

**Peer Facilitation:
Theory and Practical Methods of
Inducting First-Year Students Into
the Uses of Discourse in Academia**

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Context of language facilitation

- English Language Skills (one year)
- Majority of students 2nd or 3rd language English speakers
- More than 90% of students are mother-tongue Xhosa speakers from the Eastern Cape
- Students are members of the Commerce Faculty

What do I mean by referring to - student 'induction' into the uses of discourse in academia?

- Cultural models and discourses
- 'Communities of practice'
- Students as apprentices
- Assimilation and accommodation of knowledge

Cultural models refer to:

"Socially accepted associations among ways of using language, of thinking, valuing, acting, and interacting...associations that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or 'social network' (J.Gee)"

Discourse use within a cultural model

- Discourse encompasses:
"the use of spoken, written and signed language and multimodal/multimedia forms of communication" (Centre for Discourse Studies, Aalborg University, Denmark)
- *Varying* discourses create (according to Gee) meaningful distinctions based upon values and beliefs (theories)

**Communities of practice
(Etienne Wenger)**

- Communities of practice are formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavour
- Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly

My students and cultural models or communities of practice

- Students emerge from peculiar cultural models and communities of practice, with unique ways of engaging in discourse (traditional, African culture)
- These values may conflict with values we uphold in academia, such as criticality, egalitarianism and cultivation of questioning attitudes
- 1st years traverse cultural models upon entering the university landscape; this process can be destabilising as new territory is explored and previous knowledge and ways of doing are re-evaluated

Students as apprentices

- *Situated cognition* is a theory of instruction that suggests learning is naturally tied to authentic activity, context, and culture (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989).
- In institutions of HE, students model ways of reasoning, analysing, discoursing and doing via observations of and interactions with instructors and peers
- Lecturers partially apprentice students in the ways of the faculty, and related professions

Student assimilation and accommodation of knowledge

- **Assimilation** is the process whereby students incorporate elements of the physical world into their understanding and formation of interpretive categories
- **Accommodation** refers to the process whereby students adapt their understandings to the realities of the world in order to arrive at better understandings (Barnes)

Theoretical summation

- Students emerge from cultural models where peculiar values shape the form of discourse
- Academia also possesses forms of discourses which may conflict or are totally new to first-years
- As apprentices, students assimilate and accommodate their perspectives with classroom content, while interacting with peers and their teacher to create to create new understandings of the world

Practicing the theory in class (What I do)

- I minimise instruction that requires passive learning, and use speaking time to either explain my teaching strategies, or to demonstrate the use of a particular discourse (economically related)
- I rely on a Peer Facilitation (PF) system in order to maximise active learning and engage the students in interactive tasks

Peer Facilitators

- PF's are elected by class mates (I have two classes of 22-23 students each and there are 5 PF's in each)
- I meet with PF's weekly and explicitly inform them of what my learning goals/outcomes are
- PF's also identify concepts and theories which they are tackling in their 'mainstream' classes which they believe are vital to understand
- PF's also serve as liaison officers between myself and the class when needs be

Types of activities undertaken

- As students are mainly assessed via the writing of essays and exams in their mainstream modules, conventions of academic literacy are practiced in peer groups; here, students check and support each other in terms of structure, quoting support, avoidance of plagiarism and proper referencing
- Before drafts are submitted, PF's assist me in ensuring that students are aware of the requirements of a task and that the group has engaged in peer reviews of each others' texts
- Intensive dialogue also occurs among the students to ensure that the theories that they are required to comprehend and relate to the real-world are collectively dissected

** I must add that I provide students examples of proper quoting, referencing, etc., by sharing authentic texts from their faculties*

Verbal discourse

- Orals: students love expressing their views, and the shy ones also enjoy listening to their peers
- Monthly, students engage in individual orals where they discuss a current event of their choice
- This practice increases confidence in participating in the discourse of their faculty, and also links the real world to economic theories encountered in mainstream classes
- Students have started to sound like professional economists (further linking them to professional communities of practice)

Challenges in this approach

- Scaffolding awareness
- Parallelism between foundation and mainstream content
- Teaching approach which varies from the mainstream (reading selections)
- Liaison with mainstream lecturers

Student perceptions of active learning: A

- Passive learning occurs to learners who tend to memorise the content of the subject without understanding. Sometimes they study without preparing what are there objectives of the module what is required and what should be understood after reading the chapter. Passive learning also takes place in the classrooms. Most learners have a propensity of waiting to be told what is this? Why it functions like this? what are the results? Hence that is passive because you don't learn anything by just listening to the educator instead of doing something in your own and see what are the results. Whereas active learning occurs when applying a very known system "Do-it-Yourself" (D.I.Y). By doing this learners have an opportunity to find things on their own with the support from the educators. Active learning includes the ability to investigate; identify challenges in your (?) and respond to them with your perspectives or research and come out with results then it shows that a learner is understanding the content of the subject.

Student perceptions of active learning: B

- The difference between active and passive learning lies in the usage of information. As students enter the learning environment, they are assumed of not having knowledge about concepts and topics taught in class therefore the lecturer takes the initiative to equip their brains with information by verbalising the information to them. The concept passive refers to the student as storing information. Active learning refers to when the lecturer strives to assist the student in restructuring the new information and the information they had prior the new information was supplied and helps them to practice using it. In the few months of my university life, I had realised a major difference between education at high and primary level and it has made me realise why most teenagers tend to fall out of tertiary and some end up realising their dreams dissolve. At tertiary level, passive learning takes place more than active learning and I feel that the one type of learning is just as important as the other one. Lecturers at university perform most of the work in class and because of time constraints, work load and the large amount of learners in class, direct active learning is almost too impossible to achieve.

Conclusion and perceived benefits

- Peers assist each other in the act of traversing distinct cultural models
- By demonstrating the peculiarities of academic conventions, with PF's, students master basic techniques
- By linking media and other authentic texts with their faculty courses through reading and reasoning about them, students assist each other in becoming acculturated members of a new community of practice

Thank You

... for listening to my ideas about inducting
first-years into the uses of discourse in
academia

