CHAPTER 14

Academic literacy revisited: a space for emerging postgraduate voices?

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Becoming doctorate

Few would challenge the notion that postgraduate studies, particularly at doctoral level, should make a contribution to the body of knowledge. Such contribution is typically the product of several years of academic endeavour characterized by a process of 'being and becoming' a scholar (Van Schalkwyk 2014). The doctoral journey has, however, been described as one that is fraught with uncertainty and ambiguity, and that is intricate and multi-faceted (Green 2005; Jazvac-Martek 2009). In addition, Barnett (2009: 431) has suggested that in today's complex and unpredictable, technology-driven world we require a "wider form of human being" than ever before. It is in this complex space that the postgraduate academic project is situated, requiring the construction of a meaningful, intellectual work such that the graduate is able to take a stand and make her voice heard. Aligned to this thinking is the tacit assumption that engagement in postgraduate studies will facilitate the acquisition of academic literacy and entry into the disciplinary discourse or community of practice within which the academic work has been undertaken. In so doing, the graduate will become recognized as a scholar in the field.

For my own doctorate I explored the acquisition of academic literacy among a group of first-year extended degree programme students. These students represented a cohort who had obtained entry into university in spite of not having met conventional entry criteria. My study drew initially on the work of Gee (1990) and was later influenced by those who described academic literacy as embedded in epistemological perspectives that are socially constructed (Street, 2003; McKenna, 2004), thus within knowledge that is derived from our experiences and interactions with one another. Being 'academically literate' was therefore closely

linked to understanding the 'ways of doing' in a particular discipline or even within the academic world. How this understanding was to be acquired, however, proved to be more complex. In the footsteps of scholars from South Africa such as Leibowitz and McKenna, my research problematized the thinking that assumed a smooth transition to becoming academically literate by virtue of 'immersion' in the discipline. The diverse students who participated in my study seemed to struggle to pick up the typically tacit clues provided by their university lecturers on how to write in a scientific style. Often these students resorted to mimicry as they tried to engage academically and 'sound scholarly' (Van Schalkwyk et al. 2010).

After completing my doctorate, I documented my experience as a postgraduate student. Influenced by the extended degree programme students' stories, I reflected on my own transition from 'outsider' to 'insider' (Jacobs 2005), and on 'becoming' doctoral (Van Schalkwyk 2010). There were both similarities and differences between my story and those of the students. Although I had emerged slightly bruised from my doctoral studies, I had done so confident in having fulfilled my apprenticeship, and feeling that I had paid my dues. I believed my doctorate would give me entry into my disciplinary community of practice and, importantly, license to critically influence its discourse. However, I became acutely aware of some of the challenges that postgraduate students face in seeking to pay homage to entrenched 'ways of doing'. I spoke of the power that resides in the hands of those who decide on what those 'ways of doing' ought to be and highlighted how, in the process of writing (the currency with which postgraduate work is typically traded), many are excluded and may never find their own voice (Starfield 2004). I problematised the issue of the power that resides in knowledge and, probably naively, called for those of us involved in postgraduate supervision to "be mindful of our students' potential to change not only their own identities … but to also change the prevailing discourse…" (Van Schalkwyk 2010:218).

Power and knowledge in a postgraduate context

In the intervening post-doctoral years, the issues of power and knowledge in the context of learning have taken centre stage in many contexts, and particularly in South Africa. Calls for the decolonization of curricula and for a 'cognitive justice'

(Leibowitz 2016), while often focused currently at undergraduate level, have equal relevance for postgraduate students and also deserve consideration. In this chapter, I have not tried to presume to know the experiences of others, but to unravel some of the threads that exist at the very edge of these debates, specifically from the postgraduate perspective. In doing so, I revisit some of the theoretical perspectives on academic literacy that informed my doctoral research and introduce some that I now realise could have strengthened my work at the time.

The power relationships that characterise postgraduate supervision have been well-explored in the literature, typically describing shifts from the unequal or hierarchical position between student and supervisor to one that is eventually characterized by collegiality and collaboration (McPhail and Erwee 2000; Lee 2008; Benmore 2016; Van Schalkwyk et al. 2016). However, these understandings should not be taken at face value and belie the intricate layers of how power asserts itself at this level. Power establishes boundaries to maintain its status – it needs to separate the powerful from the less powerful or even the powerless if it is to be sustained. It is here that *knowledge* as a *commodity* enters the fray. Whose knowledge? What knowledge? Knowledge to what end? It is also here that knowledge becomes powerful. Palmer (1987:22) has argued that "the way we know has powerful implications for the way we live" and "every mode of knowing contains its own moral trajectory, its own ethical direction and outcomes". Thus the knowledge held by the expert supervisor is rooted and grounded.

I would like to believe that few of us who supervise will consciously, and with intent, work to negate the knowledge capital that our students bring with them to the supervisory space, particularly when that knowledge is premised on different norms and values. But, I do believe it is happening, possibly subconsciously, all the time. Some might argue, this occurs with good reason. It is surely the role of those who are the custodians of the discipline, who have contributed to developing the scholarly and scientific stature of the discipline, to take responsibility for maintaining such standing? On the other hand, to what extent do we, in our supervisory roles, serve as gatekeepers to protect the status quo, making decisions about what does or does not contribute to the body of knowledge in our fields? How rigid are we in our thinking? What space is there for other knowledges? And how is this influencing issues of access and success across the system, particularly

in South Africa? If we consider the numbers in our country who are entering postgraduate studies, and who are graduating, then tough questions need to be asked about equity across the system. As a proxy, consider the fact that based on 2012 data, the doctoral participation rate of white females in South Africa is 40 times higher than for their black African counterparts (Cloete et al. 2015). While one acknowledges that issues of access and equity are complex and cannot possibly be reduced to a single aspect, it is important to consider how issues around powerful knowledge might be serving as a barrier to change the current situation.

Sounding scholarly

Language has a powerful symbolic presence in South Africa across the many strata of our culturally rich, yet unequal, society representing both freedom and oppression depending on which language and who is speaking. In the context of higher education, language becomes a weapon of powerful knowledge, and can serve to subjugate and exclude. In my doctoral thesis, I highlighted the work of Bourdieu who described how the sophistication of a student's background was strongly related to an "ability to manipulate scholastic language" (Bourdieu et al. 1994:28). He continued, suggesting that "many university students are unable to cope with the technical and scholastic demands made on their use of language… [and are] condemned to using a rhetoric of despair whose logic lies in the reassurance that it offers" (Bourdieu 1994:4). Although Bourdieu was writing about school children, his work resonated with the findings from my own research among students embarking on higher education. It also influenced my subsequent reflections as I described how my first forays into academic writing as postgraduate student floundered. The feedback from my tutors left me feeling exposed and uncertain, in spite of having entered advanced studies as a mature learner who believed she had brought considerable craft knowledge and sound language skills into the postgraduate learning space. Finding my voice took time, as I engaged at the periphery of the disciplinary community, struggling (as my first-year students had) to find the words that would make me sound scholarly. For many postgraduate students in South Africa today, their entry into this boundary space occurs in a second or even third language – a reality that can have significant implications as one seeks to progress towards becoming an insider.

In addition, our postgraduate students come to us with established identities that often have both stature and value in their communities, but that may or may not prove to be enabling when they seek entry into a chosen disciplinary community (Canagarajah 2002). As argued earlier, this entry hinges on the adoption of the dominant discourse and ironically, it is in the quest for the doctoral voice, that their own voice can be silenced. Equally ironic is that even our well-meaning efforts at intentionally making overt the expectations with regards to academic or scientific writing, and the tenets of what scholarship looks like in that field, can serve to entrench the power differential rather than seek to close the gap.

Challenging entrenched positions

Drawing on the work of Fraser, De Sousa Santos, and others, Leibowitz (2016) has recently argued that what is needed are 'social arrangements' where we can engage with one another on a more equal footing. Our reality is that there is no equality in how scientific knowledge is distributed and this influences who has access and who does not. But, cautions Leibowitz (2016), simply moving towards a more equitable distribution does not address the hegemonic status of knowledge. She posits the idea of variety of knowledges that might exist side by side conforming to a range of criteria that speak to issues of democracy and mutual acknowledgement. These ideas deserve further consideration.

Ultimately postgraduate studies ought to be about learning – transformative learning that challenges entrenched assumptions and leads to a more open and inclusive stance (Mezirow, 2003). Accordingly, graduates who have been exposed to transformative learning experiences would be equipped to act as agents of change for the public good. The potential for graduates to 'talk back' to some of the social justice issues that have been raised in this chapter has been explored previously (Van Schalkwyk et al. 2011) arguing for the doctorate to be seen a public good. However, Mezirow (2003:60) cautions that transformative learning is premised on students' ability to engage in both critical reflection and what he describes as "critical-dialectical discourse" that fosters self-awareness and awareness of others. Those who are socially and economically marginalized cannot engage equally in this potentially powerful form of discourse and this all has clear implications for how we teach and how we supervise.

In writing this chapter, revisiting some of the theory about the multiple literacies that make us 'academic' or enable us to demonstrate scholarliness did not prove to be wholly satisfactory. I felt obliged to press on and more recently have been exploring critical theory. Reading in this hitherto unfamiliar space has given me a sense of déjà vu as I once again have engaged on the periphery, in the boundary space between being the knower and the one who does not know. Even as I share my understanding of this literature, highlighting arguments that strike me as meaningful, illuminating and useful, I do so tentatively. I am uncertain as to the extent to which I do this work justice, acutely aware of how I am a novice in this field and how my 'being and doing' in this domain may lack depth.

The epistemology underpinning critical theory accepts that power is the key determinant in deciding what and whose knowledge counts (McMillan 2015) and typically critical theorists seek to critique and confront norms – whether societal, political, economic – that are controlled by one group in society and constrain another. In response, in his seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* Freire (2000) argued that rather than aiming at integrating those regarded as 'outsiders' into a particular structure or system, we should look to change the dominant system. This thinking is counter-intuitive to many in academe who hold tenaciously onto the knowledge and the knowledge systems that define their disciplines. Nevertheless, Freire's work served as catalyst for what has become known as a 'critical pedagogy' which "considers how education can provide individuals with the tools to better themselves and strengthen democracy, to create a more egalitarian and just society, and thus to deploy education in a process of progressive social change" (Kellner 2000:197). In light of what has gone before in this chapter, such a call intuitively resonates. However, critical pedagogy as a concept is not uncontested. Questions have been raised as to the extent to which it recognizes the complex spaces within which many students and learners reside, and challenges the extent to which such students can indeed take up the 'tools' that have been provided. Accordingly, we need take note of how "some assumptions that are made in critical pedagogy may overlook the complexity of students' emotional investments, in particular social positions and discourses" (Zembylas 2013:179). This echoes our earlier discussion.

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Concluding thoughts

Ultimately, what does all this mean for postgraduate studies in the South African context? How do we guide and support our postgraduate students to find their 'voice', to achieve 'liberating literacy' (Jacobs 2005)? In offering a caveat to critical pedagogies, Zembylas (2013:183-185), who worked in South Africa although in a more general educational context, posits three approaches that could offer a response. Firstly, he argues for 'pedagogic discomfort' that would push both student and teacher beyond their comfort zone and interrogate long-held positions; secondly, that we explore areas of 'mutual vulnerability' emerging from the hurt and trauma that many students carry with them as a result of our troubled past; and finally that we acknowledge the value of compassion and 'strategic empathy' that has the potential to bring student and teacher closer together.

Revisiting academic literacy in the context of postgraduate studies offers a frame within which we can extend our understanding of the complexity that is inherent in the postgraduate journey. We are reminded of how the construction of the scholarly artefact – the dissertation or thesis – occurs within this space that is dominated by issues of power and norming. This challenges us to consider the extent to which those responsible for supervision may be complicit in maintaining hegemonic ways of doing. Rather than seeking conformity, our endeavours should be towards enabling new voices and different knowledges that will challenge dominant thinking and, in so doing, take science forward.

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