with multilingualism in their daily lives means that they have greater insight and experience from which they can draw. They too can become *producers* of knowledge.

In the first lectures, we use examples to demonstrate the extraordinary multilingualism that exists – sometimes around 20 languages are spoken in a class of 100 students. These include not only South African languages but also languages from other parts of Asia, Africa and Europe. Their multilingualism gives these students access to languages, communities and cultures not usually available to monolingual English speakers.

Tutorials are devoted to the close study of extracts from a number of research texts. For example, Kay McCormick's (1986) paper entitled *Children's use of English in District Six*, which provides an excellent introduction to authentic research conducted in a South African community. Students are asked to look for questions that motivate the investigation, examine the kinds of data that were collected and analysed, and consider how conclusions were reached. These tasks provide opportunities for intensive and careful reading and the recycling of skills, such as textual annotation, taught previously in their academic literacy module. The topics introduced in this article (attitudes to the relative status of English and Afrikaans in District Six, code-mixing and switching, standard languages, linguistic repertoires, etc.) engender much discussion and debate. The students are not only introduced to sociological terminology but also to research terms (qualitative and quantitative data, research respondents, interviewees, research samples, research findings, etc.).

Other topics include naming practices in their communities. Here students become 'knowers', who are able to relate with confidence the practices in *their* communities, and practices related to *their* social identities and contexts. Another topic, which is based on work in the 'New Literacy Studies' (Street, 1984), focuses on 'literacy practices'. Students read the literacy biographies written by other students and talk and write about their own childhood literacy practices, both oral and written. During this time, students are encouraged to think about possible topics that might be chosen for their own research projects.

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Research processes

The proposal

The first major task for students is to produce a proposal that must include a research question, aims, a rationale and reference to the methodology to be used. Sets of questions (taken from Freeman, 1996) have proved useful in providing guidelines for the writing of a new and challenging genre.

WHAT? What is the enquiry? What are the researchable questions?
What are your resources? (people, material, cost, equipment).

WHY? Why is this topic important? Why is it interesting?

WHERE? Where will the research be done?

WHO? Who will be the participants?

HOW? (research method) How will you collect the data? Will you use interviews? Will you use observational studies? Will you use questionnaires? Will you use a combination of these research methods? How will you analyse it?

SO WHAT? Why is it useful, important or relevant to do this study?

A proposal requires clear thinking and succinct, explicit writing. Each question requires careful thinking as students must *identify* the problems and the parameters around which they will want to work. They must generate hypotheses and work out ways to solve the problems they have set for themselves. This is demanding and requires high-order abstract thinking, hypothesising and reflecting (Biggs, 2003; Bloom, 1956; Perkins, 1992) and we carefully support students through the process.

Biggs and Collis' SOLO taxonomy (1982) has been used by teaching and learning practitioners at universities globally to assess how students' performance develops in relation to particular disciplinary tasks. The taxonomy describes the increasing structural complexity in the way students learn in particular contexts, where they can usually see only one aspect of the problem and the task that lies ahead. At first, the students function at a 'unistructural level' or 'multistructural level' (Biggs & Collis, 1982). However, they need to work at a more 'relational level' so as to integrate the 'Who, What, Why' issues and express these coherently and succinctly.

Topics chosen by students are fairly wide ranging. Examples include: literacy practices of street vendors; attitudes to Zulu, Xhosa, Tsonga and other African languages; naming practices in specific communities; the language of Kwaito music, and suchlike.

Designing research questions is also very challenging and tutors must get involved to make sure that the questions are do-able. A poorly-worded question often limits the students' ability to work successfully on the project. The following are examples of research questions produced by students:

What are University of the Witwatersrand students' understanding of the Love Life Billboards?

What are the attitudes of Wits students towards Tshivenda and Tsonga?

Are African languages under threat as a result of the dominance of English?

Questionnaires

At the next stage, students draw up questionnaires. They learn about qualitative and quantitative forms of data collection and are expected to devise instruments for collecting both types of data. Students' difficulties concern understanding the differences between open and closed questions, categorising the sets of questions, sequencing, selecting appropriate questions, making the questions clear and concise, and so forth. They conduct pilot studies to help them test their questions and identify problems with their questionnaires.

Reading opportunities

In order to strengthen academic literacy, we expect students to read independently to support their own research projects with suitable references. Much of what was taught in the earlier skills-based academic literacy course is incorporated into the final research report, but, as we have argued, the requirements are made more meaningful as they are embedded in the learning experience of the research project. We introduce a number of suitable research articles, which all relate in some way to the field of language issues in South Africa, to supplement the reading of our students.

Working in groups

The research project is a truly collaborative programme in that each student's contribution is needed if the project is to be successful. The workload must be shared and all must help to identify which project the group as a whole can manage. Good leadership is usually required in order to steer the direction of work and to deal with conflict and indiscipline. Some groups work very successfully without clear leadership – these groups adopt a democratic and consensus-driven approach. Others thrive on strong intelligent leadership. However, malfunctioning groups occur every year and in every class, sometimes leading to the complete breakdown of the group. Groups do not function optimally because of a variety of reasons. Often this is because one or two members do not cooperate, disagree about the topic or the approach, do not attend meetings or are absent from class. This has always been a major difficulty and presents a significant challenge for tutors.

In a previous study (Granville & Dison, 2005), we looked at possibilities for getting students to use metacognitive reflection to evaluate the success or otherwise of specific aspects of the course. According to Kitchener (1983), metacognitive reflection goes beyond mere information processing; it concerns awareness of the thinking and learning; it is learning to learn, evaluate and correct the information processing. In this study we concluded that the more *task-specific* questions yielded better responses than did more general questions. One of these questions, 'How easy was it for you and your group to come to a conclusion based on the findings of your research?' yielded the following comments from two of our students (Bongi and Petunia):

Everyone was involved and interested in the research. We had problems but we managed to overcome them because of good group work. We came

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up with many ideas, which really helped us to be critical when coming to what we had to write.

For me it was difficult because in a group I was having no say. Every time my ideas were objected to by some of the members. And that put me to miss the project because we had different perspectives.

Final research report

Students are required to produce individual work for their final research report although all members of the group draw on the resources of the whole group (the interviews, the analyses and the findings). They are also required to reflect, not only on the meaning of their results, but also on their personal experiences of the research process itself.

We draw on the work of one of our fairly successful student's (Themba's) research report in order to demonstrate what learning we think has taken place and what can be done by an average to good (but not necessarily exceptional) student. The report reflects the work of his group, but the report itself is his own. It does, however, point to some of the successes that can be achieved by collaboration and shared knowledge.

Themba's research report

Research question, aims and rationale

Our research question was 'What is the status and attitudes of students at the University of the Witwatersrand towards the Tshivenda and Xitsonga languages? The reason for choosing this topic was to find out whether (sic) Tshivenda and Xitsonga are given the same recognition as Nguni and Sesotho languages seeing that Tshivenda and Xitsonga are seen as minority languages. We would like our research to make people aware of Venda and Tsonga and to give them the same respect and recognition that they deserve.

In the example, the student has succinctly described the 'What?' (the attitudes of Wits students to Tshivenda and Xitsonga). Two reasons (the Why?) for choosing the topic are also clearly articulated. To get to this point, Themba and his group, together with tutor support, have refined this question to give clear direction to the project.

Themba's methodology

The reason we chose the University was because it was very easy access for us to get our information and seeing that it is diverse in terms of students of different races, nationalities and languages. We would also get clear answers about our research that we wanted ... Our sample consisted of thirty-six informants and fifteen interviewees. They are students who spoke Nguni, Sesotho, Venda and Tsonga languages. They were both male and female. We were not very picky in terms of age. Our research is not biased towards any ethnic group ...

... With the qualitative methods we used questionnaires. We made sure the questions were clear and easy for the students to fill in and there

were no questions we thought our students could not answer ... With the quantitative data, we asked students to rate the languages of South Africa on a scale of one to ten, the reason for doing this was that we wanted to see where ... Xitsonga and Tshivenda were on the graph ...

We also proceeded to do unstructured interviews with students as we felt there was not enough information to write our research report. The interviews gave us in-depth views on what our students had to say about their languages and we got to understand why their languages were seen as minority languages ... we had to listen attentively so that we could understand what each student had to say ...

The decision-making process for this section makes linguistic and conceptual demands as students must make choices as to what to include or leave out. They must integrate and evaluate the various aspects of the method and make decisions about what would best serve their purposes. These include the selection of interviewees and interview questions that will best elicit the responses they need in order answer their research question.

The report also provides a rationale for choosing Wits students for their interviews. They have selected a range of students from different language groups.

The methodology section requires working with the special language of research and understanding the meaning and application of terms such as 'qualitative and quantitative methods' and 'unstructured interviews'. In the previous extract, Themba displays understanding of the different opportunities and value provided by the different forms of data.

Themba's findings

From the data we collected and our analysis we found that a huge majority of subjects had negative attitudes towards Tshivenda and Xitsonga. In terms of the pie chart, 80.5% of the students thought that Tshivenda and Xitsonga were low-valued and 11.5% thought that Tshivenda were equally valued and 8.3% were neutral ... In the interviews one of the respondents said (that) Venda and Tsonga were low valued because most of the speakers live in the rural area ... Another said that people associated Venda and Tsonga as uncivilized languages, which shows that some respondents mindsets will not change.

Themba's findings show that he was able to work with the qualitative/quantitative distinction and draw interesting conclusions regarding the attitudes of some of their respondents. There is also further evidence of 'relational thinking' as he makes connections between the various aspects of the findings.

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Themba's discussion and analysis

We thought that peoples' attitudes towards Tshivenda had changed – but little did we know that they have not changed. Some respondents (Tsonga speakers) felt that the attitude of people towards their language was not good as people would disrespect their language and would think they are stupid ... It is sad for the Venda and Tsonga people as they have to code-switch so that they can be accepted into a group but why should they code-switch if no individual is willing to learn their language?

But there were some positive respondents who said that students are proud of their languages which suggests that there is hope for the future as it takes time for people to adjust to change

Themba's discussion and analysis produced surprising findings, which are usually interesting in research, as surprises signal an alternative view on particular phenomena, 'There was little change in respondents' attitudes in the sample and there were unpleasant consequences for this'. There are some higher-order reflections about the consequences of peoples' attitudes to these languages. Themba's group have not only described their data but they have evaluated and made judgements on what they found.

Analysis of data presents a number of cognitive challenges for students. We found it useful to get students to consider their data on three different levels: First, to *describe* the findings; second, to analyse, detect patterns and counter patterns; and third, to provide explanations and interpretation of their findings. Using Biggs and Collis' SOLO taxonomy (1982) we have been able to evaluate the cognitive outcomes achieved by students. Are they simply describing or listing the data, or are they relating, comparing contrasting and seeing relationship between different aspects of the data? Have the students been able to make judgements on the meaning and significance of their data?

Reflection and metacognition

After writing the report, students are required to write reflections on their experiences of the project. This requires metacognitive understanding and produces some interesting reflections. For example, some students discussed the value of the group experience, others mentioned the difficulties experienced while dealing with their respondents in the 'outside world'. Some wrote about the pleasures and difficulties of being involved in 'knowledge production' and about the extent to which they had begun to appreciate how their involvement in the project helped them to read and appreciate the research articles they have to read in other courses. These reflections alerted us to the potential for getting students to engage in metacognition. This encourages students to replay and review what they have done well or badly giving them a conscious sense of how much they have learnt.

Themba's reflections

We had difficulties in the beginning as we did not know what was expected of us in terms of research. We were very behind as we did not have our data for the deadline, but we got help from our lecturer ... and we were well on the way. We conducted a pilot study and realised that our questions would not work. Then we started all over and then our questions were correct. We collected our data and analyzed it ... The other problem we had was with students who did not want to participate and because of ethics we had to leave them alone ... I learnt to be patient, understanding and to listen to what others had to say ... Our sample was enough as we had many respondents and from that we gained knowledge about their views. Our strength was our sample that was mixed in terms of respondents that were of different race groups, language and countries.

Our weakness were not gathering our data on time. I learned about drawing bar-graphs and pie charts ... It is up to us the youth and students to rectify this problem by implementing awareness programmes for us to ensure that languages do not get looked down upon. We still found out that Venda is more recognised than Tsonga as shown in the bar graph. I hope that our research findings will help other researchers in this field. I want to say thank you to my team members for all the hard work they have done.

Themba's reflection displays a different mode of writing and of understanding. In standing back from the whole process it moves away from the 'academic' kind of discourse to a more personal response. There is an honesty in the self-evaluation that may not normally occur in conventional reporting. Themba's reflection exhibits a different dimension of understanding about the process itself, the struggles with group and the personal learning. It is an honest appraisal of the strengths and weaknesses of the project as a whole. The meta-level reflection has helped him to deepen his understanding of what occurred during the research. This richness of response is also evident in the reflections of many of the other students in their reports. This complies with Brockbank and McGill's (1998) focus on critical self-reflection as a goal of higher-order thinking. A course of this nature constitutes an attempt to enable students to operate on this level.

Thinking and writing

From both linguistic and cognitive points of view, Themba's report displays a clear focus on the main purpose, rationale and findings of the research project. Each of these is a challenge: the abstract requires the language skill and clear thinking needed to distill the essence of the project. He understands the purpose of research and is able to use evidence to support his claims. The work displays higher-order learning and thinking in terms of the processes of research, as well as an ability to grapple with the outcomes. In Perkins' (1992) terms, he has displayed 'epistemological engagement' and enquiry levels of understanding. He understands the need for the different kinds of analyses and comfortably uses both qualitative and quantitative data to deliver justification for his findings. He controls the three levels of analysis taught

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on the course, namely, description, analysis and interpretation, and has mastered the specialist language of research and language studies confidently using appropriate terminology (code-switching, respondents, pilot study, etc.). The reflective section displays meta-thinking – an ability to reflect on the process and meaning of the research project as a whole.

Conclusion

Cummins (1996:70) argues that ‘language and content will be acquired most successfully when students are challenged cognitively but provided with contextual and linguistic supports required for successful task completion’. The high standard of many of the research reports produced by students reveals their growing ability to structure information from different data sources and integrate and assemble ideas for the purpose of addressing the research question. From our assessment of some of the student writing, it emerges that certain students may have mastered the skill of arranging ideas coherently, but often fall short when required to provide reasons for choosing their research topics and account for their findings. One of the key challenges in the pedagogy of the course is to place more emphasis on learning and language strategies for improving students’ ability to explain and reconstruct information. Many students would benefit from a conscious attempt to develop ‘language of thinking strategies’ (Perkins, 1992:109).

The course set up a recursive cycle of thinking, writing and learning that propelled students into increasingly sophisticated modes of operation.

We conclude that it is possible for first-year students to engage successfully in authentic research. In arguing that a project of this nature moves students ‘beyond skills’, Themba’s report (as well as those of others) demonstrates that the process drives students to higher levels of thinking and more sophisticated language use. As initiates into the academy, they become researchers, and thus begin to develop a new academic identity as participants in the knowledge production process.

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