

FROM 'BANKING' TO 'STOKVEL': A CRITICAL REFLECTION ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF LITERACIES PROGRAMMES FOR ENTRANCE LEVEL THEORY OF ART AND DESIGN STUDENTS

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Abstract

This paper presents an analytical autoethnographic reflection on the adaptations in approach to the teaching and learning of literacies that led to the writing and research-intensive literacies programme currently presented to first year visual arts students. It maps our practices to theory, and specifically to those of Freire, Lave and Wenger, Mezirow and the transformational education theorists. Experience tells us that many students entering our programmes are not enthused at the idea of theorizing and writing about art and design, nor are they equipped with the ability to do so. In our quest to find solutions to the 'problem' a range of programmatic interventions were introduced over a period of time, including intensive writer-respondent support, with an ever-increasing hands-on engagement on the part of the disciplinary lecturer. The result was that when a smoothly flowing textual product was produced its ownership was contestable, as the inputs from the 'bank' of support were not discernable from those of the student. After reflection, the programme was refocused into its present 'stokvel' form, (the stokvel being based on traditional African concepts of self-help and mutual support, with a group of people contributing to a collective fund from which each, individually, can draw benefits), wherein the ownership of and responsibility for the learning process has been returned to the students, who experience situated learning in a community of practice, with the disciplinary lecturer and the academic-literacies practitioner acting as facilitators.

Key Words: *banking, stokvel, literacies, situated learning, community of practice*

Introduction

Art students want to make art. They do not want to write about art. This may be a generalization, but it is not far from the truth in my experience. Another truth, however unpalatable it is for the entry-level student, is that there is an expectation that graduates in the visual arts should be able to write analytically and reflectively about art and design production, and should be capable of positioning their own works and practice and those of other visual artists within conceptual frameworks. It is expected that theorizing play an integral and important role in their lives as artists, designers and creative practitioners in the public sphere, who are viewed as the 'locus' of cultural mediation. (Gaztambide-Fernández 2008:251)

Our challenge has been to find ways to bring students into the disciplinary discourse and to facilitate the acquisition of visual and textual literacies while at the same time working to assist them to develop a discourse voice that is uniquely their own. These objectives inform the Theory of Art and Design curriculum we present as part of our bigger project to provide a transformative learning experience to our entry-level students.

In this autoethnographic research project, I make my own experience as a teacher-practitioner and researcher the topic of investigation in its own right (Ellis & Bochner 2000). Over a number of years I have worked in cooperation with colleagues on 'semi-integrated' and 'integrated initiatives' (Warren 2002:86) intended to develop literacies and to bring students to the table, with regards to writing in the discipline. I have felt a growing frustration with the outcomes of these initiatives, and with what I saw as an ongoing co-dependency between student and teacher, with many students seemingly assuming the role of passengers, and with the disciplinary-practitioners (me in this case) and the language and literacies-practitioners swayed into various forms of over-compensation.

Perselli (2005:67) speaks about the need for 'disrupting the self' in order to establish a discourse identity. Mostly, in my experience, our entry-level students are not keen on finding themselves disrupted or discomfited or shaken out of their current frames of reference and worldview, when it comes to the production of written texts. I found that I was able to 'bestow' disciplinary content knowledge on students but my perception was that they did not take ownership of it, internalize it, or transform it in the way I hoped they would. To generalize, a majority mimicked, plagiarized and regurgitated and then erased the information from their minds at the end of the academic year. They did not love, own, challenge or even enter the discourse, certainly not in the way they engage in their studio work.

The frustration I expressed in my teaching journals echoed that voiced by my colleagues in the corridors and coffee room of our school. I turned to the theorists in an attempt to develop a better understanding of the situation. The mapping of theory to our practice helped me to identify the possible root cause of some of our failures. What I concluded was that in our desire to compensate for the perceived shortcomings of our incoming students in terms of literacies and disciplinary curiosity, we had unwittingly fallen into the trap of applying what Freire (1972:71) refers to as a 'banking' methodology of teaching.

In the research on which this article is based I retraced the series of adaptations in approach to the teaching and learning of literacies that we had introduced over a number of years, all of which had failed to live up to our expectations. Making use of the literature, I put theory into practice and mapped out the model for the Writing and Research Intensive Programme (WRIP), which was designed and developed in response to the identified shortcomings of the previous methodologies.

The WRIP sets out to address the possible root cause of the shortcomings, rather than offering yet another stopgap solution to the literacies 'problem'. It is grounded in the writings of Freire (1972), and Mezirow (1997), and it defers both to the literacies model developed by Nichols and Brenner (2009) and to the community of practice focused model (Lave & Wenger 1998) used in our studio modules.

The WRIP can be compared to the traditional 'stockvel', which Lukhele (1990) explains as a type of communal savings and buying group, in which the members have a shared commitment to contribute money to a common pool, from which they all benefit in turn. The members of the 'stockvel' community are honour bound to support one another in times of need, and there is social support as well as financial (or in our case academic) commitment and benefit to all the members.

In the WRIP the ownership of (and responsibility for) the learning process is returned to the students themselves. I suggest that our initial experience of the programme show that this situated learning in a community of practice approach has the potential to transform the entry-level students teaching and learning experience of the theoretical modules as well as that of the disciplinary-practitioner.

Chronology of literacies support initiatives

The challenge of assisting entry-level students to acquire visual and textual literacies is not a new one. By the late 1990's the literacy levels of our incoming students had become a topic of concern and critical comment (Allen 1998). Over the years we attempted a range of solutions. In 2002 the institution began to provide Writing Centre (WC) support and our students began to make limited and often unwilling use of the WC, discussing their assignment with a consultant, then handing in their drafts for editing, thereby disengaging themselves from responsibility in the 'fixing' process.

In 2008 the WC adopted the writer-respondent approach, modeled on Jacobs' (2007) practices. Disciplinary-practitioners and language and literacies-practitioners started to work in co-operation to develop student literacies, presenting workshops wherein Theory of Art and Design assignment topics were explicated, and best practice writing examples were analyzed. Students could voluntarily access writing assistance through the WC, with electronic submission of drafts for consultants to respond to using Track Change applications.

Along with my colleagues I observed a disjoin between the expectations of the writing and the content experts, with the WC practitioners responding to the structure but understandably lacking a depth of disciplinary content. The result was that visual arts disciplinary specialists, myself amongst them, took

on more and more writer-respondent responsibilities and became increasingly committed to the provision of writing and literacies support.

In 2009 the writer-respondent approach was integrated into a newly initiated pilot in-department trans-disciplinary project where a language and literacies-practitioner worked *within* our own department, in close co-operation with the disciplinary-practitioner, to present a mixed model for the Theory of Art and Design and Communication modules, intended to facilitate shared literacy practices. Hodges (1997: 78 in Quinn 2007:1) says that research has shown that teaching *about* writing in a decontextualized way is not as effective as helping students with their writing as part of the mainstream courses they are studying.

The mixed model, which was focused on the development of literacies and the provision of intensive writer-respondent support, was intended to engage students, and bring them into the discipline. It focused on three aspects: small group tutorials of 8-10 students, which the practitioner and the language and literacies-practitioner presented together to explicate assignment topics; the ready availability of both the disciplinary-practitioner and the language and literacies-practitioner to assist the students to craft their essays; and the rigorous application of the writer-respondent approach, with the student submitting multiple drafts of the essays and the disciplinary-practitioner and the language and literacies-practitioner responding to the drafts with both formative commentary and summative assessment (Duker 2009).

The result was an improvement in the writing generated by the top quadrant of students. However the ownership of their smoothly flowing textual product was contestable, as the inputs from the 'bank' of support - the teacher, literacies specialists and writer-respondents, were not discernable from those of the student. Weaker students, specifically those who were not home-language English speakers, did not seem to retain even the grammatical accuracies they had been assisted to acquire from one assignment to the next.

Feedback indicated that the intensive small group tutoring was disruptive to the students studio work, causing resentment from both staff and students, when they were drawn out of the studios for their scheduled sessions.

Statistically few students actively sought out either the disciplinary or the language and literacies-practitioner to engage in an active discussion on a one-to-one basis on the structuring or content of assignments. Instead students relied on the written feedback and 'correcting' of their drafts. The language and literacies-practitioner observed that the provision of detailed written responses to the electronically submitted drafts had drained her energies and that a large number of students had not engage decisively with the writer responses or made the changes as advised.

We agreed that the majority of students were still not actively and critically engaging with the processes of constructing meaning or writing in the way we had anticipated. As we worked harder and harder to achieve learning 'for' our students I became increasingly disenchanted with the writer-respondent model, and resolved to look for alternative solutions to the student literacies 'problem'.

Review of literature

Single and double loop problem-solving models

If you want to solve a problem then you need to get to the root cause of the problem and address that, rather than simply trying to fix the problem itself. Put in a nutshell that is the thinking behind the range of organizational change, problem solving, learning and mental models developed by Argyris (1999) Kim (1993) and others.

Argyris (1999:68) and Kim 1993:25-28) present organizational learning models based on double loop solution finding for (organizational) problems. They show that in a single loop model once a problem has been identified, a strategy is developed that addresses the immediate problem, then a solution is put forward and action is taken that is intended to solve the problem. When the results are evaluated and it is found that there is either a match or a mismatch between the problem and the solution, if there is a mismatch the planner devises a new strategy intended to fix the problem. Inevitably when a

different but related problem is identified, it too is dealt with in isolation, without taking the bigger picture into account, and the same cycle is repeated.

In the double loop model when a problem is identified the solution-finding starts not with the problem, but with the source. Argyris (1999:68) calls this going back to the governing variables, Kim (1993:28) refers to going back to the mental model and they suggest that by deconstructing a problem in this way and finding a way to re-articulate it you are more likely to find a long-term solution, because the structure (the mental model) drives behavior (the problem). So if you want to change the behavior you need to change the structure that is producing the behavior.

Freire's critical pedagogy

Freire's description of the traditional 'banking' method of learning resonated, in the light of the observations that the students were not retaining the literacies they had 'acquired' from one assignment to the next, despite the elevated levels of support and feedback. He says that when students become dependent on the teacher for knowledge and do not learn to think for themselves 'The more students work at storing the deposits entrusted to them, the less they develop the critical consciousness which would result in their intervention in the world as transformers of that world'. (Freire 1972:60)

Freire describes three stages in the development of critical consciousness Stage one being a period of 'intransitive thought' characterized by a sense of vulnerability and disempowerment. Stage two a state of 'semitransitive thought', with students beginning to address problems and apply 'their minds and take action to effect change', but are not yet at the point where they are able to act as 'change' agents, being still dependent on others to take charge in challenging circumstances. In stage three, 'critical transitivity', students have attained autonomy and are able to think critically and 'merge critical thought with critical action to effect change' (Kitchenham 2008:108).

Mezirow and transformational educational theory

Mezirow (1997:5) says that transformative learning develops autonomous thinking. His models are influenced by Habermas (1971) and Freire (1973) and can be read as a 'recipe' for actualizing the development of the critical consciousness that Freire calls for.

For Mezirow, our point of view emerges from our habits of mind, into which is woven our character, worldview, and our habitual ways of interpretation. For perspective transformation to occur, for our habits of mind to change, both the perspective we use to construct meanings, and our frames of reference, need to be interrogated. Kitchenham (2008) suggests that Mezirow uses frames of reference as 'a kind of universal construct' to cover a broad array of ways of knowing and of multiple intelligences, in addition to an 'eclectic assortment' of mixed categories including habits of mind, world view, religious and political orientation and beliefs, interpersonal relationships, cultural and ideological bias, stereotyped attitudes and practices, moral-ethical norms, emotional / psychological understandings and aesthetic values.

Lave and Wenger and situated learning in a community of practice

Lave and Wenger (1991,1998) posit a 'social concept' of learning where meaning and identity are negotiated in communities of practice, which are groups or collectives of people with a common interest or bond, who are engaged in a joint enterprise (1998:2). They see learning as part of the lived experience of participating in an active engagement with the world (1998:3), and social practices as the driver, or 'primary generative phenomenon' of learning (1991:4). They talk about active or 'situated' learning (1991: 32) as being embedded in the context of culture, and being focused on doing (practice), belonging (community), becoming (identity) and experience (meaning) (1991:4). Knowledge is something that is acquired through that activeness, and meaning is the product of that knowledge. Learning activities in this context are engaged and dilemma driven, and there is a distinction between intentional instruction and information dissemination, and learning as they understand it, where the emphasis is on the transformation of the whole person, not just the reception of factual information. They make a distinction between 'traditional' apprenticeship, which is instruction based, and 'situated' learning (1991:32) which I interpret them to suggest is formative and holistic in approach, and they believe instruction must be done in 'complex, social environments' (1991:40).

Brenner and Nichols applied theory model

Brenner and Nichols (2009) refer to 'active learning' through the 'the implementation of active classroom learning techniques such as the inquiry approach'. This approach forms the foundation of a literacies programme they presented at Wits University. They draw connections between learning, critical thinking, reading critically, and writing, and they elaborate on the need for students to share ideas and talk about and apply that which they are learning, so that it becomes part of themselves. Their students write *in* the programme, as opposed to receiving 'first aid' through the intervention of writer-respondents. They propose practical suggestions for writing intensive interventions and their model focuses on 'writing as thinking', where students write in their peer groups in a supported teaching and learning environment, as opposed to the traditional model of assignment writing, which sees the student going home to write in isolation.

NMMU Introductory Studies studio teaching applied theory model

Like the Brenner and Nichols (2009) model, our studio-teaching methodology places much emphasis on the positive role of the community of practice. In introducing students to the studio disciplines, we use a mixed-model approach (Duker 2009). We start with what Anderson (2006) refers to as cognitive apprenticeship where 'the disciplinary-practitioner is presented as the expert and the student is styled as an apprentice and is inducted in a highly supported way into the discipline using the grammatical approach that artists and apprentices have followed over the centuries' (Duker 2009). We introduce students to the range of complex literacies embedded in the design grammars, including what Carter (2008:70) describes as academic, visual, societal, material, scientific, mathematical, spatial and graphic literacies. Studio practitioners set out to be extremely explicit, in their articulation of disciplinary concepts and mores.

As the year progresses the studio practitioners adopt 'a different role, that of learning companions / co-constructors of knowledge, and the emphasis is placed on the building of a supportive community of practice, wherein students can forge their identities in an engagement with their teachers and their peers' (Duker 2009). Ludema (2001: 71) suggests that in a community of practice there is a strong social bonding and the members experience a sense of safety and security that enables them to take conceptual and intellectual risks. This is confirmed by the fact that even when there are no formal classes, students are to be found in the studios working alongside their peers, in a close engagement, expecting and receiving support and critical engagement.

Methodology

In carrying out the research on which this paper is based, in which my experience as teacher, practitioner and researcher was the topic of investigation (Ellis & Bochner 2000). I made use of an analytic approach, aligned to Anderson (2006:378) which requires (1) complete member researcher status, (2) analytic reflexivity, (3) narrative visibility of the researcher's self (4) dialogue with informants beyond the self, and (5) commitment to developing some form of theoretical understanding of broader social phenomena.

The research is descriptive and interpretive, and it draws on the writings of a range of theorists (Freire, Mezirow, Lave and Wenger, Bandura, Perselli, Argyris and Schon), amongst others, as well as on my own (phenomenological) observations, which were recorded in the form of journals and which include reflections on dialogue with colleagues and students, and a chronological recording of my own experience of the teaching and learning environment.

Discussion

The identification of the problem

In past attempts to bring the students into the discourse, and to improve their literacy levels, the application of single loop problem solving methods (Argyris 1999:68) had resulted in a range of 'solutions' revolving around the supply of support, most of which put the burden of 'correcting' on the shoulders of the academics. Each solution had brought with it new problems. What was common to

them all was that they were all disciplinary-specialist focused, rather than being student-centred. By our own admission the solutions had failed to fully address the identified problems.

When the double loop method, which required of us to go back to the root cause, was applied, and the governing variables (Argyris 1999:69) or mental model, (Kim 1993:25-28) were deconstructed, we faced the realization that our lack of success in persuading students to engage with the discourse in its textual form was symptomatic of structural problems. Specifically, these problems related to the conceptual framework and methodologies underpinning the interventions, which had disempowered students, who had in effect become passengers on their own learning journeys, whilst the disciplinary specialists occupied the driving seats as the problem-solvers.

It seemed that the majority of our students were not moving beyond Friere's Stage 2 (Kitchenham 2008:108), and that the disciplinary-practitioner and the language and literacies-practitioner (the writer-respondents) with their good intentions, were complicit in the students inability to free themselves from a dependency on others to solve their academic problems. Freire's model proved useful in understanding the uneasy and at times resentful dependency that students had developed on the writer-respondents, one that was reinforced by the intensity of support that the writer-respondent method provides. The weaker the student, the greater the writer-respondents input, and the efforts to support, the more chance that the student regressed from Stage 2 back to Stage 1, and stopped trying. We appeared to have fallen into a trap of our own making.

Simplistically put, the purpose of transformative education is to provide learning opportunities that allow for the possibility of the student being changed by what he or she is exposed to, in a meaningful way, or that at least provide the opportunity for the students to interrogate their own frames of reference. Transformative education is therefore oppositional to banking education, where acquired information is stored, and regurgitated rather than being synthesized or acting as a catalyst for some form of transformation. According to Herod (2002) in Orey (online: no date) transformative learning is learning that purposively questions assumptions, beliefs, feelings, and perspectives in order to grow or mature, personally and intellectually. It was clear that, because of the way the mixed model programme was structured, with its focus on lecturer-dominated tutorials, and its intensive writer-respondent support, there were inadequate opportunities for students to reflect, to interrogate their own world views, to exchange ideas and question assumptions, or to move outside what Mezirow refers to as their 'habits of mind' (Kitchenham 2008:118), to construct new meanings and to find something of their own to say.

Drawing on the literature, and on the examples of theory in practice (Brenner & Nichols 2009, Duker 2009), the objective was to develop a framework and methodology for a revised programme that would support the development of literacies and disciplinary voice, whilst at the same time facilitating the student's academic autonomy and lessening the reliance on the writing and disciplinary-practitioners to act as the language and meaning problem-fixers.

The Writing and Research Intensive Programme (WRIP) design

The objective was to move from the banking and reparative writer-respondent methods to a design based on an interpretation of Freire (1972) and Mezirow's (1997) theories of learning (Figure 1).

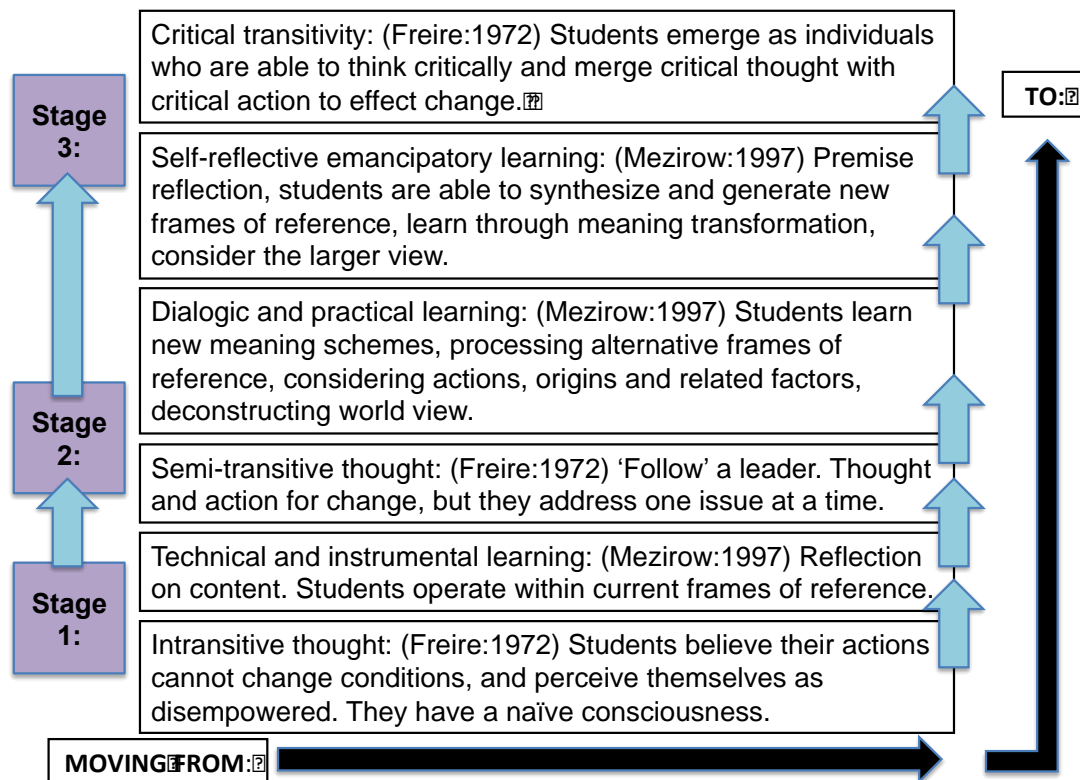


Figure 1: Moving from the Freireian 'intransitive' to 'critical transitivity' drawing on Mezirow's theories

The WRIP design would be based on a managed transition from cognitive apprenticeship to an experience of 'situated learning' in a community of practice. There would be time during each block for gallery visits, extensive group work including shared exercises, debate and discussion, collective and individual research, focused reading for academic purposes, written and visual journaling, as well as the completion of formal academic assignments through a drafting and redrafting process supported by peer reader response, and peer and self-assessments. Students would write within the supported community, although they would be able to take assignments home to complete, when and if they needed solitude in which to write (Figure 2).

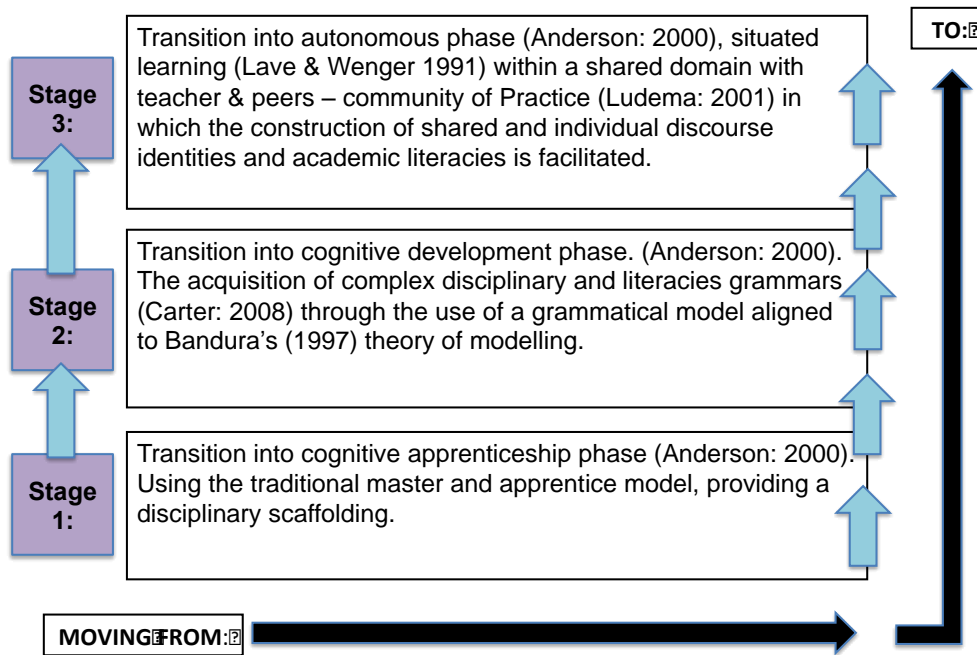


Figure 2: Moving from Anderson's 'cognitive apprenticeship' towards 'situated' learning in a community of practice

Four writing and research-intensive workshops of stepped conceptual intensity, each a week long in duration, were planned. Each block would build on the previous one, with an ever-increasing movement towards the acquisition of critical thinking skills, autonomy and critical consciousness (Figure 3).

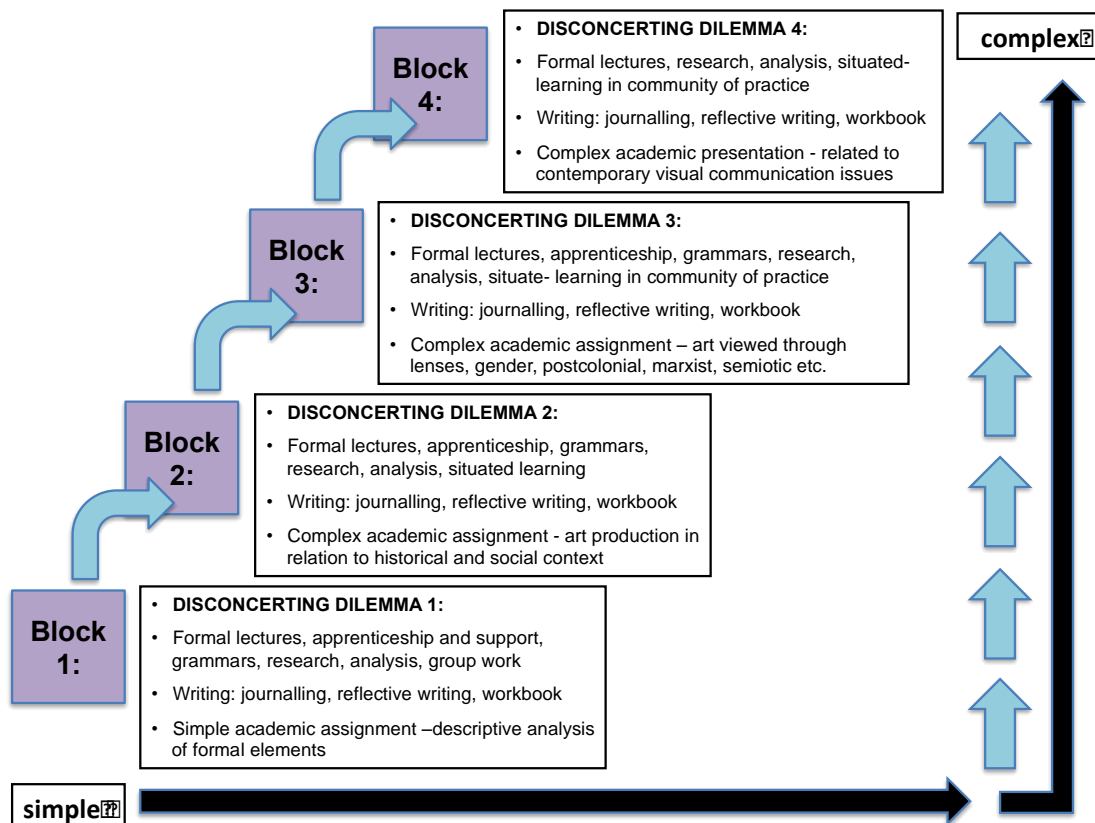


Figure 3: Stepped cycle of learning

Activities would be linked to the phases of transformative learning (Figure 4). The students would attend in groups of 25, and each block would start with a short, supportive apprentice / master introductory stage, followed by an intensive grammatical acquisition stage, and finally, the major methodological focus would be placed on the activities in the community of practice stage. At the end of this process assignments would be formally assessed by both the disciplinary and the language and literacies-practitioner.



Figure 4: Relating Mezirow's 10 Phases of Transformative learning (Kitchenham 2008:105) to the WRIP active learning cycle

Findings

There are indications that the community of practice focused WRIP that was presented for the first time in 2010 is proving to be a facilitating space for students. Whilst we have not yet established whether they retain the benefits in the long-term, they are seen to be building and retaining competencies from one assignment to the next, which is a positive first step. They engage more critically in writing and research than our previous students did, without as much need for the disciplinary and literacies-practitioners to drive them, or to solve their problems for them. Whilst this is undeniably a subjective observation, from my perspective, as the disciplinary-practitioner, I experience them as more actively involved, not only in the WRIP blocks, but also during and after the formal lectures, when there is an increased level of questioning and engagement.

Freire's cautions about the dangers of the banking approach conjure up a picture of the student as an empty piggy bank, waiting passively to be filled by the owner of the disciplinary knowledge and information. My experience to date is that the WRIP the peer group of students and the disciplinary and literacies-practitioners become members of a disciplinary community of practice that can be likened to a stockvel. The stockvel, though it is also a means of banking, and it also focuses on the accumulation of savings, has a different conceptual underpinning and a different operating system. It is one based on traditional African concepts of self-help and mutual support, with a group of people contributing to a collective fund from which each, individually, draws benefits in a rotation, and where

there is a social as well as a financial commitment and a commitment to support one another (Lukhele 1990). In our community of practice both the students and the disciplinary and literacies-practitioners draw benefits and build disciplinary capital as we engage in the practices of teaching and learning.

Conclusions

This paper has focused on one aspect of the ongoing longitudinal analytic autoethnographic research project in which I theorize my own teaching and learning practices. In it I have reflected on the process through which the WRIP came into being. I have traced the chronology of attempts at solving the dilemma we face, namely that students are unwilling to engage in theorizing about art and design, and often lack the literacies to do this effectively. I have described how I turned to the theorists for understanding, as we looked for the root causes of this disaffection, and how, using a double-loop problem solving model, I came to the (in retrospect obvious) conclusion that, with the best intentions we were teaching using a banking methodology that diminished, rather than increased, the students potential to succeed.

Through the WRIP I believe we have begun to move to extract ourselves from the deficit position into which we maneuvered ourselves over the previous few years, in our well-intentioned attempts to 'make things right' for our students.

This research has already served a cathartic purpose for me, as it has allowed me to pause and reflect on how I experience the teaching and learning situation, something that disciplinary-practitioners maybe omit to do, as they pressurize themselves to find the 'right' approach to helping students. My reflections and findings may well resonate with specialists from other disciplines, who find themselves in similar situations where they have taken on the role of what Jansen (2011) refers to as 'professor nanny', rather than facilitating an environment wherein the students are able to take ownership of their own learning processes, and disciplinary specialists can breathe a sigh of relief.

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Short Biography

Mary Duker is the Director of the School of Music, Art and Design, Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, Port Elizabeth. Her work in progress is situated in a context of global, national and institutional imperatives to improve teaching and learning. Her interests lie in facilitating access to the visual arts disciplines and in the design of curricula that scaffold the teaching and learning of literacies for diverse, vulnerable, but aspirational groups of students.