The power of the words we use

The words we use influence our understanding of the world and they affect how we interact with any person, animal or object. Despite the childhood rhyme that 'sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me', words are powerful and have real effects.

In Chapter Two we argued that discourses, which we have defined as ‘clumps’ of ideas that ‘hang together’ in words and other sign systems, have power as mechanisms in the realm of culture. Individuals draw on discourses to make sense of the world. For example, we might draw on a discourse of ‘disadvantaged students’ to explain challenges that students have with their studies. When the discourse being drawn on then complements other mechanisms, such as the availability of funding for student development, this can lead to the emergence of particular events, such as a compulsory support course for students identified as ‘disadvantaged’.

As a result of the intersection of discursive powers with structures and the agency of people, the power of the discourse can be reinforced. In the example above, the intersection between the discourse of ‘disadvantaged student’ (realm of culture), the funding for student development (realm of structure), and the development of add-on courses by academics (realm of agency) all serve to reinforce the idea that students lack something fundamental due to their ‘disadvantaged’ status.

If, however, people draw on other discourses in the exercise of their agency, then this can result in dominant discourses being challenged. Academics may suggest, for example, that there are more complex explanations for student success or failure than ‘disadvantage’, and this might lead to a very different set of responses emerging.

Understanding that discourses have power means understanding that the ways in which universities speak of their student body has consequences. Across the African continent, there is evidence of both low student throughput and differentiated success along the lines of race, language group, ethnicity and social class (Cloete et al. 2011; Moremi 2018), so it is crucially important for us to have a sense of how students are understood within universities.
In this chapter, then, we look at how students have been discursively constructed over the T₂ to T₃ time span of the research that underpins this book and we consider how discourses have conditioned the events and experiences that have emerged. To return to our realist framework, it is important to note that the power of discourses is only activated when agents draw upon them. All discourses are rooted in social practice and we argue that it is incumbent upon us, as agents, to be conscious of the ways in which we draw on discourses in the exercise of our agency.

Across our research, including that which we undertook for the Council on Higher Education as described in Chapter One, we have identified a number of discourses by which students are constructed and by which students co-construct themselves. As indicated previously, while this data is South African and our research focuses on the emergence of events and experiences in the South African higher education context, we attempt to draw links beyond our borders where relevant. We begin by discussing the conception that has permeated almost all of the data we have looked at: a discourse that we have come to call the discourse of the ‘Decontextualised Learner’.

**Students as decontextualised individuals**

In this discourse, students’ success and failure is explained in terms of attributes inherent within them as individuals, such as intelligence, motivation and aptitude (Boughey & McKenna 2016, 2017). Students are understood as individuals who work hard or do not, are motivated or are not, are bright and talented or are not, and who are therefore in the appropriate course or do not really belong there. We acknowledge that students are, of course, individual beings, each with their own strengths and limitations, but it was clear that the dominance of this focus on the individual student’s capacities entailed a significant blind spot to the bigger social structures within which students and the university exist.

Through the dominant discourse, the student is decontextualised from her social norms and practices, and her successes and failures are understood to be primarily or even exclusively a personal responsibility. The university, the society in which the university exists, the history of the country, the development of the curriculum – these are all hidden from view as the explanations for success and failure hone in on the individual.

In the data that we examined for the research on the institutional audits, one university explained poor student performance by arguing that ‘students appear to lack motivation to study, having registered on the basis of having been awarded a bursary or merit scholarship’. If students have been awarded a bursary or merit scholarship to study at the institution, then presumably they have performed sufficiently well at school to enable them to meet the criteria for the award and, thus, have presumably been sufficiently ‘motivated’ to achieve this level of performance. The institution’s report seems to suggest that, having gained access to the institution, the motivation somehow evaporates.

This sort of account locates motivation in individuals as an attribute that is either present or absent. No consideration is given to the role of social context in enabling and constraining the kind of agency that will lead to learning (Case et al. 2018; McKenna
DENYING CONTEXT, MISUNDERSTANDING STUDENTS

The university’s alienating environment, peculiar cultural practices, and unclear expectations are not brought into consideration (De Kadt & Mathonsi 2003; Luescher et al. 2020). Interestingly, the solution proffered to the problem in this particular piece of data was to note: ‘An area for improvement, therefore, would be to evaluate practices used for selecting motivated students’.

It is also not unusual in our experience to find that successful students are constructed as ‘talented’ – that is, as possessing attributes that are inherent rather than socially developed. If students are admitted to the university and fail, then it would seem that their talent was insufficient. The only fault that the institution bears lies in their initial assessment of that talent. Indeed, many universities have spent a large amount of money on developing access tests to help them do so.

This suggests that the problem lies in letting the ‘wrong’ students into the system. Given the relatively low participation rates in higher education in South Africa and beyond, as discussed in Chapter One, we need to consider that the students who do manage to access university study have often survived a dysfunctional schooling system and may have lived lives of financial deprivation. The ability of these students to overcome such circumstances to be amongst the few who access higher education is significant. One presumes that if talent was indeed an inherent attribute, these students must have it in bucket loads.

There is extensive literature calling for a stronger focus on the role of student agency to understand learning in higher education (Klemenčič 2017; Luckett & Luckett 2009), and there is a growing body of work that attempts to identify each student’s strengths and weaknesses, through aptitude and other tests. Arguably, the dominant focus on students’ inherent ability, described above, could be seen as a recognition of their agency; after all, the discourse of the Decontextualised Learner places the spotlight on the student herself – it looks at her strengths and weaknesses. This may at first glance seem a positive approach; however, it suggests that success rests on her actions regardless of the nature of the social space in which she finds herself and regardless of what might be the totally alien nature of the teaching and learning practices confronting her. The question of who or what it is that is ‘appropriate’ (or, more to the point, who is deemed ‘inappropriate’) is not dealt with. Such explanations for student success, that are focused primarily on decontextualised individual properties and disregard the realms of structure and culture, are an example of ‘upwards conflation’, a concept we explained in Chapter Two.

In talking about students, there is a continuum of possible ways of doing so. On the one end, there is this decontextualised understanding that the student body comprises simply a collection of individuals, each bringing their own inherent personalities and aptitudes. On the other end of the continuum is a focus entirely on the social, with the understanding that students represent particular socio-economic, historical, political contexts which they bring into the university, which in turn has its own social, historical, political context. Across all the data over multiple studies, we found there was a strong focus on the psychologised, individual end of this continuum and very little that took social issues from the other end of the continuum into account. This finding is echoed in the literature as Trowler (2008: xi) suggests that the lens used in much research on
educational practices ‘has been predominantly a psychological one, not a sociological one, focusing on the individual not people in interaction with each other and their environment’.

And where student success is repeatedly attributed to factors inherent in the individual, such as potential or cognitive ability, student failure is ascribed to a lack of seemingly neutral, a-social, a-political, a-cultural skills as a result of poor schooling or simply not being the ‘right’ kind of student. Across all the data we have analysed over the years, and in particular the work we did on the first cycle of institutional audits (Boughey 2009, 2010b; Boughey & McKenna 2011a, 2011b), there is ample evidence that students are largely understood in ways that are decontextualised from their histories and socio-economic realities.

Discussions about students are thus generally premised on the understanding that students can improve their lot through effort and will. They can ‘pull themselves up by their bootstraps’ and ‘achieve the dream’ provided they have sufficient motivation and aptitude. While histories of disadvantage may be acknowledged to be unfair, this discourse suggests that they can be fixed through hard work by the student. Importantly, this thinking assumes that the university is fair and open to all. The effects of this dominant discourse are everywhere, as will be discussed in this chapter.

The two ends of the continuum of ways of discussing student success – from understanding student success as a product of the individual student’s inherent attributes at one end, to understanding this as emerging entirely from the social structures in which learning takes place at the other end – are examples of the two forms of conflation (upwards conflation and downwards conflation) that Archer (1998) warns us about.

On the one hand, we have upwards conflation where student success is understood to be entirely the result of characteristics inherent in the individual. On the other, we have downwards conflation where student success or failure is understood to be entirely the effect of social and cultural structures, with no powerful agency accorded to the student.

Neither end of the continuum of explanations really provides a nuanced account of student agency. Agency, or students’ capacity to act (Luckett & Luckett 2009), is underdeveloped in both of these accounts. Extreme social understandings of student learning portray the education process as one whereby the student is inducted slavishly into a pre-existing knowledge domain with its own set of norms and values, with no space for the student to adapt and critique such domains. And while the dominant account, that of the decontextualised student, accords the explanation for success to the student herself, it does so in a very flat and fixed version of agency. It is her motivation or cognitive ability or some other characteristic that explains her success. It is not about her developing and activating her agency to work with and against the structures and cultures of society.
By ascribing all power to students as the explanation for success or failure, without empowering them to enact agency, the data we examined places responsibility for student success or failure solely in the hands of the students themselves. One of the main attractions of this understanding of personal responsibility for success is that it has an absolving function. There is little consideration of how the institutional culture and discipline-specific practices might be underpinned by alienating values and norms which could counter some students’ efforts to pursue their personal projects.

Without access to the peculiar cultural practices of the university or to the epistemological and ontological underpinnings of the disciplines within the university (a point we will elaborate upon in more detail in Chapter Five), it is doubtful that hard work alone can lead to success.

For example, in an article that discusses students enacting agency by studying together in peer-groups, Bertram (2004) notes the inappropriate and unproductive learning practices used by students when reading course material. Without access to the epistemologies of the target discipline, students called on rhetorical reading practices with which they are familiar from school (where the text is searched for keywords and concepts that match those in the question) rather than using the text to develop knowledge. Similarly, Case (2013) considers in depth the ways in which student agency is constrained by institutional structures and cultures. She argues that attempts to make sense of agency in isolation from sociological considerations are dangerous. In spite of the many warnings against a decontextualised account of student learning, this continued to be the default position across the T2 to T3 period.

The issue of talent as an explanation for student success becomes even more vexatious when held up against the fact that success rates are racially differentiated across all South African programmes from T1 in 1994 to date (CHE 2020). If it is indeed the existence or absence of talent in individual students that best accounts for success rates, then how do we explain the fact that white and Indian students perform consistently better than their black African and ‘coloured’ counterparts? Such discourses need to be rigorously troubled for the racist undertones they contain. In other countries on the continent, similar disparities can be found along the lines of social categories such as ethnicity, colourism or language group (Odhiambo 2016). In all these cases, the use of the notion of ‘talent’ as an explanation for student success needs to be interrogated for the ways in which this supposedly neutral explanation condones and reinforces social divides.

While it makes sense to have rigorous processes to ensure that the very limited spaces in higher education are filled by those most likely to succeed, we need to be wary of how we understand what it is that makes a student most likely to succeed in higher education. When we discursively construct the likelihood of succeeding simply as ‘talent’ or ‘potential’ or ‘motivation’ or ‘cognitive ability’, we hide the extent to which higher education success is a function of access to a particular set of literacy practices and dispositions validated and reinforced in a middle-class childhood (Case et al. 2018; O’Shea et al. 2019). This is an uncomfortable notion but one that has been repeatedly established through research around the world (Armstrong & Hamilton 2013; Guinier 2015; Mettler 2014; Walpole 2003).
Of course, we would like to think of higher education as a meritocracy in which everyone has a fair chance of success. We want to believe that it is the hard work of the individual, coupled with her personal attributes, that determines whether or not she gains access to the goods the university has to offer. It is upsetting to admit that it is the student’s socio-economic background that most clearly correlates with university success. In addition, we do not want to consider the ways in which social structures such as race, ethnicity, and gender also function as mechanisms constraining students’ chances of success.

That the university, through its current practices, plays a role in reinforcing the unjust social status quo is a bitter pill to swallow. Furthermore, it raises a number of challenges about how our pedagogy, curricula and institutional cultures could be re-structured to alter this. To acknowledge our complicity is to set ourselves the enormous task of addressing it.

Given that there has been a wealth of research countering the dominant decontextualised account of students, it is important to look at why this has not been taken up. In South Africa, as in many other contexts, increased emphasis is being placed on using research from teaching and learning to enhance success rates. But all too often theories about learning and teaching are misappropriated to serve problematic and resilient dominant thinking.

The misappropriation of theories on teaching and learning

Where academics draw on theories of teaching and learning to pursue projects of their own, they also draw on the discourses available in their cultural context. The power of these discourses can be such that they lead to theory being misappropriated and shifted to serve the discourse. Theories are ‘gathered into’ discourses and, when this happens, the use of the theory can simply be incorrect.

As discussed in Chapter One, powerful theories can shed light on phenomena hidden by problematic dominant discourses. They can make the familiar strange and help us to see things we have taken for granted or misunderstood. Theories about students, curricula, and teaching and learning have the potential to offer us alternative lenses to look at issues like success and failure. It is therefore worth looking at the kinds of theories being brought to bear on our understandings of students and their learning. In doing so, we can also often see the way that they are being misappropriated in service of the discourse of the Decontextualised Learner.

While a quick review of the scholarship of teaching and learning literature demonstrates that a vast array of theories is being drawn upon, the effectiveness of such theories in providing appropriate lenses on the problem depends to a large extent on how such theories are taken up. And it would seem that we have a habit of taking potentially powerful theories and re-jigging them so that they reinforce our existing frames.

One example is the theory of ‘student-centredness’ which emerged in the 1990s as universities drew on this approach to try to attend to the needs of a far more diverse and massified student body. The call for student-centredness was a call to acknowledge students’ identities and histories and to shift from traditional ‘teacher-centred’ approaches (Rogers & Freiberg 1994). It argued for a move away from focusing on what the teacher
did to what the student did, who the student was, and what the student wanted and needed. This would seem to be exactly the right theory to shift the dominant Decontextualised Learner discourse.

Sadly, however, this ‘student-centred’ approach was often subverted to reinforce the Decontextualised Learner discourse (McKenna & Quinn 2020). To be ‘student-centred’ came to mean identifying the problems inherent within the student. The theory of ‘student-centredness’ was used as the basis from which to call for more thorough selection to make sure that the university gets the students with the necessary skills, and it was used to argue for remedial interventions that address the skills that the ‘student-centred’ approach had identified as lacking (McKenna 2013). Student-centredness may have emerged as a concept from an understanding that higher education has a role to play in achieving social justice but it is often misused to justify a focus on students’ deficits, once again absenting the notion of the university as a social structure and the student as a social being.

The student engagement movement, which similarly promised a desirable shift in attention to the student experience, has also at times been appropriated. It has sometimes been brought into complementarity with the efficiency discourses of knowledge commodification, discussed in Chapter Three, to allow ‘student centeredness to mean establishing what the student, as the customer, desires and then adapting the product, the curriculum, to suit them’ (McKenna & Quinn 2020: 111). Reference to student engagement can also be found in a number of institutional policies and strategies and often entails a collection of metrics about students, with the understanding that these can be used to enhance efficiency in throughput in relation to the maximisation of subsidy.

Another example of a theory that has been misappropriated in our universities in order to complement the Decontextualised Learner discourse is that of deep and surface approaches to learning. The concepts of deep and surface approaches to learning were developed by Swedish researchers Marton and Säljö in the 1970s and were quickly taken up in research on teaching and learning around the world (Haggis 2009; Richardson 2005). But what began as an identification of how contexts enable different approaches to learning was corrupted into a consideration of why some students were ‘deep or surface learners’ (Boughey & McKenna 2016; McKenna 2012b). A theoretical approach that raised questions about mismatches between university and student practices thus became subverted to allow conclusions that students were doing the wrong kind of learning: ‘surface learning’, or, an even more worrying misappropriation, they were the wrong kind of learners: ‘surface learners’. Importantly, the concepts of ‘deep or surface learning’ or ‘deep or surface learners’ were nowhere in the original theory and have never been validated since.

What the misappropriations of such theories have in common is a focus on the student in ways that are decontextualised from her social context, and a concomitant blind spot about the social context of the university and the structure of knowledge.

While we have given examples of misappropriations of theories thus far, it is worth noting that we also see evidence of the continued use of theories that have been repeatedly debunked (Hlengwa et al. 2018). Theories such as ‘multiple intelligences’ and ‘learning styles’ purport to focus on the student and her needs – surely an admirable intention –
but they do so in a manner that suggests that learning is a neutral process dependent on individual attributes and independent of social context. Not only is the social nature of the student and the university conveniently ignored by such theories, but the structure and history of the target disciplinary knowledge is also rendered invisible. As will be argued in Chapter Five, knowledge is no more neutral than are universities, students or academics. Teaching and learning theories that focus only on the presence or absence of ‘neutral’ attributes and skills in the student are convenient because they allow us to avoid the murky terrain of ideology.

It may seem that we are suggesting that academics or universities as a whole are intentionally or uncaringly in cahoots with a system of inequality, even selecting debunked theories or misappropriating theories to do so. But of course, this is not the case. Most people working in higher education believe in social justice and wish to be part of achieving it. However, mechanisms such as the discourse of the Decontextualised Learner constrain the possibilities for social justice in ways which are subtle and normalised and very difficult to identify.

There has to be an explicit intention to identify these discourses at work in order to reduce their influence within the system. Such discourses might be powerful mechanisms but we are not powerless to resist them. We have agency, and with agency comes a responsibility to question our common-sense understandings and, indeed, some of the academic literature on student learning. We need to challenge the ways in which theories are misappropriated to focus yet again on the learner’s skills or deficits. We need to be alert to how such appropriations allow the academic department, the disciplinary knowledge, and the institution to be absented. We have to insert awareness of the extent to which our universities and institutional practices are deeply ideological and historical in nature and serve some students better than others.

This problem is of course not peculiar to any one country. Despite repeated calls over decades for us to understand the social nature of higher education (e.g. Dewey 1900; Freire 1970; Nussbaum 1998), most explanations of higher education success continue to ignore this. It is easy to understand why such individualised accounts have remained dominant: it is far simpler to develop remedial initiatives to address deficiencies in individuals than it is to look critically at the extent to which universities offer equitable access to powerful knowledge.

The ‘language problem’ and how it lets universities off the hook

Beyond the possession (or lack of possession) of personal attributes described above, another frequent and related explanation for student success evident across the research that underpins this book is that of language proficiency. Language has long been used as a political tool in South Africa and it continues to be an issue that raises great emotion. The debates about the use of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction in some South African universities continue as we write this book (see, e.g. Hibbert & Van der Walt 2014; Mkhize 2018; Prah 2017), and the lack of commitment to developing African languages for academic purposes, in the ways that the apartheid government spent millions of
rands doing with Afrikaans, is frequently bemoaned. The privileging of some languages over others in the higher education system has created numerous injustices across the continent (see, e.g. Samuelson 2013). But hidden beneath many of these debates is another matter to do with the very way in which the phenomenon of language is understood.

Language is generally understood as a neutral phenomenon comprising grammar, syntax, vocabulary and punctuation used to convey ready-formed ideas and meanings between people. In this sort of understanding, ideas pre-date language. The ideas exist and are then encoded into language. The ability to convey those ideas to others or to ‘receive’ them from others is then dependent on an individual’s ability to ‘decode’ the features of the language, that is, the grammar, syntax, vocabulary and punctuation. While this understanding of language has been widely refuted in the literature (see, e.g. Bangeni & Kapp 2017; Thesen & Van Pletzen 2006), it remains powerful and it has the added benefit of being politically expedient.

For example, way back in 1993 Bradbury noted that the ‘second language’ label in South Africa served as a means of avoiding difficult conversations about the intersections between race, class, and educational success. By attributing students’ learning difficulties to their status as speakers of English as an additional language, it became possible to avoid engaging with the effects of the apartheid ideology of inferiority. Anyone can experience difficulties in understanding a language which is not theirs by birth, so it is far simpler to point to this issue to account for poor success than to consider how unequal social structures are reinforced within the university.

There are other reasons for the continued use of what we term the ‘language problem’ (Boughey 2002) as a key explanation of student failure. If language is the explanation for why some students fail, then it can be reasoned that a university’s responsibility is simply to ensure that students have the requisite language competency to engage with their studies by putting appropriate admissions requirements in place. Perhaps, the university could take its responsibilities even further and offer add-on language courses focused on increasing students’ vocabularies and improving their grammar. These language courses, usually offered by so called ‘language specialists’, exist outside the mainstream disciplines and focus on teaching generic versions of ‘academic language’ which are themselves highly questionable. The ‘language problem’ is thus seen to be something with which the university has to contend but not something in which the university is complicit.

As we have indicated in the discussion above, this sort of understanding of the ‘language problem’ draws on an understanding of language ‘as an instrument of communication’ (Christie 1985), a view that sees language as a vehicle for transmitting meanings constructed separately from the language. Language, in this understanding, is simply a neutral conduit whereby meaning is transferred. The neutral conduit is made up of generic grammar rules, vocabulary, etc. Problems that arise in misunderstanding are then because the student did not correctly encode or decode the message, hence the focus on teaching the code to the student.

Frances Christie (1985) identifies a model alternative to that of language as an ‘instrument of communication’. This model, which she terms the model of ‘language
as a resource’, draws on the work of linguist Michael Halliday (1985). Halliday sees language use as a system of choices. Language users make these choices based on their understandings of the context in which the language is being used. To make appropriate choices, the language user needs to know and subscribe to the value system being drawn upon in that particular context.

So, for example, the use of the passive voice in scientific writing is not an arbitrary practice. A scientist chooses to write ‘Solute X was added to Solvent Y’ as opposed to ‘I made a solution by adding Solute X to Solvent Y’ because of the valuing of objectivity in scientific research and, thus, the desire to conceal human agency. Because of the valuing of objectivity, language choices ensure that there is no evidence of the researcher herself in the writing. She has no gender or religion or race or age, indeed she is not visible in the research at all.

These and myriad other choices in language use emerge from the value systems of the context being drawn upon. When students are not familiar with academic contexts, even if they are aware of the rules of spelling, grammar and punctuation, they can still make inappropriate choices. For example, it is possible to refer to a young human being as a ‘child’, a ‘kid’ or a ‘toddler’. Each of these vocabulary items is entirely appropriate in different contexts. In an academic context, the use of the term ‘kid’ would contravene the dominant value system that favours formality. Students frequently use inappropriate vocabulary in their writing as they have not fully accessed the value system of the new context. The same observation could be made of what many academics call ‘WhatsApp language’ in academic assignments. Students also sometimes err in the opposite direction, calling on a thesaurus of pompous words to mimic what they have identified as the elevated nature of writing in their discipline.

As another example of how language choices relate to values in the context, rather than ‘neutral’ grammatical rules, it is pertinent to consider how, throughout this book, we have used specialised terms related to our choice of theoretical framework. We have written on ‘analytical dualism’, ‘mechanisms at the level of the Real’ and so on. We had to introduce our framework in order to provide our readers with access to these terms.

The terms then allow us to make sense of the world in a very particular way. Obtaining access to a discipline entails being introduced to the epistemic position of that discipline and thereby to the language practices by which its truth claims are deemed credible. Language is thus understood to be central to taking on the meaning-making processes in specific disciplinary contexts.

Learning in a medium of instruction that is not one’s home language greatly increases the difficulties many students experience, but we would caution that language, if understood as grammar and vocabulary in the medium of instruction, is a very small part of the acquisition of language as integral to academic practice, as we will now discuss further in relation to reading and writing, another area where theory has often been misappropriated.
Reading and writing as ideological acts

Social anthropologist, Brian Street, identifies two models of literacy (1984). The first of these models, the ‘autonomous model’, sees reading and writing as a set of skills involving the encoding and decoding of printed text. This model is one we are all most familiar with since it is intuitive given our experiences of learning to read and write at school. In the early years of schooling, we are taught the correspondence between symbols (i.e. the letters of the alphabet) and sounds and use this to learn to read words on the page and to spell words as we write. This aspect of literacy, which Street calls a ‘technology’, is critical to reading and writing. However, Street’s work observing reading and writing as an anthropologist allowed him to identify that much, much more was involved than this technological proficiency, and this is what led to the development of his ‘ideological model’.

The ideological model understands literacy as a set of social practices, that is, as a set of things people do with and around texts of various kinds. These would include a willingness to engage with certain kinds of texts in certain kinds of ways because of underlying values about what it is appropriate to do. It can even involve setting aside engagement with text altogether.

In a collection of studies that explored literacy practices in a range of marginalised communities in South Africa (Prinsloo & Breier 1996), Malan (1996: 146) has this to say about ‘pension day’ in Bellville South:

Pensioners did not actually need to be able to read or write in order to receive their pension. One old woman in the queue told me that she was ‘blind’ (an image often used to describe themselves by people with little or no schooling), but when I asked her how she dealt with the pension pay-out, she said with great confidence: ‘Very easy. Like anything else. What I don’t know, I can ask someone who knows. If I hear about something, I go to those who can [read and write]. And now that person has to read to me what I want to know. That is how it works.’ It did not matter to her that she could not even sign the form: ‘[I] just make a cross,’ she said. ‘Then they [the officials] chap, chap [they stamp the form].’

In this community, as in others in the study, engaging with printed text was readily negotiated.

Other South African studies show how in some social contexts engaging with academic texts is disparaged. O’Shea (2017) describes how students at a university read books and articles surreptitiously on their phones, as being seen to be an avid reader could result in allegations of presumed superiority and even that they were ‘coconuts’.

The ideological model therefore goes beyond understanding reading as a set of technical skills. It is seen to encompass sets of practices related to text which, ultimately,

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2 The term ‘coconut’ is used disparagingly to refer to black people who are alleged to have assumed characteristics associated with whiteness.
are value driven. People engage with certain kinds of texts in certain kinds of ways because they see value in doing so.

The sort of thinking encompassed by the ideological model allows us to move beyond understanding literacy as a unitary phenomenon, involving everyone reading and writing in the same way, to seeing that many different literacies exist in the world. The much-vaunted ‘academic literacy’ is but one group of many literacies available in the world, and is based on sets of values about what can constitute knowledge and how that knowledge can be known in the academy. And, as we shall argue later, within the academy multiple literacies exist side-by-side.

The identification of literacy as a multiple phenomenon should not be taken to mean that we are advocating a relativist approach where ‘anything goes’. Rather, our use of the Critical Realist framework, and other theories such as Legitimation Code Theory, allows us to see that different literacies perform different functions making some appropriate and others inappropriate to particular contexts. For example, literacies that draw on ‘claim and evidence’ structures have more explanatory power in the academy than opinion type literacies of social media and the popular press.

Another theorist, James Paul Gee (1989, 2008, 2012), takes Street’s identification of the ideological model further in order to argue that being literate within a particular social context entails taking on a ‘way of being’. In the case of the academy, this would involve understanding academic literacy as including everything from the ways in which one reads an academic article to how (and whether) one asks a question in a lecture theatre. In order to make this argument, Gee (2008: 154) draws on the concept of Discourse (always deliberately capitalised to distinguish it from other uses of the term). According to Gee, a Discourse is:

composed of distinctive ways of speaking/listening and often, too, writing/reading coupled with distinctive ways of acting, interacting, valuing, feeling, dressing, thinking, believing, with other people and with various objects, tools, and technologies, so as to enact specific socially recognizable identities engaged in specific socially recognized activities. Literacy is then defined as demonstrating mastery of a Discourse. When you have fully acquired a literacy, you have taken on these ‘distinctive ways of acting’.

Gee’s work is central to the argument we have been making in this chapter around the need to understand students as social beings as it brings the concept of identity into play. When students enter our universities, they are not simply required to learn new things. Rather, they become different people, they develop a new identity. We all have multiple literacies available to us, and we continue to take on new literacy practices throughout our lives as we enter new contexts, and thus we build multiple ways of being in the world. Taking on the literacy practices of the academy is thus understood as an issue of identity.

Part of an academic identity, for example, entails questioning what we read or hear and acknowledging that knowledge is always provisional and open to amendment in the light of evidence that challenges it. For many students, the challenges of taking on such
practices can be intimidating, particularly if they have been encouraged to see the printed text as ‘the word’. As readers, they are now being expected to question and, as writers, their role is not simply to repeat what has been said elsewhere but rather to make a series of knowledge claims about what they believe to be the case based on their reading of other texts or on data they have generated. The shifts required can be overwhelming regardless of whether students have done very well at school because schools generally require and reward different sets of practices. At a personal level, the need to shift and develop can leave students questioning who they are, all they have ever known and the entire world around them.

Access to the literacy practices of the academy is unevenly distributed. While academic language is no one’s mother tongue (Bourdieu & Passeron 1994), taking up the peculiar ways of reading and writing of the academic disciplines is a simpler endeavour for some than for others. The ease with which the literacy practices of the disciplines can be taken up depends in part on the similarities of the practices expected in the university context to those practices that students bring with them from their homes, schools and other social spaces. In some homes, children are exposed from a very early age to the people around them reading and writing, and, more specifically, they are exposed to others reading and writing particular kinds of texts in particular kinds of ways – for example, reading out brief sections of a newspaper article and deliberating their agreement or disagreement with the argument being presented there. In this sort of environment, critical approaches to reading and writing may be normalised.

The key point about the ideological model of literacy is that literacies are context-dependent. Young people who have been exposed to and who have adopted the practices of literacies that are somewhat aligned to those valued in the academy are therefore privileged simply because of the circumstances of their birth and upbringing and not because of any inherent talent of their own.

What is very significant in all of this is that the university not only values certain literacy practices (which are then made difficult to access through the normalising of these practices as ‘common sense’); it also ignores or sidelines others as ‘inappropriate’.

As we have indicated earlier in this chapter, we would all like to assume that the university is a meritocracy and that success within it is determined by individual attributes and hard work (Sobuwa & McKenna 2019), and indeed this remains the dominant discourse. But research around the world consistently indicates that this is not the case (Armstrong & Hamilton 2013; Guinier 2007, 2015; Mettler 2014). The close relationship between middle-class literacy practices and those valued in universities, that we have discussed above, is one part of the explanation for the international correlation between socio-economic background and university success (Case et al. 2018; Walpole 2003).

As universities embark on widening access and ensuring equitable success for all students, we need to look directly at the gap between the promises of higher education to provide social mobility and personal advantage and the reality of its role in cementing social place and status (Clegg 2011). This means we need to reflect far more explicitly on the ways in which we might assume that our students already have certain literacy practices in place or what we can do to better enable access to these. Even more importantly, we
need to reflect on why it is that students do not always do what we would like them to be able to do, and we need to be much more rigorously critical of the ‘remedial’ measures we put in place.

The social account of reading and writing we have provided here requires more than attempting to increase reading speed using computer-based programmes offered in ‘reading labs’ or instruction in the grammar and syntax of the language of learning and teaching. Such measures reduce the practices of reading and writing to their ‘technical’ aspects and ignore the social dimensions which are much trickier to address.

What we have tried to argue in this section therefore is that, while a basic competence in the language of instruction is indeed a prerequisite to quality higher education study, the dominant understanding of the ‘language problem’ is an incomplete and simplistic account of student difficulties in mastering academic literacies. To write a laboratory report successfully in Chemistry or an essay in Political Science or a case brief in Law is largely about understanding the disciplinary concepts, values and norms from which the particular language practices manifest.

There is thus a limited relationship between the language practices expected in the academy and the medium of instruction being used. Taking on the literacy practices of a discipline will be difficult for all students, regardless of their home language, but it will be especially a challenge for students whose prior experiences of literacy practices in any language have little in common with those being expected of them in the university. This is not to undermine the intricacies of learning in a language that is not one’s home language; rather it is to disrupt some of the more simplistic understandings of this challenge. If students are battling to acquire the literacy practices of the discipline, having those literacy practices presented in another language of teaching and learning will not make this challenge go away. The understanding of language as simply a technical endeavour remained dominant throughout the T₂ to T₃ period under study.

However, having one’s home language valued in the academy is about far more than easier access to knowledge practices. It is about identity and self-worth too, an issue which has only in recent years come to receive serious consideration in the South African academy but is also relevant across the continent because of the multiplicity of languages spoken and the dominance of the colonial languages in higher education.

The language(s) we speak are integral to our identities. Frantz Fanon (1961) argued that language is fundamental to cultural revitalisation and the development of agency. He argued that, because language and identity are so entwined, being denied one’s language will have significant effects on one’s mental health. Students who do not hear their languages on campus, or even worse, hear them being dismissed, are clearly not going to feel welcome at university. They suffer what Miranda Fricker (2007, 2013) refers to as testimonial injustice, whereby their very identity is not recognised.

More recently, and in terms of the framework we are using in this book, and only towards the end of the period we have called ‘T₂ to T₃’, many universities in South Africa have finally moved away from ‘English-only’ or ‘Afrikaans-only’ policies. In some cases simultaneous translation of lectures had been introduced as a means of opening up the use of, say, Afrikaans, to those who do not speak the language. However, unless the
translators are themselves disciplinary experts, it is unlikely that they will be able to draw
on the literacy practices of a particular knowledge area in their translation.

Preferable is the increased use of translanguaging, which is beginning to be
implemented in various spaces in universities although this tends to be dependent on
the understanding and the willingness of individual academics to exercise their agency
in this regard. Tutorials are being held in multiple languages, students are being
encouraged to use a mix of languages in conversation with each other to enhance access
to knowledge, and academics are seeking ways to use multilingualism as a resource for
teaching. Increasingly, albeit very slowly, indigenous languages are also being used as
formal languages of instruction and assessment. We have argued that such approaches
will not be a panacea to the ways in which the literacy practices of the academy can serve
to reinforce social structures. They will not make higher education learning instantly
accessible to all, but they will serve as a powerful part of a much more complex move
towards social justice in the academy.

**Fixing the problem of academic literacy**

Unfortunately, in many universities around the world, the complexities of the relationship
between identity, language and academic literacy practices are poorly understood. There
is little appreciation that there is no such thing as ‘academic literacy’ per se; rather there
is the academic literacy of Philosophy, the academic literacy of Paediatric Medicine, the
academic literacy of Political Studies, and so on. In many cases, the theory of academic
literacy has been misappropriated to support the very model it was developed to contest.
Thus, we hear of ‘academic literacy courses’ that are generically offered to students
who come from widely disparate programmes. There is thus no understanding that the
academic literacy practices to which students seek access emerge from the values and
structure of the target field.

Oftentimes the ‘teacher’ in such a general ‘academic literacy’ course is not herself a
member of the target field and so is highly unlikely to be able to demonstrate the requisite
literacy practices. In such courses, students are taught about issues such as topic sentences
and essay writing devoid of disciplinary content and context. In complete contrast to
its meaning in the research from which the concept arose, ‘academic literacy’ is often
simplistically understood as being about English language proficiency (Boughey 2013;
Boughey & McKenna 2016). In the data we examined from the institutional audits, one
university in South Africa, for example, indicated that it offers modules in Communication
‘that focus on enhancing English literacy’. What on earth is English literacy? What are the
socially-embedded practices that are made explicit in such a course? Is it about becoming
‘English’ and learning how to make a decent cup of tea?

It is also worth observing that where such courses are offered, they generally have high
pass rates. Students are usually able to meet the requirements of language competence
in discrete ‘academic literacy’ courses focused on language structure, but there is little
acknowledgement that they continue to grapple with the ‘language problem’ back in their
mainstream classes.
Common-sense understandings of language and academic practices are not unusual but they are dangerous. They allow institutions to believe that, simply with the ‘right’ set of neutral, generic and transferable skills, students should succeed. Despite consistent evidence that such common-sense interventions are not addressing students’ need for epistemological access, Moyo’s (2018) study on the use of state funding to enhance teaching and learning in South African universities found that these approaches remain the dominant way in which billions of rands made available for the purpose of development are being used.

Alongside generic academic literacy courses, another intervention aimed at addressing the ‘language problem’ involves Writing Centres, which have become features of many universities. The ways in which such centres are structured and the kind of work they do is very uneven, and there are ample examples of tensions between those working in Writing Centres who may be informed by socio-cultural theories and those academics who may rely on decontextualised understandings of learning and who then direct their students to the centres to get their language problems ‘fixed’.

Frequently, Writing Centres are described as supporting students across disciplines, with an assumption that writing is generic across disciplines, that it can be developed through instruction from non-disciplinary members, and that the curriculum itself requires no change. For example, in one institution in our study, the Writing Centre is said to ‘identify, develop and support the literacies necessary for competency in writing’, but one wonders if the tutors within such centres have themselves achieved the particular competencies required by the different disciplines. The plural of ‘literacies’ in this quotation is heartening as it seems to indicate an understanding that literacies arise not as a generic language structure but as discipline-specific practices emerging from particular ontological and epistemological positions. However, the idea of ‘competency in writing’ seems to indicate a notion that there is a standard form of academic writing that can be taught to students outside of the context in which it will be used.

There are alternative, more social understandings of the work of Writing Centres (see e.g. Archer & Richards 2011; Dison & Clarence 2017; Nichols 2011, 2016), where such structures work primarily to provide an audience for students – an audience that is probably not au fait with the literacy norms of the pertinent discipline but which has a strongly theorised understanding of how it is that literacies reflect particular sets of values. This audience can then ask questions of the novice writer that can assist them in becoming aware of the underpinning values and negotiating the concomitant literacy practices. These alternative approaches to the work of Writing Centres of necessity entail close relationships between the Writing Centre and the academics who have the disciplinary expertise and who assess the students’ demonstration of this.

Other models of writing development such as Writing Intensive Courses, Writing Groups (Achadu et al. 2018; Thesen & Cooper 2013; Wilmot & McKenna 2018) and Writer-Respondent projects (Bharuthram & McKenna 2006, 2012) also engage with the development of writing in ways that acknowledge its social nature and its discipline specificity. Such approaches avoid notions of ‘quick fix’ whereby the student can improve their ‘English’ and learn a few academic skills and all will be well. Instead, such approaches
are based on an understanding that knowledge practices need to be made accessible to students if they are to succeed and that the development of literacy takes lots of practice.

In sum then, the development of students’ ‘academic language’ entails the acquisition of academic practices related to knowledge construction. Understanding language practices in the academy in theoretically informed ways is critical if development opportunities for students are to be made meaningful. What is not acceptable, given the enormity of the problems in our universities related to language and literacy, is a continued reliance on common-sense approaches.

**Disadvantage as an explanation for failure**

Thus far in this chapter, we have argued that the dominant understanding of students is one that is decontextualised from the contexts of students’ lives and from the contexts of the universities. The dominant understanding of students is also simplistic in the ways in which language is seen to relate to such contextual issues. Another discourse dominant in higher education focuses on the notion of ‘disadvantage’ (see, e.g. Odhiambo 2016).

There is no doubt that there is a relationship between the structure of social class and access to and success in higher education. This is manifest in global data and in seeming unending efforts of governments across the world to ‘widen access’. But in many countries, colonial history and issues of language make it difficult to distinguish the role of class from multiple other kinds of injustice, and indeed intersectionality studies suggest this is by definition an impossible task. In Rwanda, for example, we see examples of ethnicity continuing to manifest in the ways that class and educational access and success intersect (Russell & Carter 2018).

This chapter, using New Literacy Studies, has thus far argued that the ease with which students access the practices of the academy is in part related to the kinds of practices with which students have had prior experience, and in part related to how explicit the target practices are made through the course pedagogy. As long as our higher education system continues to privilege certain ways of being over others and does not make such ways of being explicit and readily accessible to all students, then social class will remain a major determinant of success.

When we speak of and act in relation to students, we often draw on discourses that construct them as deficient. Poor throughput and low graduation rates are seen to arise from a lack of student development. There is very little consideration that university structures and cultures might also have causal powers in this regard.

Schools, particularly those in rural areas, are described in the data related to the study underpinning this book as lacking facilities such as libraries and computer laboratories, which presents students with a ‘legacy of disadvantage’ of both ‘poor English skills’ and ‘a lack of general knowledge’. The problems with the schooling sector cannot be underestimated in many countries across Africa, and the impact of poor schooling is clearly a major part of the complex issues faced in university teaching and learning. Many schools in South Africa are dysfunctional (Bloch 2009) and, despite a national curriculum, there is great variance in the everyday practices that are valued in different
schools. The extent to which schooling systems are a causal factor in poor university throughput needs to be clearly acknowledged (Scott et al. 2007) although, as we will argue here, this idea also needs to be problematised.

Schools themselves are very different social contexts to universities and demand significantly different practices (Geisler 1994). Schools perform multiple functions and preparing students for university is only one of them, especially when we consider that only a small proportion of school leavers ever attend university in the case of the African continent (see, e.g. Darvas et al. 2017). While there is no doubt that some schools better prepare students for academic study than others, there are flaws in assuming that ‘educational disadvantage’ arises only from schooling. Social class and structural racism are also intricately linked to difficulties scholars experience at school and at university. The repeated identification of an ‘articulation gap’ between schools and institutions of higher education across our data, rather than between the university and students’ wider social contexts, speaks to a particular view of the university as an unmoving social structure.

The effect is that as long as the university focuses on the claim that it is schooling’s responsibility to prepare students for tertiary study, it is able to absolve itself of the need to identify and then make overt its own practices. The focus on the ‘disadvantaged school’ might therefore at times be indicative of unwillingness, on the part of the university, to reflect on what it means to teach and learn for epistemological access in higher education. Regardless of the types of programmes offered, the construction of students as deficient and ‘disadvantaged’ will impact on the type of teaching- and learning-related events which emerge in the university and on the experiences of both students and staff as they engage with those events.

One of the main ways in which the higher education sector has attempted to address the issue of disadvantage in higher education in South Africa has been through the implementation of Extended Programmes with an Integrated Foundation Phase. This DHET initiative has provided funding for an additional year of study, with the result that a three-year degree, for example, is stretched over four years. The additional year of study allows students to engage with extra developmental courses which do not count towards the credits needed for the qualification itself but which are intended to support students so that they are able to engage with the learning it requires.

The ‘problem’ is thus often understood to be inherent in the student who needs remedial support. This absolves those working in the ‘mainstream’ curriculum from having to make any changes to their pedagogy or content. This is exacerbated when the foundation work is undertaken outside the disciplines by lecturers who are not themselves active members of the target discipline.

When there are parallel routes, with some students being admitted into a ‘mainstream’ programme which in principle can be completed in a year less (even if in practice it very rarely is) and others being admitted into an extended programme which requires an additional year to complete, we also have the perfect set-up for a space of ‘othering’. Such parallel programmes are underpinned by an assumption that those who are in the ‘mainstream’ programme are not in any need of the support offered to those in the extended programme,
who are therefore ‘deficient’ in some way. We pick up the issue of Extended Curriculum Programmes in more detail in the chapter on curricula that follows.

What we have tried to show here is that a set of ideas that we have termed the discourse of the Decontextualised Learner has had a profound effect on what emerges in response to the need for both more access to and success in our universities. In terms of the framework we are using to organise this book, the discourse intersects with other mechanisms (including funding) to lead to the emergence of courses (that might be add-on generic skills courses) and experiences (e.g. perceptions of some students as inferior to others) which do not serve the system or the students within it very well.

The university as a neutral space

Yet another feature of the discourses constructing students that we are examining in this chapter is the absenting of the university’s history, ethos and values. Had a social account of students been more evident, this would of necessity have raised questions about how the university values some ways of being over others.

One of the main benefits of the discourse of the Decontextualised Learner is that it allows institutions to understand learning as being autonomous of context. In the research which underpins this book, we found that learning is indeed primarily understood as a set of neutral skills, separate from history and culture. Skills such as note-taking, study skills and time-management skills, when coupled with specific decontextualised attributes in the student, such as motivation and potential, were seen to lead to educational success.

In the understanding of learning as a set of skills or competencies which are a-social, a-cultural and a-political, learning is understood to be open to all, provided that the individual exercises the agency to learn.

So dominant were these understandings constructing learning as dependent on factors inherent in the individual that the learning process was almost exclusively described in neutral ways entirely unrelated to the vast inequalities that surround us. If one understands that there are many ways of knowing and that knowledge itself is differentiated (as will be discussed further in Chapter Five), then learning cannot be seen to be neutral and decontextualised. Instead, learning and teaching are understood to be socially constructed, with academics teaching towards particular ways of knowing. This understanding recognises that there are multiple mechanisms from which such ways of knowing emerge.

All universities have clear data providing the demographic details of their students and their success rates and so on. And yet most institutional documents that we reviewed were silent on macro-level structures such as race and how this correlates with student success more broadly and their own institution more specifically. Racially-differentiated pass rates and other inequalities have not to date been widely used as the basis for deep reflection on transformation of curriculum or pedagogy. Such blind spots make it possible for some academics, even those who understand themselves as activists strongly committed to broadening access, to ignore their own role in maintaining the status quo through teaching in ways that constrain epistemological access. Arguments many
academics make for change at a macro level in the higher education sector are rarely tied to micro-level practices such as the ways in which students are given feedback on assignments or are supported in developing their writing.

Understanding learning as socially embedded, as a cultural phenomenon, brings a different perspective to bear on the way in which institutional identity is conceptualised and the understanding of how it is experienced by students. The culture of the institution, the ethos of the university if you will, is an integral part of a social understanding of teaching and learning. The notion of a ‘culture of learning’ was at times invoked in the institutional documentation we examined, but this was largely to do with ensuring the physical environment was safe and clean and otherwise conducive to learning. Given the reality that many universities are unable to provide safe, clean environments conducive to learning (Soudien et al. 2008), concerns about such aspects of a ‘culture of learning’ are legitimate. However, in other examples, the term ‘culture of learning’ was used to refer to students’ ‘lack of work ethic’, with institutions noting that they needed to develop a ‘culture of learning’ on campus in order to improve success rates. When the term ‘culture of learning’ is used to refer to a lack of effort on the part of students, there is little consideration of the ways in which academic institutions are themselves redolent with cultures of learning in ways which are not apparent to students.

One result of this failure to acknowledge that teaching and learning are socially, culturally and politically situated is students’ feelings of alienation from the institutions in which they are studying. The identification of the discourse of the Decontextualised Learner along with the use of our framework allows us to explain these experiences which emerge from events (classes, assessments, requirements to write and so on) that themselves have emerged as a result of the interplay of the discourse with other mechanisms at the level of the Real.

The 2015 and 2016 South African student protests at T4 have made it impossible to discuss the institution in ways that suggest a socio-political neutrality. But this is not to say we have yet made sense of how institutional cultures are maintained and practised. We have yet to fully grapple with the ‘political dynamics of power that define the knowledge making project’ (Kumalo 2021: 1). Nor have we grappled sufficiently with which aspects of these cultures are necessary for universities to be spaces of powerful knowledge-creation and which aspects are the vestiges of our colonial history.

In an understanding of the university as a cultural, social, political space, we begin to ask questions of our values and practices that were silenced before. In our teaching and interactions with students we begin to consider more carefully what inclusion looks like. As Jenni Case (2016: 31) has argued:

Who asks questions in class, and how can you shift these dynamics? Who comes to you after class to ask for help and how do you signal your availability? What happens when you get students to work in groups – how do you disrupt the patterns of dominance and submission that are too easily read off of society’s rules? We can have a well-thought-through curriculum structure but if this doesn’t reach down to
an inclusive pedagogy and upwards to a welcoming institution, then it will not meet its intentions.

Thus far we have discussed the dominant construction of the student, that of the Decontextualised Learner, which absolves institutions from placing a critical spotlight on our institutional cultures, curriculum structures and pedagogical practices. But there is another conception of the student which we have noticed becoming increasingly prevalent and to which we now turn. This is premised on the notion of the university as a business and, in such a conception, the student as a client. Like the discourses we have identified above, this also serves to lead to the emergence of events and experiences which need to be opened to critique.

**Students as clients**

It is increasingly common for students to be referred to as ‘clients’ or ‘customers’. This is perhaps unsurprising in the context of universities being understood as training grounds for the knowledge economy (Allais 2007, 2014; see also Chapter Three). In this understanding, students pay fees in order to get access to private goods that will enhance their social mobility. These private goods include knowledge, access to social networks and workplace skills. As we have also indicated in Chapter Three, the construction of higher education as a private good has allowed for reductions in state spending and an increase in tuition fees. This can then even allow for action, on the part of governments, to ‘protect’ students as consumers. In the United Kingdom, for example, a steep rise in tuition fees eventually led to establishment of an Office for Students (OfS), described as an ‘independent regulator’, which aims to ensure that every student, whatever their background, has ‘a fulfilling experience of higher education that enriches their lives and careers’ (Office for Students 2020). According to its website, the existence of the Office is prompted by a discourse around value on returns since:

Students invest significant time and money in their studies. Undergraduate and postgraduate courses involve commitments of several years. Many students take out substantial loans, to be repaid when they graduate and earn over certain limits. They need to know that their investment of time and money is worth it.

The construction of the student as a client complements a broader conception of the university as a ‘technical institution’ (Graham 2013) following a neoliberal agenda of feeding the market. This kind of framing of the university has ethical implications (Nash 2013). If students are ‘customers’, then the product for which they are paying can be considered in terms of its ‘exchange value’ (Harley 2017; Holloway 2010). In this framing, the certificate students achieve must be able to be exchanged for more than the original investment paid by the ‘customer’. The exchange value might include having access to jobs that are more

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3 https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/about/our-strategy/why-we-do-it/
financially rewarding and allow greater degrees of autonomy than those available to those ‘customers’ who have not invested in tertiary education. In fact, in the context of high unemployment, the exchange value of a qualification may include access to employment of any kind. It is very difficult to counter this framing of higher education in such exchange-value ways, given most students’ need for financial security and social mobility, but we would argue that the focus on the ‘exchange value’ of higher education, emerging from the discursive conception of students as customers, significantly narrows the ‘use value’ of higher education. In our work, we found that constructing students as customers or clients who have paid for a service limits understandings of the student as critical citizen and fledgling scholar.

The implications of the ‘student as customer’ discourse are enormous and impact on the very purpose of higher education. The incursion of the discourse very quickly has pedagogical effects. If universities begin to construct students as clients and customers, it will be tempting to avoid offering courses that challenge students’ worldviews. It will be tempting to avoid courses that are not of immediate relevance to the workplace. It is another step in the move to packaging knowledge as a product to be sold in the university marketplace.

This move was already evident in how student feedback was being understood and used in many universities across our data. In a few universities, our research showed that student feedback was being used to measure the performance of academics, thus suggesting that student satisfaction was a goal in the business sense whereby the customer is always right. Moreover, if we return to the framework underpinning this book, we can see that students’ feedback, comprising their observations and experiences of teaching, is located at the level of the Empirical. While eliciting students’ opinions is very important, we need to remember that what they say emerges from mechanisms located at the level of the Real. Treating what students say as ‘truth’ can therefore lead to a failure to explore how what they say emerges from the interplay of numerous mechanisms (Luckett 2007). As a result, some of the reasons for their dissatisfaction or unhappiness can go unaddressed.

Sadly, few institutions have policies on feedback which sufficiently acknowledge the need to triangulate information from different sources when making changes to the curriculum and to teaching. Perhaps even more worryingly, in the context of this chapter, few institutions have policies on the use of student feedback which allow academics to ‘talk back’ to what their students are saying from their positions as experts in the disciplines in which they were employed to teach. This has the potential to stymie innovation and to block change. Even more importantly, the practices related to privileging the student as customer can leave academics and other members of staff who are experienced and knowledgeable in their areas of work feeling disempowered and ‘deskilled’ as they are
challenged by students who are only in the university for a short period of time and who actually understand very little about the nature of a university or academic work.

The use of a business (rather than academic) construction of quality is troubling, and emerges where the students are indeed clients and it is not the success of their educational journey that is monitored but the degree of their customer satisfaction. This sort of discursive construction of the student is resisted in much of the higher education literature (see, e.g. Badat 2016) but was evident in a number of institutional documents. In one institution, support for students related to registration, finance and even careers is offered under the auspices of a ‘Student Service Centre’ which is ‘committed to client service excellence’.

This more recent emergence of the discourse of the student as customer is complementary to the Decontextualised Learner discourse that has been evident for decades. These various conceptions all allow the university to be constructed as a neutral space and to place deliberations about knowledge, power and identity in a blind spot.

With students positioned as passive and decontextualised learners, teaching is then discursively constructed as dissemination. Teachers, in this understanding, have the knowledge, and the purpose of their teaching is its transmission to students. Teaching is then constructed around a set of discourses involving the idea of ‘getting the knowledge across’ to students. This understanding is reinforced by the neoliberal constructions of education discussed in Chapter Three, which propose that the purpose of education is the transmission of skills and knowledge for a competitive labour market. Thankfully, alternative constructions of universities and students were also in evidence in the data, as we shall now see.

**Students as social beings, the university as a social space**

Thus far, we have focused on the dominance of the ‘Decontextualised Learner’ discourse, with a quick look at the emerging ‘Student as Customer’ discourse, and the implications of such discourses for teaching. But, of course, these are not the only understandings of students being drawn upon in our universities. We all draw on multiple and even conflicting discourses, and these have effects on what events and experiences emerge in the world. Reflecting back on our framework, we can see that the effects of such mechanisms can constrain or enable our agency but do not determine it. We have the power to resist structural and cultural conditioning; and, indeed, jostling for space in the data about students that we have grappled with over the years is a more sophisticated, theorised account of students and student learning, even if it has achieved little purchase and seems to repeatedly emerge and then quickly slip away (Niven 2012).

For example, in one institution’s documentation examined in our research on institutional audits, in a section discussing the work of the Academic Development Centre, it was clear that teaching and learning were understood as deeply immersed in the socio-cultural context, and not as the neutral transmission of knowledge to a decontextualised individual. But the potential impact of the centre on teaching and learning was uncertain, given the existence of contrasting discourses across the bulk of the report. Within this same
document, a section on ‘Student Support Services’ clearly drew on the Decontextualised Learner discourse and seemed to work against the impact of the Academic Development Centre. The report goes on to explain that student success is vested within the individual, who simply needs ‘more effective study techniques’. Clearly, different stakeholders in the university were drawing on very different understandings to tackle the common concern of improving undergraduate pass rates.

In another institutional report, there was an explicit calling on the social context of the university and that of students:

In order to recognise both the diversity and cultural capital of such students, there is an argument that mainstream curricula need to change to cater for all students. This model would require strengthened and adjusted curricula and is best described as bringing academic development off the periphery and into the mainstream.

However, even here this more radical discourse appeared only briefly and was slipped into a text replete with instances of dominant Decontextualised Learner discourses at work. For example, the quotation above was preceded by the statement that ‘recruitment and selection procedures need to focus on identifying academically excellent students from an ever-widening base of feeder schools’. Academic excellence, it seems, is understood as something separate from social and cultural capital. It is worth noting that the academic development work done in some universities is mostly focused on students through extended studies courses and add-on support initiatives. And where it is focused on staff, this often takes the form of ‘tips for teachers’ rather than providing challenging spaces for reflection (Quinn 2012). The extent to which academic development work can challenge the university more broadly is thus limited. We will return to the development of academic staff as teachers in Chapter Six of this book.

In South Africa, writers such as Vilakazi and Tema (1985) have long accused universities of implementing student development initiatives that constructed the problem as being vested in the student and which allowed the establishment to continue untransformed. Our deliberations here, emerging from our research over the years, thus sadly do not constitute a new conversation.

**Foregroun**

**d students’ epistemological access**

Understanding the student as a social being, the university as a social space and literacy practices as socially constructed has profound implications for teaching. In contrast to the notion of teaching as dissemination of knowledge, discussed earlier, in a social understanding, academic teachers are not simply imparting knowledge, but rather they are inducting students into the norms and values, and the emergent knowledge-making and literacy practices, of the field. Each field inhabits different norms and values, and is geared towards producing different forms of knowledge for different purposes, and, as a result, different sets of academic literacy practices emerge. Thus, we have ‘academic literacies’ rather than a unitary ‘academic literacy’. Teaching with this understanding
requires a high degree of critical reflection on the norms and values of the field, and on teaching in ways that make these explicit to the student. This is what Morrow (2009) refers to when he argues that teaching is about supporting ‘epistemological access’; that is, teaching in order to enhance the possibility for access to the disciplinary ways of making knowledge.

It is thus possible to turn the idea of teaching as an act of knowledge dissemination on its head and to argue that all acts of teaching at universities are about teaching students how to construct academic knowledge regardless of the level at which the teaching takes place and regardless of the innovation in that teaching.

Teaching students about the main theories in Sociology 101, for example, serves to map out the disciplinary terrain and induct students into an understanding of how knowledge is structured. Students are then tasked with using a quotation or reading from this map to write an assignment. This entails their taking a position and arguing for that position through a series of claims and evidence. What constitutes credible evidence might not be immediately obvious to the student, nor might the very notion of ‘giving an opinion’ or ‘taking a critical stance’. But as they write the assignment, students are effectively taking the first steps in learning how to construct academic knowledge. In a Chemistry laboratory, students are being expected to take on a different set of literacy practices such as careful observation, meticulous documentation of steps in experimentation and so on. They are then expected to draw on the theory they have learned in lectures and from textbooks to make claims about what happened in experiments, each of which is backed up by the data they have collected in the reports they write on ‘practicals’.

The pedagogical consequences of such an ideological understanding that language use is deeply embedded in the values and knowledge structures of the field are multiple. To begin with, it requires teaching that provides an explicit scaffolded induction into such language practices, which can be quite a challenge for the academics for whom these practices are often so normalised as to be invisible (Jacobs 2007, 2013). We need to be able to make what has become familiar to us strange so that we can point out to students how language practices work within our fields. This has significant implications for academic development, because practitioners in the field usually tasked with the job of teaching at foundation level or running additional tutorials might not themselves be familiar with the norms and values and emergent literacy practices of the field.

Induction into the target knowledge practices also entails providing multiple opportunities to practise the relevant manifestations. Depending on the literacy practices valued in the discipline, this could entail frequent chances for students to give presentations, design models, or paint artworks, but by far the most common will be regular opportunities to produce the form of writing expected in the discipline. Students not only need regular scaffolded opportunities to take on the discipline-specific writing practices, but they also need to be given the kind of formative feedback that inducts students into these ‘ways of being’. This is a challenge in the context of large classes and heavy teaching loads.

It is easy to see the allure of constructing the ‘language problem’ as being related to sentence structure and punctuation and understanding reading and writing as a technical
act. Such simplistic understandings allow for a solution to be provided separately from the mainstream curriculum in the form of add-on classes. Within an ideological understanding of language, on the other hand, developing the ability to read, write and speak in the ways required by the field now becomes something to be attended to within mainstream classes.

For decades now, so called ‘language specialists’ have been employed in universities to fix students’ ‘language problems’ in add-on initiatives in South Africa (McKenna 2004a) and elsewhere, such as Namibia (Mungungu-Shipale 2016), Tanzania (Ninyinondi, Mhandeni & Mohamed 2016) and Nigeria (Ndimele 2016). Addressing students’ language-related experiences outside the mainstream classes allows universities to carry on without disruption. In many respects, this can be seen to be a self-serving industry. It provides employment for many people who might not otherwise be employable in universities given that they are not knowledge producers or experts within a university discipline or field. Such people are often employed on short-term contracts against earmarked funding (Boughey 2012a; CHE 2016; McKenna 2012a). Many do not see it as in their interest to pursue further qualifications, which would involve engaging with theory in more depth, given the precarious nature of their employment. As a result, practices which have been shown to have emerged from ‘faulty’ and un-interrogated understandings of students’ experiences continue to proliferate. This situation is not helped by the fact that many of those appointed to powerful positions with the responsibility for ‘managing’ teaching and learning often do not themselves have a background in higher education studies or teaching and learning, and therefore they continue to draw on common-sense understandings as a basis for the initiatives they choose to promote (Moyo 2018).

As we have argued, ‘Academic Literacy’ courses that offer generic language skills; ‘banal life skills courses’ (Ginsberg 2011) that offer lessons on time-management and note-taking; and those kinds of Writing Centres that are set up to ‘fix students’ English’ can all be seen to work in complementarity with the discourse of the Decontextualised Learner. Such initiatives are often presented as being ‘transformational’ in that they provide support for disadvantaged students, but rather than addressing the problems of high student failure and differentiated success rates, such interventions may actually exacerbate them. The common-sense discourses related to language and learning that underpin these structures work to further disempower students by pathologising them, while leaving the university and the disciplines within it beyond critique.

The social understanding that language use in the university manifests as field-specific literacy practices emerging from specific historical, cultural and political contexts has implications that go beyond the how of teaching and learning to raise questions about the who of teaching and learning. As we have argued, given the centrality of values and beliefs to the development of language practices, taking on the range of literacy practices expected for success can often involve profound shifts at the level of identity (Luckett & Luckett 2009). Students entering higher education will need to figure out the context and
acquire the values and attitudes towards what can count as knowledge before they can truly engage with these practices (Case et al. 2018).

Perhaps even more importantly, teaching based on this understanding involves acknowledging that the shifts required of young people as they enter our universities can be enormously destabilising and can even lead to anxiety and depression. From this perspective, learning is not simply a cognitive activity but rather involves the entire being. Making sense of the context often falls into what is known as the ‘hidden curriculum’ (McKenna 2010), and this process can be enormously confusing and alienating for students (De Kadt & Mathonsi 2003; Luescher et al. 2020). Furthermore, because these literacy practices have been normalised for the academics steeped in the discipline, they might make judgements as to the students’ intellectual capacity on the basis of whether the students have been able to crack the code.

The process of taking on the academy’s literacy practices is often difficult at the level of student identity because the ‘code’ of target literacy practices is unspoken. It is difficult for academics to articulate this code and so it can easily be seen to be beyond question. It is very difficult to open up to critique that which you are barely aware of. It is only when the nature of the discipline-specific practices is made explicit, and access is scaffolded through multiple opportunities for engagement, that the underpinning values are exposed and are subject to critique. This has consequences for the decoloniality debate.

As we take on the responsibility for facilitating epistemological access, we need to question why certain practices are privileged in our lecture halls and examination processes while others are dismissed or ignored. And herein lies a tension that Janks (2000, 2009) calls the ‘access paradox’. In scaffolding students’ access to the dominant literacy practices of the discipline, we are reinforcing this dominance. In an age where we are raising questions about whose forms of knowledge are dominant and which knowledges are silenced (an issue we unpack in more depth in the next chapter), teaching in ways that enhance access to disciplinary practices thus requires a simultaneous consideration of other ways of being and doing. We need to not only make the powerful ways of being and doing in our disciplines accessible to our students, we need to teach in ways that create spaces for critique of these.

Teaching for epistemological access entails an ‘ethic of care’ (Leibowitz & Bozalek 2015; Tronto 1994; Zembylas et al. 2014) whereby we take fully into account the affective nature of education. If we understand teaching as the process of making knowledge practices explicit and simultaneously making spaces for challenging them, and if we understand learning as acquiring powerful knowledge and becoming a particular kind of knower, then this means that teaching and learning are deeply entwined with issues of identity. Understanding this entails understanding our responsibility to genuinely ‘see’ our students and to care for them and for ourselves as we undertake the complex process of knowledge creation and acquisition. Being aware of the affective nature of identity issues related to knowledge practices is essential to assuring epistemic justice whereby students are given access to powerful knowledge (hermeneutic justice) and are attributed credibility (testimonial justice) (Fricker 2007).
This understanding that teaching for epistemological access entails an ethic of care is not to be confused with teaching only that which is familiar and safe. Teaching has to provide access to more than what we already know. We want to be sure that our students are able to know more and to know differently as a result of our teaching. This is not always going to be easy. If students are not encountering challenging concepts, then they are being denied epistemic justice. Zembylas (2015) writes of the need for a ‘pedagogy of discomfort’ within this ‘ethic of care’. He suggests that discomforting feelings are important in challenging dominant beliefs and habits which sustain inequalities. Ashwin (2020) argues that the current fixation on the economic value of higher education qualifications has distorted the transformation potential of our universities. Discourses privileging the economic value of going to university constrain the possibilities of individual transformation. Such transformation, he argues, requires discomfort. Ashwin’s observations are particularly significant in the context, for example, of calls for ‘trigger warnings’ to be placed on books in university libraries and the silencing of some speakers at public events. Without discomfort, we cannot experience either personal or social transformation.

Conclusion

Discourses are powerful mechanisms in the domain of culture and are extremely difficult to shift. This chapter has argued that discourses drawn on to conceptualise students generally fail to take the social nature of learning and higher education into account. The problem of high student failure is considered mainly in terms of deficits in the student that the university then attempts to address by providing remedial interventions. The dominant discourses used in universities to talk about students and to understand learning are problematic and partial. Furthermore, these understandings lead universities to implement student-development initiatives that do not directly tackle the social nature of learning but instead sustain the institutional status quo. Consideration of political, economic and social structures must be central to any reasonable account of student failure, but we found little evidence of this in the data we examined for the purposes of the study underpinning this book. We have argued that there are different ways to understand students and learning, which will lead to different kinds of teaching events and, hopefully, more positive experiences of higher education.

Elsewhere, in an article that reported on the ‘meta-analysis’ research that underpins this book (Boughey & McKenna 2016), we argue that the result of the first cycle of institutional audits conducted by the HEQC in South Africa between 2004 and 2011 was enormous change in the structural system of universities. All the institutions that were audited implemented structural changes as a result of the work of the HEQC. Teaching and learning centres were established or strengthened and there was enormous activity in the field of institutional policy development. At the same time, key agents were appointed to ‘manage’ teaching and learning and oversee the quality assurance thereof. While there was thus change in relation to structure, the domain of culture did not shift very much. What we saw was stasis in the ideas used to account for student performance data and
feedback. These accounts, in the form of the discourse of the Decontextualised Learner, simply will not allow us to make sense of data. Our recommendation was therefore that any future work done by the HEQC needed to focus on enriching the theoretical stockpot of ideas used to account for what we could see in the performance data.

The HEQC did indeed embark on a cycle of quality work that took the form of a Quality Enhancement Project (QEP). The extent to which it stimulated different kinds of thinking about our students and what they achieve has yet to be researched. Our sense, having attended many of the events that were included in the project, is that this was not the case and that instead the reflections relied on a-theoretical notions of ‘best practice’.

In many respects, this chapter is an attempt to challenge dominant discourses and enrich the theoretical stockpot by positing other ways of thinking about students and what happens to them in our universities. This depends on how the way we talk about students leads to things we do to students, to observations we make about them and in turn to the ways they experience higher education. The framework we have used for this book assigns power to every individual to choose from which mechanisms they will draw to pursue projects and concerns of their own. Those who are concerned with students and the way they experience higher education have the agency to consider the alternative constructions we have offered in this chapter.