IMPROVING ACADEMIC LITERACY AT HIGHER EDUCATION

by

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DECLARATION

I, Loretta Diana Free, declare that the dissertation entitled: Improving Academic Literacy at higher education, submitted by me in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Magister Educationis in the Faculty of Education at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, is my own work, and has not been submitted for a degree at any other university. All the sources used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references. Language editing was done by a professional linguist.

L D Free (Ms)

January 2008
This research study is dedicated to my family:

Carmel, Christian, Nasreen and Christina
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Overview

This study is a deliberation on students who advance from high school to a higher education institution, without demonstrating the attributes required on admission. They are granted formal access, despite being underprepared for tertiary studies. One of the qualities that they noticeably lack is academic literacy.

In the course of this investigation, academics had to relate what their perceptions were of the academic literacy of their students at higher education level. Initially, being literate meant the ability to read and write, but the term literacy has assumed a more varied form. The term multi-literacies is employed now, as there are several forms of literacy. These include, Information Technology, Technology, pictorial and numerical literacies, to name a few.

Academic literacy constitutes more than one literacy, namely, operational or functional literacy, cultural literacy and critical literacy. These literacies are elaborated on and the role of language proficiency, together with the inter-relatedness between students’ linguistic competence and their cognitive ability are discussed in depth.

Alternatives are examined to assess how this problem of the lack of academic literacy can be circumvented and what mechanisms can be put in place in order that students can be assisted in their pursuit of academic literacy.
1.1 INTRODUCTION

When students embark on their higher education, they are expected to demonstrate certain general competencies. These competencies include, inter alia, a sense of responsibility; being goal directed; independence of thought; and sound reading and writing skills (Intersegmental Committee of the Academic Senate, 2002:9). The ability to engage in intellectual debate, meet due dates for assignments and take control of their learning, presupposes a high level of maturity and confidence (Intersegmental Committee of the Academic Senate, 2002:9). As no single quality dominates as a prerequisite for student success in higher education, all competencies should be perceived as complementary qualities, together comprising a well-balanced student.

While these competencies undoubtedly contribute to the holistic student make-up, my area of interest revolves around the specific competency of academic literacy, and its inter-relatedness with academic success. Research by Farnill and Hayes (1996), as cited in Holder, Jones, Robinson and Krass (1999:21), indicates a definite positive correlation between literacy skills and academic success, and state that these skills are essential for advancement at higher education level. It is against this backdrop that I will position the significance of academic literacy in this study.
Academic literacy, as I perceive it, is an implicit constituent of the cognitive dimension of the higher education student, and a complex phenomenon. Furthermore, I argue that students need to be able to engage in academic discourse in order to understand and be understood in their particular community of practice. Yet, academic literacy “is not something that can be overtly taught in a convenient introductory set of lectures” (Boughey, 2000:281). Rather, it has to be developed throughout the student’s academic career, through the observation of and interaction with others in the higher education setting. Lecturers should assist in developing students’ academic literacy, until “ways of speaking, acting, thinking, feeling and valuing common to that discourse become natural to them” (Boughey, 2000:281).

Before exploring how a lack of academic literacy impacts on students in higher education, I will briefly define what is meant by academic literacy. In a very narrow sense, academic literacy refers to “the students’ ability to read and write effectively within the university context” (Amos, 1999:178). This contextual definition indicates that academic literacy is distinct from fundamental literacy, in that it is on a higher level of discourse than the latter. Fundamental literacy encapsulates the mechanics of reading and writing and represents functional, surface literacy. Academic literacy can, on the other hand, also be perceived as a distinctive way of thinking and acting (Langer, 1987), as cited in Amos (1999:178), and not merely as a set of reading and writing skills. In fact, one of the learning outcomes teachers are expected to attain with learners in the languages learning area is thinking and reasoning. The underlying assumption here is that when students are admitted to higher education, they should be capable of rational thinking and critical enquiry in order to meet academic requirements. This can be attained if their critical thinking skills have been refined.

However, a wide margin exists “between academic staff expectations and student interpretations of what is involved in student writing” (Lea & Street, 1998:3). Academic staff is often not very explicit about what constitutes a
good piece of writing. Comments such as “I know a good essay when I see it, but I cannot describe how to write it” (Lea & Street, 1998:5) could be reflective of current teaching styles. Students are often not sufficiently informed as to what is expected of them and how they should set about achieving it.

Gee as cited in Boughey (2000:280), uses a public bar as an analogy to illustrate academic discourse. The individual gains acceptance through the ability to blend in with his or her environment. Patrons of a specific bar generally display certain distinctive features, including acting and speaking in the same way and generally projecting the same image. Should the bar be used as a metaphor and applied to a university, the following emerges: students blend in through assuming an academic profile. There is a need to conform. With the massification of higher education, however, multicultural and multilingual students introduce and display new forms and levels of literacy and discourse and systems of thinking and values that are at times discordant with the accepted norm. The patrons in the bar have changed, but the culture/climate remains the same. Boughey (2000:282) extrapolates this metaphor. New ways of thinking are required of students at higher education level. Examples are:

- *Conceptions of learning* need to undergo a radical mindshift, that is, from the perception of knowledge as a commodity, to the constructivist view that knowledge produces new knowledge (Boughey, 2000: 282).

- *Negotiating voice*: students tend to accept any information, spoken or written, indiscriminately and uncritically, and then proceed to reformulate it. At higher education level it is expected of them to examine and distinguish between voices and then develop their own unique voice and style (Boughey, 2000: 283).

- When students arrive at higher education institutions, they regard writing as merely a form of note-taking. Their writing generally displays little
discernment and the lack of the ability to extract salient points; they tend to write as they speak. In other words they have not grasped the difference between academic discourse and everyday language. Lecturers, on the other hand, regard writing as a process of generating new knowledge (Boughey, 2000: 285).

- Finally, acknowledging sources and making sure that the work meets academic requirements, also need attention (Boughey, 2000: 284).

Clearly then, students are expected to demonstrate a remarkable degree of maturity right from their freshman year. Selecting main and supporting ideas from a text, identifying other voices, and adopting an academic style of writing, all form part of the ‘dress code’ in which the work must be presented. Students need a definite focus, often termed ‘a habit of mind’ to perform these functions successfully. All these diverse, high-level skills constitute academic literacy and underline the fact that such literacy is not easily obtainable.

Academic literacy is situated within a social context. It is the language of the academic discipline, used within a specific community of practice. A community has social overtones. Baskin (2001:1) states that academic writing is a means of identifying with a particular socio-political community, since whoever uses the language of the community of practice is allowed access into that community. The importance of human relations and the community of practice in the learning situation is further emphasized by Connell (2002:68), who contends that relationships are forged in the learning situation. Such communities of practice develop in the various disciplines, such as the medical, legal, accounting and educational fields. In addition, these communities are generally characterized by their own subject-specific language and their own ‘dress code’ and their ways of being, thinking and acting.
The problem of lack of academic literacy at higher education level is not confined to the South African situation. It is a global problem. Over the past fifteen years, countries such as Australia, the United Kingdom, the United States of America and Canada, as well as South Africa, have experienced a marked shift from elitist to mass university education. The result has been an increasingly diverse student population. “The changing student profile, coupled with demands from both the government and employers, has brought the importance of literacy and other generic academic attributes and skills more sharply into focus” (Holder et al., 1999:19). Hirst, Henderson, Allan, Bode and Kocatepe (2004:76) reiterate this, commenting that the increased diversity of higher education students has resulted in a more intense focus on academic literacy.

There is therefore a noticeable recurrence of the term diversity on the higher education scene. This stems from and depicts the diverse socio-economic and political milieus from which the current higher education students are drawn. The implications for education are dramatic and far-reaching. I argue that educators and all stakeholders concerned should be alert and sensitive to the different ways of thinking, backgrounds and experiences of this diverse student population. When we develop academic literacy in students, they do not only change their ways of thinking, but also assume new ways of being (Hirst, et al., 2004). Thought entails existence; therefore, a change in thought impacts on existence. This change should be taken into consideration, particularly with regard to the diverse student profile so characteristic of higher education institutions in South Africa at present.

Descartes links the concepts of thinking and being in his famous statement “I think, therefore I am” (Wikipedia, 2005:1). A paraphrase of these words shows that if the cognitive processes of individuals are altered in any way, their being, which is the essence of the self, is also affected. The way I think (that is, the individual) is the way I am. Therefore, if the way I think is altered in any way, the way I am or what I am, is also altered. Before Descartes,
Saint Augustine expressed the same idea in his *De Civitate Dei* (book XI, 26). This underlines the powerful influence of language on thought and being, and *vice versa*.

The emphasis on improved academic literacy is not driven by academics only. Prospective *employers* rate academic literacy very highly in prospective employees. In addition, reports from the economic sector emphasize the importance of good communication skills in new graduates. Academic literacy includes, but is more than, communication. If students can adapt to the literacy requirements of universities, it will be easier for them to acquire subsequent discourses, for example, in the workplace, because they will have the skills needed to do this. Academic literacy enhances academic performance. However, recent studies (Holder, *et al.*, 1999:20) reveal highly disconcerting findings that students are not only entering higher education poorly equipped with the requisite academic literacy skills, but also graduating without proficiency in these skills.

According to Pratt (telephonic interview, 2005), the following features are characteristic of current requirements in the workplace:

- *Communication* skills are vital; in order to secure a position in the workplace, it is imperative that employees have the ability to communicate with clients.

- Employees should at least be able to *write* clear and lucid reports.

- Employers are not overwhelmed by an impressive academic record *per se*. (After all, they have a wide range of graduates from whom to choose). What they are interested in, are the *unique* qualities and skills projected by the applicant.
Some firms first interview applicants to gauge their leadership qualities, competitive skills and creativity, and only peruse their *curricula vitae* afterwards. The rationale behind this is to establish whether prospective employees can *think* and make decisions independently. They want someone who can ‘hit the ground running’; who will make a difference.

What also ranks highly on the scale of prerequisites is what applicants have *achieved* - in fields other than their studies. They must be in a position to produce evidence that they have worked. Any job requires and refines skills. In the workplace, specific needs must be met. Good communication skills, ‘habits of mind’ that set applicants apart from mere plodders, proof of initiative and a spirit of enterprise top this list.

It is therefore functional to undertake a study of what academics expect and experience in this regard, as well as what can be done to promote this type of literacy, in an attempt to clear this seemingly insurmountable hurdle. At the same time, these requirements of employers in the job market highlight the relevance of this research study of the development of academic literacy at higher education level.

### 1.2 FORMULATION OF RESEARCH PROBLEM

#### 1.2.1 Background to the problem

*Academic literacy* is essential for students if they are to cope with the daily academic demands of higher education. Students use language all the time: as a communication tool, in academic discourse, social interaction, and basic routine functions. Where language skills are lacking, it follows that there will be flaws in their academic literacy, for instance, critical thinking, academic writing, a negotiating voice and academic discourse. Lombard and Grosser
Lack of academic literacy retards the education process, since students need to be proficient in academic discourse before they can begin to construct knowledge, instead of merely reproducing it. This can in turn result in a corresponding lack of progress, which is detrimental to the students. As they struggle to realize their full potential, a vicious circle is established; hence the urgency of the need to address the problem of lack of academic literacy.

1.2.2 Rationale for investigating the problem

My interest in the lack of academic literacy at higher education level emanates from my involvement in English Second Language teaching over many years, both at secondary school and higher education levels. At higher education level, I was involved with teaching at colleges of education, as well as at a university. During this period, I observed that students at all levels were hesitant to engage in discourse in their second (or third) language. This observation is not a profound one, nor is it new.

What was of particular concern to me, however, is the longevity of this problem and its alarming proportions, which has such serious repercussions worldwide. Academic literacy and the issues surrounding it were already raised by Neumann in 1985 (Holder et al., 1999). It is cause for concern that although the problem has been identified nationally and internationally, researchers have shown no real progress in exploring, addressing and solving it. I submit that the reason for this is that their focus was not on the actual problem itself, but on possible solutions and remedies, such as language improvement classes, add-on programmes and grammar courses. The basic aspects of new ways of thinking, identified by authors such as Boughey (2000:281), discussed on page 3, have generally not received the attention due to them.
To do something constructive about the problem, its key manifestations must first be identified. In the context of this study these manifestations include the inability to read critically, to question the text, to challenge the concepts, and to develop one’s own ideas and to also express these ideas clearly. This is not an indictment on the intelligence of students. It simply means that our teaching methodologies still favour rote-learning and the reformulation approach, which produce graduates whose critical thinking skills have not been developed to their full potential. This is supported by Lombard and Grosser (2004:213), who contend that too many students leave school without the ability to solve problems that require critical thinking. Lack of language proficiency adds to this basic lack of critical thinking skills.

In my observations I have noticed that students underwent somewhat of a metamorphosis when they had to communicate in their second language, which in our South African situation is usually English. Their confidence receded visibly. An otherwise intelligent, articulate individual would suddenly project him/herself as unsure and floundering.

I have, in the course of my years of Second Language teaching in education, developed a deep empathy for these students, while striving to find concrete ways to resolve their problems. I would also argue that language problems are not restricted to second language speakers only; many students do not have the ability to read, question and respond critically to an academic text even if it is in their mother tongue.

The problem of lack of academic literacy is aggravated by this lack of proficiency in English. South Africa is a country of diversity in population, culture and race. As befits a democracy, provision is made for the accommodation of these diverse groups in higher education. This is especially evident with regard to language. South Africa has a very complex national language policy that gives recognition to eleven local languages.
Despite this multilingual approach in the official policy, English is the *lingua franca* and the academic language of instruction of the country. The anomaly of the situation, however, is that in South Africa English Second Language students form the vast majority (Narsee, 1999:2).

This fact is underscored in the policy document issued by the National Department of Education (Ministry of Education, 2002:8). “Language has been and continues to be a barrier to access and success in higher education; both in the sense that African and other languages have not been developed as academic/scientific languages and in so far as the majority of students entering higher education are not fully proficient in English and Afrikaans”. Students enrol at higher education institutions lacking one of the competencies most crucial, not merely for success at this level, but for survival, namely language proficiency. As a result, they are at an immediate disadvantage for developing academic literacy, since functional literacy precedes critical literacy on the scale of literacies.

### 1.2.3 The research question

Research usually commences with one or more pertinent questions. De Vos (1998:116) regards a good research question as “one that can be answered by collecting data and whose answer cannot be foreseen prior to the collection of the data”.

This study will have one primary research question as its point of departure:

> **What are the perceptions of academics of the academic literacy of their students in Higher Education at present?**

The secondary research question, which emanates from the primary research question, is:
How can the academic literacy of students best be developed at Higher Education level, according to the lecturers?

1.3 PURPOSE OF RESEARCH

Research is a systematic investigation. It is a way of finding out things that were not known before, and of developing new ideas. As such, research advances knowledge (Swann & Pratt, 2003). The purpose of this research is to examine and explore what the perceptions of academics are of the academic literacy of their students in Higher Education at present, as well as the ways in which academic literacy can be developed at Higher Education level.

1.4 CLARIFICATION OF KEY CONCEPTS

1.4.1 Transformation

The term ‘transformation’ refers to the process of change that was brought about by the new democratic government of South Africa after the elections of 1994. All government departments in the National Party era were characterized by social and gender inequities inherited from the discriminatory policies of the past (Mabokela, 1998:1). The higher education system was no exception.

When the apartheid government crumbled, the policies of separation were incongruent with a liberated country, and change at a national level was inevitable. A change on this scale is called transformation. The word transformation has several connotations. As far as higher education is concerned, however, it is identified as a shift from “serving the minority, privileged community to serving the broader community” (Mabokela, 1998:1).
The term *transformation* does not have a single, absolute meaning. Within the context of this study, I will describe it as a reversal of the former exclusionary policy to one of inclusion. In this way, educational opportunities are distributed more equitably.

1.4.2 Language proficiency

*Proficiency* means “doing or able to do in a skilled or an expert way because of training and practice” (Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, 1989). It entails being adept and competent in a field or area. This leads one to perceive language proficiency as the ability to demonstrate communicative competence. I maintain, therefore, that proficiency in a language suggests being competent in the four basic macro-language skills, namely reading; writing; listening and speaking, and that such proficiency can be acquired through training and practice. In order to clarify the concept *proficiency* a few definitions, together with their sources, are presented below:

- According to Merriam-Webster (2006:7), proficiency means advancement in knowledge or skill; the quality or state of being proficient.
- Thesaurus (2006) states that proficiency means natural or acquired facility in a specific activity; ability, adeptness, art, command, craft, expertise, knack, mastery, skill, technique; skillfulness in the command of fundamentals deriving from practice and familiarity.
- The Compact Oxford English Dictionary (2007) claims proficiency to be competent; skilled; origin from Latin *proficere* ‘to advance’ that is, if skill gained, can move on.

Language proficiency empowers, as eloquent speakers project a confidence that commands the respect of their target group and peers. When there is a lack of the necessary language proficiency, communication is generally impeded. This also applies in the teaching-learning situation. Some students
who are not language proficient lack the freedom that enables the realization of their full potential; a ceiling has been placed on all possible achievement. A lack of language proficiency can therefore impede or even deny access to knowledge, restricting the development of academic literacy. This is substantiated by Kinsella (2006:8), who states that understanding is made possible through language; that is, there is a correspondence between our language proficiency and our understanding.

Language proficiency incorporates the use of an appropriate register for different situations and audiences. It precedes academic literacy on the cognitive ladder, as linguistic competence can enhance academic competence and open up access to construction of knowledge. Language proficiency is therefore inextricably linked to academic literacy.

1.4.3 Academic discourse

The language proficiency problem is compounded by the fact that there is a considerable difference between everyday language and the language of academic discourse. Students discover this very quickly. According to Van der Walt (2004:146), “[E]ducational linguists accept that there is a large gap between everyday language proficiency and academic language proficiency”. This means that even where students demonstrate communicative competence, they can and do experience difficulties with academic discourse.

Discourse constitutes both oral and written communication. The spoken aspect of communication is a common, daily occurrence. Writing, however, is a different practice. Writing, as Baskin (2001:1) postulates, is a positive act of identification and therefore does not flow as spontaneously as speech.

Academic discourse defines different fields of study. The discourse of the academy differs from, for instance, the discourse employed in the mining community or on the factory floor. It is the discourse of the academic
community, defined by its own interests and values, and judged by this same community. Discourse entails discussion and conversation, hence academic discourse involves discussion and reasoning by students and academics alike, and is based on language proficiency and academic literacy.

1.4.4 Academic literacy

The word *literacy* refers to basic reading and writing skills, and consequently has scholarly connotations. In current dictionaries, it is defined as being knowledgeable about scholarly reading and writing. However, we live in a world of multi-literacies, such as computer literacy, numerical literacy, information literacy, mathematical literacy, pictorial literacy and library literacy. At a recent language conference organized by the Eastern Cape Department of Education, Morrow (2005) in an oral response, made reference to ‘printed literacy’ and the high status accorded to it.

In the same way, *academic literacy* is indicative of a particular type of literacy, that which is associated with an academic context, namely scientific, theoretical, intellectual learning, such as in higher education. It refers to the ability to make and negotiate meaning and engage in academic discourse, critical thinking, enquiry and reasoning in the higher education environment. According to Amos (1999:177), academic literacy encompasses and is the result of the mobilization of “particular cognitive processes”.

Lack of academic literacy can therefore not necessarily be interpreted as an intellectual deficit within the student. It suggests, instead, that the student has not yet learnt to master the skill of how to mobilize this cognitive activity. This is underlined by Fischer and Van der Riet, as cited in Amos (1999:180), who advocate “a need for an academic development vision” in order that academic literacy can be developed. From the foregoing it can be deduced that the importance of academic literacy in the life of a student cannot be overestimated.
A few brief descriptions of academic literacy are presented below:

- “Reading, writing, listening, speaking, critical thinking, use of technology, and habits of mind that foster academic success are all elements of academic literacy. Moreover, it is expected of students to have these qualities upon admission to higher education institutions” (Intersegmental Committee of the Academic Senate, 2002:9).

- Langer (1987), as cited in Amos (1999:178), provides a broader view of academic literacy – “to communicate, to understand and be understood. Literacy is not a set of skills, then, it is a way of thinking and doing necessary for success within a particular discipline”. It therefore has both a cognitive and ontological component.

- Fischer (1995:7), as cited in Amos (1999) refers to academic literacy as the acquisition of tacit knowledge – learning to understand and interpret the values, beliefs and social practices of a particular community of scholars.

My own definition of academic literacy is that the diction is formal; it is the scientific language of the university. It differs from everyday language in that it is associated with and posited in the academy. Should the main idea be extracted from the above stated quotations, a common thread appears to be a shift in focus from the surface features of literacy to the deeper socio-cultural literacy embedded in academic literacy.

1.4.5 Higher Education structures in South Africa

Prior to 2000, the South African teacher education system differentiated between teacher training colleges, technical colleges, technikons and universities. However, following the restructuring of higher education and the closure of colleges in 2000 and their subsequent incorporation into
universities, the latter assumed sole responsibility for the training of teachers. One example of such incorporation is the Dower College of Education, which was incorporated into the Faculty of Education of the then University of Port Elizabeth. Subsequent to this, mergers took place between various institutions. For example, in the Port Elizabeth region, the Vista University, the Port Elizabeth Technikon and the University of Port Elizabeth merged in 2005 to form the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University.

Institutions now offering higher education are no longer referred to individually as colleges or technikons, but as higher education institutions. A brief overview of the structure of our education system follows. Three areas that will be briefly discussed, are the General Education and Training (GET), Further Education and Training (FET) and Higher Education and Training (HET) phases of education.

1.4.5.1 Structure of Education system

The structure of the education system comprises the GET, FET and HET bands.

The General Education and Training (GET) band comprises the Foundation Phase (grades R-3), the Intermediate Phase, (grades 4-6) and the Senior Phase (grades 7-9). The Further Education and Training (FET) band is made up of NQF levels two to four, and is non-compulsory. Various providers are involved in this band of education and training, such as senior secondary schools; technical colleges; ngos; regional training centres; private providers and private colleges; and private training centres and community colleges. At this level, learners should be prepared for higher education, careers and self-employment.

The focus in this study is on the Higher Education and Training (HET) band. As a result of a series of mergers and incorporations, three types of public
higher education institutions have emerged in South Africa. These are the traditional universities; universities of technology; and comprehensive universities.

- Traditional universities offer a wide range of degree programmes at both undergraduate and graduate levels.

- Universities of technology offer programmes in applied disciplines, such as business, design, engineering and health sciences.

- Comprehensive universities are a new type of tertiary institution, resulting from the merger of technikons with traditional universities. Comprehensive universities offer programmes and degrees in the traditional arts and science disciplines, as well as the programmes offered by universities of technology. The Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University is an example of a comprehensive university.

1.5 RESEARCH DESIGN

In the extremely demanding and highly technological era in which we find ourselves, planning and organization are essential life skills. Not only do they facilitate the execution of our many routine activities, they also afford us optimal utilization of the time we have at our disposal. Some executives have year planners, while others rely on electronic diaries. These may vary in shape, size and fashion, but there is one focus, namely, knowing one’s destination and how to get there.

The research design can be equated to a planner. According to Babbie (1992:108), an overview of a research design shows that it “involves a set of decisions”. It illustrates how the researcher intends to approach and investigate the research problem that has been formulated. If the research is highly structured, the design is composed of clearly delineated steps. Where
the research is open-ended, the approach is not prescriptive, but allows for a transpiring, emerging design and flexibility. In the research design the focus of the study, namely the topic, research methods and purpose, are detailed to enable the researcher to manage the inquiry (Henning, Van Rensburg & Smit, 2004:142).

1.5.1 Philosophical foundation

I am an advocate of constructivism. In constructivist theory, the contribution of students is emphasized as they interact with the environment to construct knowledge. Against the backdrop of this philosophy, I argue that the educator serves to initiate and facilitate the learning process, as well as assuming responsibility for it. The individuals then pursue the issues raised during discussions and utilize this newly constructed knowledge to build on and cement their existing knowledge. In this way, enquiry based learning, which is a tenet of constructivism, takes place. This is the Piagetian school of thought and surfaces in Epstein (2002:4), who highlights the principle that knowledge is not a commodity that can be transmitted from one human to the other. She affirms that humans construct their own knowledge.

As qualitative researcher, my perception of constructivism is that it constitutes an act of building. Before the building process can commence, however, a solid foundation should have been laid. When the researcher applies this principle to the education situation, it means the building of the individual’s own knowledge. This perception is supported by theorists such as Dewey, Piaget, Vygotsky and Bruner (Epstein, 2002).

Dewey underlines the significance of knowledge flowing from experience. Piaget holds the view that learning is based on discovery. Vygotsky believes in adult guidance, in addition to discovery learning. Bruner’s theory is that the child actively constructs new concepts that are embedded in prior knowledge.
He also propounds the dialogic approach initiated by Socrates (Epstein, 2002:4).

In the process of constructing knowledge, students are encouraged to engage in dialogue with other students and the educator. Logic tells us that these dialogues comprise questions, different perceptions and exchanges of meaning and understanding. One of the world’s great philosophers, Socrates, used the technique of questioning in order to promote critical thinking. Although Socrates is not linked to constructivism, his method of teaching confirms “that discussions which link epistemology and learning have been taking place for thousands of years” (Murphy, 1997:1).

According to Socrates, knowledge is only perception. I therefore argue that the individual’s perception flows from his or her interpretation of a particular work or concept. It is this perception that is instrumental in the shaping and concept formation of the subject under discussion (Kinsella, 2006:1).

1.5.2 Theoretical underpinning

My theoretical underpinning is based on Bloom’s taxonomy (1956), wherein he identifies six categories in the cognitive domain. These six categories are:

- **Knowledge**: to remember information gained by previous learning or reading;
- **Comprehension**: to understand the text and/or other sources of information;
- **Application**: to use what has been learnt in a new situation, that is, to apply existing knowledge to construct new knowledge or solve problems;
- **Analysis**: to differentiate and distinguish between ideas; to break down information into relevant parts;
- **Synthesis**: to reconstruct and form a new whole from the parts;
- **Evaluation**: to form a judgment; draw comparisons; and critique.
As the levels of the cognitive domain are unfurled, so the levels that constitute the reading process are mobilized. Thus, if readers do not advance beyond the levels of knowledge and comprehension, it logically follows that they will not develop the independence of thought essential to critically discuss and ultimately evaluate a text. If readers are not encouraged to read with enquiring minds, to compare their existing knowledge with the new knowledge of the reading material and form a judgment of the text, then they will not be able to challenge the writer, nor the opinions of others. This contributes to the lack of academic literacy experienced at higher education institutions.

1.5.3 Qualitative research approach

In this specific research study, a qualitative approach will be followed in order to provide acceptable answers to the stated primary research problem, in view of the descriptive and exploratory nature of the study. Wiersma (1995:12) defines qualitative research as “research that describes phenomena in words instead of numbers or measures”.

In qualitative research, no hypothesis is formulated at the beginning of the research, although a theory may be generated as the study progresses. Thus, a qualitative study renders freedom and natural development, as the qualitative researcher goes to the place(s) where the events unfold naturally (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003:3). This is suitable for this particular study, as I do not wish to impose boundaries that will limit the data.

Alternatively, a theory can develop based on the data; this is termed a ‘grounded theory’ or a theory grounded in the data (Wiersma, 1995:13). Ways to improve academic literacy will be suggested, based on the data collected. However, the intention is not to generate further grounded theory for the purpose of this study.
1.6 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

I propose to conduct this research in two phases. Phase One will explore how academic literacy is perceived and experienced at higher education level. This investigation will be conducted via fieldwork.

During Phase Two, recommendations to improve the academic literacy of students at higher education institutions will be derived from the findings and made available to the participants for perusal and critique in order to ascertain whether they can be implemented.

1.6.1 Sampling

“A sample is a subset of the population to which the researcher intends to generalize the results” (Wiersma, 1995:283). Strydom and De Vos, in De Vos (1998:191), state that “we are interested in describing the sample not primarily as an end in itself, but rather as a means for helping us to explain some facet of the population”.

In this study, *purposive sampling* will be used and based on specific criteria (Creswell, 2002) that will be spelled out in detail in the chapter dealing with the research design. De Vos (1998:198) states that this type of sampling is based completely on the judgment of the researcher. This is because a sample comprises elements that contain the most representative qualities of the population, as they are able to give rich information on the topic (De Vos, 1998).

The participants will be higher education lecturers, drawn from several disciplines and involved with students from different year groups. The
rationale behind this selection is that lack of academic literacy is a cause for concern to the global academic community.

1.6.2 Data collection

Data will be gathered by conducting individual interviews at a higher education institution. The reason for the choice of the interview as an instrument for data collection is that most people are familiar with interviews. Atkinson and Silverman (1997:305) as cited in Freebody (2003:136) state that interviews are generally regarded as one of the most popular methods for collecting data in social sciences. The individual’s perspective is recognized as being important; as each individual interview will be conducted on a one-on-one basis, there will be fewer inhibitive factors. Moreover, as this will be a qualitative research interview, only one open-ended question will be asked, namely:

**What is your perception of the academic literacy of students at Higher Education level?**

By conducting these interviews, we will be able to access the lived experiences of the participants, concretizing what Henning et al., (2004:52) submit as the main aim of interview data, namely, “to bring to our attention what individuals think, feel and do and what they have to say about it”. This question will also generate recommendations on how the problem can be addressed by the very people who have to deal with it. In this way, practical, and therefore relevant and useful, recommendations will be given.

During the interview, a second researcher, the observer, will assist the researcher (Krefting, 1991:215), in gauging the climate in which the interview is conducted, taking field notes and picking up on nuances that the interviewer
may miss. At the same time, the data collection process will be validated as a result of this triangulation.

1.6.3 Data analysis and description

During the interview, an audiotape will be used to record the data, which will then be transcribed verbatim. After this, the data will be subjected to analysis in order to make sense of, interpret and categorize it. Although there are no prescriptions in respect of data analysis in qualitative research, general guidelines and strategies can be utilized. What counts, is that the researcher should be able to justify the steps taken in data analysis and that the final conclusions are based on collected data (Poggenpoel, in De Vos, 1998:344).

The data will then be processed and reduced until emerging themes and sub-themes can be identified during this analysis. This is accomplished by means of a coding procedure (De Vos, 1998). For the purpose of this study, the eight steps outlined and proposed by Tesch as cited by Poggenpoel (in De Vos, 1998:343-4) will be followed. An independent qualitative researcher will be requested to perform a recoding of the data to determine if the same themes emerge and can be confirmed. Discussions will then follow between the researcher, the supervisor and the independent re-coder to reach consensus on the final results of the research.

1.6.4 Literature control

Literature in general plays a key and varied role in research. Firstly, literature provides a background to and conceptual framework for the research. A literature survey informs and at the same time affords researchers the opportunity to position their views in relation to published views on the topic.
Fouché and De Vos (De Vos, 1998:67) state that one of the goals of a literature study is ultimately “to place the problem in theoretical perspective”. Secondly, literature serves as a control against which the findings of the research can be checked and validated (Henning et al., 2004:27). Thereby similarities, differences and gaps can be detected. Creswell and Clarke (2007:29) postulate that in qualitative research, the literature is used as the evidence by the researcher for the purpose of the inquiry. The relevance for this research investigation is that once the data collection and data analysis phases have been completed, the literature consulted in the course of the study will serve as a control against which to compare the findings and recommendations.

Extensive research has already been conducted in the field of academic literacy. It is therefore natural that as researcher I would want to gain an overview of what has been covered by other researchers, including the outcomes of studies and the gaps in knowledge identified. Mouton (2002:121) regards a literature study as “an essential component of any research, because it is the main access point or gateway to the relevant body of knowledge”. De Vos (1998:64) perceives a literature study as “contributing towards a clearer understanding of the nature and meaning of the problem that has been identified”. Against this backdrop, words like gateway and contributing have connotations of revelation, to make known and to give insight to the researcher, thereby advancing the cause of research.

The body of knowledge referred to by Mouton (2002:121) can be reassuring on the one hand, yet also be extremely intimidating on the other hand. It is reassuring in the sense that others have traveled along this path before, yet intimidating, in that so much has already been said and done about the research topic, that the question arises whether anything of value or significance can still be added. These are questions that come to mind when sifting through the existing literature.
Research has already proven that lack of academic literacy is a global problem. References to literature in substantiation of this statement will be foregrounded and discussed in the next chapter.

1.6.5 Measures to ensure trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in qualitative research is essential to give the researcher credibility among fellow researchers and the public. It corresponds with validity and reliability in quantitative research. In order to ensure this trustworthiness, the findings of this study will be checked against Guba’s model (De Vos, 1998:331). This model rests on four criteria: credibility; transferability; dependability; and confirmability.

❖ Credibility

According to Poggenpoel (in De Vos, 1998:349) credibility is ensured by asking truth value questions and reflects the degree of confidence the researcher attaches to the findings of the research and the context in which the research was done. Credibility is the criterion to check how true the findings are for the subjects in the context of the research. This can be interpreted that the researcher needs to ascertain the authenticity of the findings in order to accept its credibility.

❖ Transferability

The applicability of the research findings will be checked against the principle of whether the findings can be applied to other contexts, that is, if the findings are transferable.

❖ Dependability
Dependability refers to the consistency of the data. The data will be regarded as consistent if a replication of the same study yields the same results. Consistency means “that different research participants being tested by the same instrument at different times should respond identically to the instrument” (Mouton, 2002:144).

- **Confirmability**

*Neutrality* is ensured by the criterion of confirmability. The latter refers to the extent to which the data will be confirmed by people other than the researcher. *Confirmability* will be ensured through the maintenance of an appropriate distance from participants in order not to influence their responses or sway, prompt or coerce them in any way during the interview (De Vos, 1998). One open-ended question will be posed to which participants will be required to respond, drawing on their own individual experience(s) and accretions. By this I mean that the response will be determined by the participants’ interpretation and perception of the question. Confirmability can be established if the same investigation is repeated for the same institution.

The measures to ensure the trustworthiness of the research will be explained in detail in Chapter 3.

**1.6.6 Ethical measures**

The need for ethical measures arises from the nature of the research, together with the topic being examined. Qualitative research entails inquiry “to develop a deep understanding of an individual’s experience” (Creswell, 2002:217). Participants should therefore be fully cognizant with the expectations of the researcher, as well as the implications for themselves. Often sensitive or highly contentious issues may be discussed, and participants should be made aware of this in advance.
In qualitative research, particularly in individual interviews, participants are in a vulnerable position, as they are prone to reveal their personal beliefs and principles. This underscores the need for ethical measures. Participants should be informed of the purpose of the research by being given a general overview of the study. To safeguard participants, a pledge of confidentiality and anonymity should be given by the researcher. In accordance with this principle, each participant in this study will be given an explanatory letter, which will also contain the guarantees stipulated. This letter is included as Appendix B and will be filed to form part of the audit trail.

By adhering to these standards, the researcher will obtain the informed consent of the participants (in this context, the educators selected), as well as the higher education institution at which the research will be undertaken. This agrees with the following statement by De Vos (1998:27): “informed consent ensures full knowledge and cooperation of subjects”. Finally, feedback will be provided to participants.

These ethical measures will secure the safety and rights of all the participants.

1.7 OUTLINE OF RESEARCH PLAN

Chapter One: General introduction to the research
Chapter Two: A theoretical perspective on academic literacy in higher education.
Chapter Three: A theoretical exposition of the chosen research design and methodology.
Chapter Four: A discussion of the results, supported by literature.
Chapter Five: Conclusions, recommendations, limitations and suggestions for further research.

1.8 CONCLUSION
In this chapter, I have introduced the issue of *academic literacy*. This was followed by an outline of the problem of a lack of academic literacy, and how it was impacting on the lives of students. This problem is positioned within the higher education situation, as it is here that this lack is felt most acutely and the need to address it becomes more pronounced.

The problem and purpose of the research were presented. Relevant concepts were also explained, as well as the planned research design and methodology, and the structure of the chapters.

In the next chapter, I will proceed to elaborate on and situate the problem within the larger theoretical framework. Literature sources, serving to highlight the various aspects, were consulted.
CHAPTER TWO
THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE ON ACADEMIC LITERACY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Research does not take place in a vacuum, nor can a research problem be approached in isolation. The researcher has to investigate whether the problem is singular in kind or if a problem of a similar nature has been encountered previously. In the latter instance, the results arrived at and the recommendations made would avoid unnecessary duplication.

Such an investigation usually takes the form of a literature survey, as any noteworthy developments are generally recorded for future reference. This search enables the researcher to establish what has been written on the topic, the extent of the problem, and if it warrants further study. The literature review also serves to demarcate the study being undertaken, thus positioning it within the larger framework of the field of study. This need has been confirmed by Mouton (1996:119): “it is essential to relate one’s work to an existing body of theoretical and empirical knowledge”. A literature review is often referred to as a map, indicating the borders within which the research problem is examined. This helps the researcher to remain focused, thus minimizing digression and repetition.

Mouton (2002:173) contends that “a literature survey should not simply comprise a mechanical description of existing theories”. The theory should
function as a conceptual framework, underpinning the logic of the research objective. The literature reviewed in the course of this study portrayed several lines of thought. These will be compared, contrasted and finally integrated with the principal strand of the research argument.

The problem in this research emanates from the vast numbers of students who advance through secondary school education to higher education, without possessing the necessary academic skills. Of these skills, academic literacy is the pinnacle, encapsulating all other skills. The focus of this study is on indicating the extent of the academic literacy problem. It has its origin in and is a legacy of South Africa’s turbulent apartheid history.

The period prior to 1994 was characterized by racial discrimination, which served as a basis for a life of privilege or disadvantage. White schools were well resourced, and classes were manageable. Learners were taught by qualified teachers in schools that were functional. In contrast, schools in the historically disadvantaged areas did not have access to the resources that were readily available in the privileged areas. Teacher morale was low, and schools very often did not function well in the disadvantaged environments.

All these factors had an adverse effect on learner progress and results, especially of matriculants, and the standards maintained. The poor performance of students from historically disadvantaged schools at higher education institutions has called into question the standards of education at these schools. In this regard, Mabokela (1998:1) “… has raised questions about the validity of matriculation results”.

In this chapter, I will firstly present a scientific overview of the different views of academic literacy and, secondly, discuss the various factors that impact on academic literacy and contribute to the problem under discussion. In order to facilitate understanding of this complex problem, the education system in South Africa will firstly be explained.
2.2 Higher education in South Africa

Globalization has been instrumental in having higher education exposed to the forces of change. Steyn (2004:1) postulates that in South Africa, the process of democratization and the ANC government’s commitment to social and economic reconstruction have further impacted on these forces. In this regard it is noteworthy that massification in South Africa is effectively determined by the mechanisms put in place to ensure that issues such as equity and discrimination are addressed. These measures aim at compensating for past inequities that were the norm during the apartheid government (Steyn, 2004:3).

The year 1996 witnessed the launch of the government initiated report, *A Framework for Transformation* (Ministry of Education, 1999). According to this report, a transformed higher education would be based on the following three principles:

- Increased and broadened participation;
- Greater responsiveness to societal interests and needs;
- Co-operation and partnerships in governance.

In 1997, the Department of Education launched its White Paper 3: *A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education* (Dept of Education, 1997). There have since been other policy initiatives and developments in respect of the massification of higher education. For the sake of simplicity and relevance, however, I will focus on and paraphrase the three aforementioned pillars of White Paper 3 only.

The first principle, namely *increased and broadened participation*, means that the doors of knowledge would be open to all, regardless of race or gender.
Effectively, higher education would be accessible to a broader base, suggesting a more diverse intake. This epitomizes the concept of the massification of higher education. This broader base may be perceived as the referring to historically disadvantaged race groups, who bore the brunt of the discriminatory laws of the apartheid era. They would now be in a position to aspire to professions and ideals that were formerly beyond their reach and even their dreams.

It should be borne in mind that higher education is embedded in a social structure. Underlining this concept is the whole issue of a changing student market, and changing learning styles and strategies. The changing student market refers to the fact that higher education was largely homogeneous before the advent of South Africa’s democratic government. Now, in post-apartheid South Africa, this homogeneous character has given way to a transformed system of education that accommodates the greater majority. This greater majority constitutes students who have been educated in the various departments of education along totally different lines.

Learning styles would have to be reconsidered and adapted in order to meet the requirements of the new student market. Teaching and learning strategies would also have to be revised to ensure that no one gets left behind during lectures and the education situation as a whole. The curriculum would have to be reconsidered to include market-related and job-related teaching and learning programmes, to make sure that students are prepared for the labour market on graduation. This would go a long way to guarantee students employment in the corporate world or other fields of employment.

Olivier (2004:22-23) concurs with this in her assertion that, in order to uphold the principle of inclusive education, corresponding changes are inevitable. Schroeder (1993:3) states that results from a Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) administered test showed that 60 per cent of first-year
students preferred a concrete and direct learning style. The MBTI is an instrument that is used to detect the learning preferences of individuals.

This underlines the second principle, *greater responsiveness to societal interests and needs*, and confirms the argument that the university curriculum should be reflexive, relevant and meet social requirements. For instance, knowledge should be geared towards the alleviation of poverty, and correspond with the values and attitudes of society (Steyn, 1996). A criticism often leveled at our teacher education system is that the margin between theory (programmes of the higher education institutions) and practice is too wide. By offering courses that assure employment, universities would comply with the proposal that knowledge should be a lever of upliftment and contribute positively towards the alleviation of poverty.

The relevance of the curriculum for diverse learners, for instance, is one area that will need reconsideration. Government is committed to providing opportunities that will improve that lifestyle and sustain the dignity of its citizens. This is validated by President Thabo Mbeki in his statement that this issue of sustainable development is the philosophy underlying the whole African Renaissance concept (Lombard & Grosser, 2004:212).

It would mean intervention by government to render positive assistance in order to facilitate these opportunities for an improved lifestyle. This is, however, not perceived to be the case. For example, a community-based organization (CBO) in Soweto that was dependent on government funding, claimed that the government was five months in arrears with its payments. This organization provides home-based care to AIDS orphans. This naturally had an adverse effect on the day-to-day running of the organization. Although government grants are also available for foster children, the waiting period for these grants is often so long that “by the time the grant comes, the kids are too old to qualify” (Human Rights Watch, 2005:43). The failure of government to sustain CBOs’ reaction to the orphan predicament in Africa and adjust
accordingly, is equivalent to a breach of the orphans’ trust and a deviation from its obligation, ultimately leaving children’s safety and interests to the inconsistencies of charitable organizations and volunteers.

This emphasizes the need for government to uphold the second principle of the envisaged transformed higher education. Instead, it fails the children by neglecting to supply the most basic resource, finance. I want to emphasize at this stage that while financial aid goes a long way towards alleviating the plight of these orphans, much more is needed to steer these children in the direction of a normal way of life. A parent does not represent an income only. There are several other tenuous links that hold a family together.

Psychologists concur that personal and social skills and familial and social-cultural backgrounds strongly influence academic development. Olivier (2004:17), an advocate of emotional intelligence, postulates that this concept envelops the emotional, cognitive, personal and social abilities that together constitute a well-balanced individual. This is emphasized by Fisher (2001:25), who argues that “personal and social intelligence grow together”. Hamacheck (1995) states that children’s feelings towards learning and the perception they have of themselves in the education situation go hand in hand with their academic development.

The third principle, co-operation and partnerships in governance, suggests closer partnerships between education institutions, the higher education system and the state, and higher education institutions and civil society. This implies that there should be more interaction between, for instance, higher education and the state, so that the one partner will be cognizant with the activities and administration of the other. Higher education institutions are expected in turn to liaise more with civil society so that the programmes offered by these institutions will be relevant and address societal needs.
It is generally acknowledged that there is an enormous skills shortage in South Africa. Unless there is positive intervention by stakeholders, this situation is not likely to improve in the near future. Van Wyk and Daniels (2004:360) raise the concern that academics do not seem to be very interested in modifying their teaching approaches, adding that there is an apparent apathy in institutions to the call to work together more closely.

The political, social and economic needs of a democratic South Africa have severely strained the South African higher education system. As a result, it was propounded in White Paper 3 (DOE: 1997) that this system would be transformed to cope with changing national needs. In a concerted effort to alleviate the skills shortage problem, government has initiated a shift to ‘Mode 2 knowledge production’ (Ntshoe, 2004:215).

Whereas Mode 1 knowledge production focuses on disciplinary-driven research, Mode 2 knowledge production focuses on trans-disciplinary research and is more problem directed. Mode 2 knowledge is relevant to the needs of the country in respect of ‘industry, government or society’ (Weingart in Steyn, 2004:2). This also complies with the criterion that knowledge production should subscribe to societal interests and needs (Steyn, 2004:1).

2.3 Conceptual framework: Overview of two scientific models

2.3.1 Multi-level approach of Green

Several themes have emerged from the literature studied. For the purposes of this study, I will discuss Green’s multiple level approach to literacy, as explicated in Lankshear (1999), in some detail. The term *multiple* indicates that academic literacy is not a simple concept that can be explained in simple terms. It is rather like climbing a ladder; the student commences at the bottom rung of the ladder and progresses to the top. Certain hurdles have to
be surmounted along the way and as this happens, the individual’s literacy skills are refined, moving from the concrete to the abstract.

I approach the study with the premise that academic literacy comprises a set of skills that can be learnt by students, but that it also calls for a change at a deeper, more affective level than cognitive awareness (Boughey, 2000:279). The word cognitive is generally associated with the intellect; it is knowledge based. The knowledge that we absorb, however, impacts on our feelings and emotions. This leads us to the realization that the cognitive domain is directly linked to the affective domain and that this impact is reciprocal. Delport (cited in Olivier, 2004:19) avers that one should regard the cherishing and nurturing of the affective aspects of the learner’s life as vital.

Academic literacy is therefore “a way of being”. According to the Intersegmental Committee of the Academic Senates (2002:9), academic literacy necessitates the adoption of certain “habits of mind”. When we talk about a habit, we refer to a deep-seated tendency of the individual to act and respond in a certain way. Weingartner (in Van Schalkwyk, 2005:2) refers to these habits of mind as “knowledge and abilities”. This particular way of acting and responding is wholly interwoven with the individual’s character. We associate that person with this form of behaviour and in effect come to link this act to the person. It is in line with the specific person’s disposition. It does not stem from an impulse; it is a permanent trait; in short, it is part of the individual’s character.

According to the Intersegmental Committee of the Academic Senates (2002:9), a habit of mind is not simply a technique that is useful for a particular situation. It is an action or pattern of behaviour that is repeated so often that it becomes typical of that individual. It further states that “true academic competence depends upon a set of perceptions and resultant behaviour acquired while preparing for more advanced academic work”. We can translate this to mean that a student’s academic make-up is portrayed in such
habits of mind, showing that the students mirror the code of conduct of the particular community of practice to which he or she belongs. This means that students need to consciously assume the behaviour and project the features that are associated with higher education.

McKenna (2004:279) agrees, stating that academic literacy encompasses all aspects of the “ways of doing things in higher education”. Academic literacy embodies the very norms of behaviour in higher education; the things that each discipline values and the behaviours it does not (McKenna, 2004:279). These themes and ideas will now be examined in more detail.

Academic literacy comprises several facets of literacy. Green (Lankshear: 1999) postulates that the acquisition of academic literacy is a hierarchical process. If a student progresses through this hierarchy, he or she will be able to attain a satisfactory level of academic literacy. The underlying philosophy is that academic literacy is not something that automatically happens at one stage or the other. Students have to work towards its attainment. This suggests that the attainment of academic literacy is a process. Moreover, it is precisely as a result of its intangible nature that no explicit description of academic literacy exists. The notion that academic literacy is made up of multiple levels “and that these are far more complex than simply addressing the technical skills of the student”, is also an emerging thread in Van Schalkwyk (2005:7).

In her presentation of academic literacy as a multi-faceted concept, Van Schalkwyk (2005:7), emphasises that academic literacy encapsulates issues relating to language, and cognition. It is imperative that we recognize the complexity of the multiple levels that constitute academic literacy if we aim to develop the level of academic literacy of higher education students.

The three levels of the hierarchy are: functional literacy; cultural literacy; and critical literacy.
2.3.1.1 Functional literacy

The first phase of literacy is termed *functional* or operational literacy, which comprises reading and writing at a fairly elementary level. The reader can function in society by performing fairly simple tasks related to reading and writing. Examples of such tasks are filling in forms at a bank, or taking down simple notes.
A paraphrase of *functional literacy* reveals that the individual is able to implement reading, writing and calculation skills. It can also include the ability to solve problems of a fairly basic nature. The application of the skills mentioned would enable the individual to function smoothly in the community, hence the term *functional*. Functional literacy or the capacity to master survival skills, such as securing employment, is as significant an outcome of educational programming as is academic success.

Cummins (Kilfoil & Van der Walt, 1997:15) distinguishes clearly between functional and academic literacy in what he terms basic interpersonal communication skills and cognitive academic language proficiency. In *functional* literacy, basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) are developed, whereas in language used at academic discourse level, cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) is developed. This would mean that functional literacy is skills based, while academic literacy connotes moving away from the functional to a higher level enquiry-based literacy that leads the individual to independence of thought.

A similar train of thought emerges in the work of Hugo (2003:46). Literacy is generally interpreted as the individual’s ability to execute the basic functions of reading and writing. The author postulates that this ability to read and write forms the foundation of the learner’s career. The words *functional, basic* and *foundation* are suggestive of an entry level: the minimum requirement for acceptance. In this study, it is the minimum requirement to be perceived as literate.

Functional literacy, therefore, launches the individual on the road to a deeper, more meaningful literacy, that of the academic, hence academic literacy. A functionally literate person stands on the threshold of the more complex world of the academically literate. Being functionally literate, that is having
developed basic reading and writing skills, provides the individual with a
glimpse of what can still be attained.

2.3.1.2 Cultural literacy

*Cultural* literacy, which envelops the discourse of a specific community of
practice, is slightly more complex than functional literacy. Kilfoil and Van der
Walt (1997:2) maintain that language and culture are inextricably intertwined
and that language is a manifestation of culture. The word *culture* is suggestive
of belonging; we refer to the culture of a people or a group. When we learn a
language, we want to learn more about the people who speak that language.
This, in turn, leads to enquiries and discussions about their culture, portraying
the strong link that exists between a people and their language.

A striking feature of language is that specific issues that are important to a
certain population group or race, will have more words relating to them. To
show how language is influenced by culture, the analogy of the Eskimos and
the integral role played by snow in their lives, can be used to endorse this
statement (Leigh, 1999:5). If we consult an English dictionary to look up the
meaning of the word snow, we will find the word *snow* and one description of
it. This is sufficient for our understanding. The Eskimos, on the other hand,
have many generic words that describe snow in its various manifestations and
forms. One such term is *aput*, for snow that has fallen on the ground; while
another is *gana* for falling snow (Leigh, 1999:5). This abundance of terms
emphasizes the key role of snow in their lives. It also highlights the fact that
culture represents a significant aspect of language and influences it
correspondingly.
Culture can be defined as a set of guiding principles. It is a prescribed lifestyle for a particular society. When reference is made to Western culture, or to Eastern culture, the assumption is made that readers know that each group follows its own guidelines and upholds its own principles. Cultural literacy is part of the extraneous literacies found in a particular society. These literacies may have their origin in technology, such as computer literacy, information literacy and communication literacy, to name a few examples. The more mechanized a society is, the greater the variety of information and data that can be accessed. It should therefore be borne in mind that students’ literacy skills should be developed correspondingly in order that they may avail themselves of these various literacies.

Literacy is very often regarded as a socially constructed practice. The justification is that in order for students to be accepted in their discipline, they need to speak the language of that particular community of practice. In addition, they have to conduct themselves along the lines of the behavioural patterns of the said community. This second phase of literacy requires a shift in the speaking and thinking patterns of students.

2.3.1.3 Critical literacy

Critical thinking refers to one’s own interpretation and assessment of the oral or written communication(s) of other people. Fisher (2001:67) states that a feature of a critical thinker is that he or she does not hesitate to challenge the ideas of others. Learners should be taught how to read a text with a view to challenging the content. The author contends that South African teachers will themselves have to undergo training to teach learners what critical discourse entails.

Critical readers bring their own accretions to the text. This means that they draw on their own experiences to make sense of and give meaning to the text. Students should be taught not to believe everything they see in print, but to
question. They should compare and contrast the issues raised in the text with what they hold dear. This substantiates Bloom’s association of critical thinking with evaluation, which is the highest of the ‘cognitive goals’ of education (Fisher, 2001:69). In short, critical thinking is synonymous with independence of thought. This means that the students will need to have formed opinions of their own about the text, prior to their engaging in critical thinking. Thus they can compare what they have arrived at, with the judgments of others.

The critical thinking ability of students is closely aligned with their academic literacy skills. Constructivists claim that humans conceptualize the world they live in within the ambit of their experiences. They construct their world through the translation of their experiences. The wider the range of experiences, the more associations they can form and, in turn, the more knowledge they can construct, and vice versa (Epstein, 2002:27). Constructivist theorists maintain that students construct their own knowledge. This is achieved by building on their prior knowledge of a subject, and fitting the new knowledge into their existing beliefs (Epstein, 2002:3).

Hirsch, Kett, and Trefil (2002) emphasise this theory of association. Their line of thought is that a fundamental principle of learning is as follows: the easiest way for an individual to learn something new is to form an association with something that he or she already knows. It is said that during the reading process, the writer writes the text and the reader, by virtue of his/her interpretation of this text, re-writes it. Reading is an act of communication between the reader and the writer. The reader’s successful interpretation of the text therefore hinges on his/her knowledge of the issues raised in the text through which an association can be formed.

Logically speaking, in order to accommodate new experiences, there needs to be a shift in the recipients’ intellect. This means that they must discard existing practices that may have become outdated to embrace new
encounters. At the same time they witness how new knowledge is constructed. All this sounds deceptively simple, yet it is not for it is here that the academic literacy skills of individuals come to the fore. Students have to engage in critical thinking to form an assessment of what they wish to retain and what they wish to discard.

In this way, students learn, *inter alia*, how to prioritize, identify salient points of knowledge, and evaluate the information that they access. All this involves thinking critically and weighing up what is important and what is not. Hugo (2003) asserts that with the huge volume of information available on the Internet, students should develop the ability to select what is relevant for their use and disregard what is not.

Critical literacy entails the construction of knowledge and how it can be transformed. Casazza and Silverman (1999:183) acknowledge that in order to achieve the level of *critical* literacy, students are required to move through the two aforementioned levels. It is only when they are responsible in some measure for the construction of knowledge that they can advance to the attainment of academic literacy.

Winberg (1999:166) substantiates this statement, arguing that higher education entails nurturing and advancing the skills for critical understanding in a specific area. She adds that becoming a thinker means that one does not accept anything without subjecting it to an in-depth examination. Socrates employed the technique of questioning to develop the critical thinking skills of his followers (Murphy, 1997:1). By means of the method of questioning, he elicited a response from them. In this way, they took responsibility for their own knowledge. This method, which later became known as the Socratic method, is still in use today.

According to Kasper (2002) critical literacy enables the reader to evaluate the credibility and validity of informational sources. This means that students are
able to distinguish between different voices, and validate information from the various sources. It includes the ability to question, analyse and apply this new knowledge. By so doing the student moves from the basic levels of literacy to the critical literacy stage as set out by Green (Lankshear, 1999).

2.3.2 Bloom’s Taxonomy

Educational expert Benjamin Bloom is known for his very definite views on education. His view is that true teaching rests on the pillars of subject mastery and personal development. His philosophy is that humans have both a cognitive and an affective domain. When we learn something, therefore, we are first exposed to new knowledge and the accompanying levels, after which this new knowledge will impact on our affective domain.

The taxonomy mirrors the staircase image, in that Bloom believes that we commence our learning in the lower levels of thinking and then progress to the higher levels (Forehand, 2005:1). Having subjected this taxonomy to intense scrutiny, I compared its similarities and differences with the levels of literacy to be mastered before academic literacy is attained. I perceived this taxonomy to be relevant to this particular research study and that it could serve as a conceptual framework.

2.3.2.1 The cognitive domain of Bloom’s Taxonomy constitutes six levels, namely,
Of these six levels, the first three fall into the lower-order category of thinking, while the latter three fall into the higher order category of thinking. The relevance of this system of classification for this particular research investigation is that academic literacy is also a stage that is reached only after the fundamental stages have been subsumed in the hierarchy (of literacies). Thus, there is a parallel between Bloom’s Taxonomy and the attainment of academic literacy and it is this parallel that justifies the choice of Bloom’s Taxonomy as conceptual framework for this study.

We read in order to acquire knowledge. This knowledge component provides the platform for our levels of comprehension and application. Reading to acquire knowledge represents the rudimentary level of literacy. The more readers read, the more they learn, and the easier it is to learn. This is as a result of prior knowledge gained which facilitates the process of association formed with the topics encountered in the text being read. Prior knowledge makes it possible for the readers to familiarize themselves with the subject matter more readily than complete ignorance of. Epstein (2002:3) reasons that one needs a foundation (of knowledge) on which to base new knowledge.

The level following on reading for knowledge is reading with comprehension. Reading with attribution of meaning enables readers to remember what they have read. They can therefore question what they do not understand in the course of their interaction with the reading matter. Readers can also show their disagreement and document their differences with the text. In this way, they recall data obtained from previous readings and do a comparative study, albeit mentally, of what they have learned in other readings and what they are experiencing through reading with understanding, now.
After the comprehension stage, students should ideally be equipped to *apply* this new knowledge. For example if they have learnt new teaching and/or learning strategies, they need to demonstrate mastery of this new knowledge by implementing these strategies, or by devising new ones. By now, it is obvious that the levels are becoming progressively more complex and are increasingly more difficult to master.

*Application* is the practical demonstration of the absorption of knowledge and the display of the readers’ comprehension. It shows whether the readers indulged in the meaningless memorization of text content or engaged in meaningful debate with the text. This also shows the level of communicative competence on the part of the reader, that is, his or her ability to engage in dialogue with the text.

Application entails activities that focus on meaningful personal development, as opposed to the transmission of knowledge and the recall of information. While the usefulness of transmitting facts to students and assisting them in recalling information cannot be denied, these outcomes should not be the focus of any study. It is only when students can practically implement their new knowledge and adapt it to suit their existing circumstances that we state that they have succeeded in the mastery of this new knowledge. Once readers can apply this knowledge, they have mastered the lower order category of thinking. This mastery enables them to proceed to the next level: the higher order category of thinking.

In our ascent of the cognitive ladder, we encounter the three levels of the higher order category of thinking, namely analysis; synthesis; and evaluation. An *analysis* is the process of separating parts or breaking a concept into smaller, component parts in order to understand its structure. An example of analysis is gathering data and then classifying this data according to a
particular system or themes. The analogy of identifying the constituent parts and functions of a process or concept could also be used.

In the analysis of a text, readers examine content, compare text messages and break down the gist of the text. When we break a text into constituent parts, it is with the intention of coming to terms with the finer details. In this way we ensure that nothing of importance is overlooked. We may find a new teaching strategy fascinating, but if we cannot translate it into practice and employ this strategy to enhance our learner attainment, then we have not reached the higher level of thinking yet.

The *synthesis* stage means that readers can embark on the development of new structures and give new meaning to the writer’s message. The process of synthesis involves drawing on various sources to solve a problem. An example of this is to read and retell a short story. When all the salient points in the story have been recounted, readers can encourage their students to retell the story in a revised way by, for example, creating an alternative ending.

Readers can utilize the data collection and analysis stages to illustrate what constitutes synthesis. Should one use the analogy of an assignment, the process will very likely unfold as follows: Students will read the assignment question and find relevant literature to base their argument on. They will then proceed to sift the literature into what is functional for the purpose of the assignment; what material they are going to use to strengthen their background knowledge and what they are going to use in the actual assignment for confirmation of their assertions and finally, for referencing. This depicts mastery of both the analysis and synthesis aspects.

On completion of the assignment, it is considered routine to examine the assignment essay in order to weigh up whether the assignment question has been answered and whether the focus has been maintained. If the student
detects a shift in focus, it will be rectified at this stage. This last stage is therefore perceived to be the evaluation stage. Once the student is happy that all the assignment criteria have been met, the assignment can be handed in for formal assessment by the lecturer.

*Evaluation* is the final phase of both the lower, and the higher order of thinking. This involves critique, critical thinking, and the ability to compare and review and then, finally, to form a judgment. It is this judgment that is the focal point of the whole system of classification. When applied to the literacy hierarchy, we can perceive the progression to the evaluation level to be the equivalent of the student having attained academic literacy. The levels of operational, cultural literacy and critical literacy are all subsumed in the concept *academic literacy* (Green, 1999).

We have detected a definite correspondence between the taxonomy of Bloom and a checklist. In the context of this study, a checklist will allow the progress between levels to be measured, for instance, the progress between knowledge and comprehension, and then between comprehension and application. In other words, by using this system of classification to monitor progress between the various levels, such progress can be evaluated more accurately. Cognitive development is by and large an abstract process. This checklist, with its built-in mechanisms to gauge progress, serves as a measuring tool to establish the extent of this process of development.

**2.3.2.2 Affective domain of Bloom’s taxonomy**

![Diagram of the Affective Domain of Bloom's Taxonomy](image-url)
This domain comprises five levels: to receive; to respond; to value; to organize or conceptualize values; and to internalize or characterize values. This domain centers largely around feelings, values and attitudes. The implications of these five levels for this investigation are, firstly, that it is not only the cognitive domain that undergoes a change when students are exposed to new content, but change also occurs in the affective domain. Secondly, individuals form part of a greater background: their environment. Whatever knowledge they gain, is perceived and interpreted in the light of this environment. It indicates the way in which we respond to certain experiences and the effect they have on us. For example, if the knowledge aspect is examined, it is logical to assume and expect that when something new is learnt, it does not have an intellectual impact only; it goes beyond this sphere.

When we receive certain phenomena, we become aware of specific events. We listen, mull it over, add it to our existing knowledge or discard it. Responding calls for active participation by the respondent. This includes questioning the new information, involving oneself in discussions, giving a presentation on the topic, or designing a model based on this information. The minute we respond to an external feature, our emotions are stimulated, resulting in us developing an attitude towards it. This attitude can be positive, negative, or even one of indifference.

Value is the worth we attach to a phenomenon, object or behaviour. This varies according to the beliefs and value systems of the individual. The opinion an individual expresses, is based on his or her inner convictions. It is therefore intensely personal. The subject at hand may be of little interest to
one person, but may be important to another, and this is where respect for other cultures and ways of life comes into play. When we accept or refute the ideas or concepts of others, we do it on the strength of our own values. The differences between the Western and Eastern cultures can again be cited. Certain forms of behaviour are acceptable in certain cultures, but taboo in others. Once new information is discordant with the sense of values of the recipient, it is highly unlikely that it will have a positive impact on the recipient.

We need to decide whether the new information is relevant to our situation and whether it will enhance our values or cause us to regress. It is only when we have come to a clear realization that we can commit to this particular action. Deciding on the worth of something is very challenging, especially if it is abstract. Here, we can include appreciation for a privilege bestowed, enthusiasm towards an interest or activity, and motivation to commit to the task in hand.

The fourth category of the affective domain is that of organization. One always has to work in accordance with a plan to ensure the smooth running of a system. In organization, the emphasis is on prioritising the different values that one encounters, which are held dear by different sectors of society. This is especially relevant in a country like South Africa, with its highly diversified population. One needs to be sensitive to the feelings of others (and vice versa) and behave responsibly to avoid conflict. Organizing and integrating this new value into existing values would therefore depend on whether or not it is in alignment with the students’ beliefs. There is a close connection between knowledge and the individual’s sense of values.

The fifth category of the affective domain is the internalisation or characterisation of values. This characteristic is evident in people who work independently and are self-reliant. To these people, living according to a value system that acts as a measure for behaviour control, is the norm. This ensures consistency and discipline in their lifestyle. Cooperation is displayed
in teamwork, and an objective approach is adopted to problem solving. While their values are consistent, they are not inflexible in their stance, revising judgments, should the situation(s) change.

The above has been an attempt to show the association between the cognitive and affective aspects of our make-up, how the cognitive domain interacts with the affective domain, and how Bloom’s taxonomy merges into the whole study. If one were to compare and contrast the affective domain with academic literacy, the following strands of thought emerge:

The level of receiving is similar to the communication process in literacy; that is, after having read the text, the reader receives the message, interprets this message and examines it from all angles. The prior knowledge of the receiver makes it possible for him or her to identify with or distance himself/herself from this text content and respond to it. This response epitomises the reader’s subject background, as well as his or her attitude towards the text content. The background and attitude emanate from the reader’s cultural situatedness. The reader does not respond to the text in isolation; the response represents the greater environment that he or she comes from.

We can deduce from the cycle thus far that receiving phenomena and responding to these phenomena call for active reader interaction with the text. The author has a message for the reader, and the impact of this message depends on the way in which it is received and responded to by the reader. This serves to highlight the cultural dimension of literacy, which in turn incorporates what is perceived as the meaning aspect of literacy (Lankshear & Knobel, 1998:1). It is a matter of understanding texts in relation to contexts. To be literate is always in relation to something. One is never simply literate. For example, one may be computer, maths, information and technologically literate, to name a few forms of literacy.
The critical dimension of literacy is indissolubly linked to literacy as a meaning system. Once the operational dimension, and subsequent to this, the cultural dimension has been mastered, the critical dimension can be analysed. Literacy is often referred to as a social construct, because the literacy level of the people reflects their socio-cultural and socio-economic standards. Because it is being steeped in social practice, the people comprising the community should form part of this critical dimension.

There is one distinctive facet to the critical dimension, however, namely that the members of the community at large are not overly exposed to it. This is the crux of the struggle towards the attainment of academic literacy. Members of the community should not be given access only, but, more importantly, should be absorbed into the said practice, thus enabling them to live out and assist in its transformation.

2.4 Factors that impact on academic literacy

The literature identifies several factors that directly impact on students' levels of academic literacy. These factors will be discussed under the headings below.

2.4.1 Multi-literacies

The conventional definition of literacy is the individual's ability to read and write. The use of the singular form of literacy, together with the singular description to be able to read and write, dates back to the days when the use of electronics was unknown in education. Today we do not talk about literacy per se, as multi-literacies are more the norm than the exception. Information, computer, library, technological, mathematical, numerical, environmental and pictorial literacies, are only some of the literacies that are incorporated in the term multi-literacies.
Being literate therefore has a much broader connotation than reading and writing only. Viewing and speaking also form part of literacy. Sheridan (2000) avers that our minds work in a cross-modal manner. We interpret different modes of representation or literacy. For instance, we paint word pictures or translate pictures into words. Kerka (1989:1) highlights this broadened interpretation of literacy by stating, “being literate thus means being able to combine these systems in complex ways to create meaning”. While reading is thus still central to literacy, it entails not the mere reading of words, but the interpretation of signs, sounds, symbols and pictures within our social construct, which together constitute multi-literacies.

2.4.2 Language proficiency and cognitive development

The theory that academic literacy comprises multiple levels, justifies the argument that it is not only English Second Language students who encounter problems at higher education institutions. However, the problem of a lack of academic literacy is exacerbated by the language problem. Some mother-tongue speakers also experience difficulties, because their critical thinking skills have not been developed to their full potential. To achieve academic literacy means to utilise our critical thinking and problem-solving skills, in conjunction with language skills (Fisher, 2001:98).

At higher education institutions, the ability to synthesise and organise data is crucial for survival. Discussions with both students and lecturers, have revealed that academic life revolves largely around language proficiency. It is widely accepted by academics that original texts, such as book chapters, current affairs, programmes like news bulletins, news articles, websites and many other sources are consulted on a daily basis. It is physically impossible to assimilate all the information verbatim. For practical as well as intellectual reasons, therefore, these texts need to be skimmed over and the main points extracted.
Students need to read with understanding at higher education level in order to achieve subject mastery. If they lack this ability, their cognitive development will be slowed down. Kilfoil & Van der Walt (1997:15) promote the idea that students must be assisted by lecturers and mentors in improving their cognitive skills, so that they can cope with the learning content. This idea is particularly relevant in the South African situation, where the language of instruction (English) is usually the students’ second language. Students therefore have to expend more time and effort on their academic work, as language proficiency and cognitive development are interwoven.

Fisher (2001:192) contends that readers may at times gauge the surface meaning of a text, yet fail to understand the deeper meaning. This demonstrates the inter-relatedness of language proficiency and cognitive development. Metaphoric language is lost on students with low levels of language proficiency. The author further states that students who are not fluent readers “are slow to apply thinking to reading” (Fisher, 2001:193). This confirms the interdependence of language proficiency and cognitive development.

It logically follows that lack of language proficiency would influence the students’ academic progress, for example, in the writing of an assignment. The writing of an academic text engages the student both cognitively and linguistically. In order to submit a well-written, thought-provoking assignment, students have to read widely on the prescribed theme. Poor reading skills narrow the students’ choice of reading material, as complex diction is beyond poor readers’ comprehension. Such students can therefore not read widely. Skillen (1996:6) describes how the attainment of critical reading skills enhances readers’ understanding of the central message of the reading material.
Maynard and Peräkylä (2003:233) discount the notion that language basically has a communicative function only. They highlight De Saussure’s concept of a discrete difference between what he terms *langue* and *parole* (1962). *Langue* embodies the idea that “human cognition is the seat of linguistic structures”, while *parole* constitutes “the actual speech” produced by humans (Maynard *et al*., 2003:239). This demonstrates that our cognitive ability and our ability to produce language are interlocked. While language enables us to communicate with others, this communication is only part of its function. Language involves our intellect and impacts on our behaviour. This brief analysis of language as having two roles, directs us to the cognitive and affective aspects portrayed in Bloom’s Taxonomy.

Lecturers know from experience that, like other higher education assignments, the idea of academic writing frequently intimidates under-prepared students. A first reading of a passage is very often perfunctory – to gain the gist of the text. The reader decides what the main idea is in his opinion. In other words, he attempts an interpretation of the writer’s message.

Too often an assignment simply comprises notes taken down indiscriminately during lectures and then handed in by students as their own work. These students are oblivious to the fact that they are trying to pass off the lecturers’ work as their own, thereby laying themselves open to charges of plagiarism. It should be emphasized that these students do not knowingly plagiarise: their poor language use and cognitive abilities make it easier for them to simply hand in the lecturers’ notes, because they cannot communicate as competently as they should.

The crucial role of language in education cannot be ignored. “Critical discourse analysis begins with the assumption that language plays a primary role in the creation of meaning, and that language use must be studied in social context, especially if we are interested in the politics of meaning” (Brown & Kelly, 2001:502). Lastly, embedded in academic literacy is
confidence and fluency in the language of instruction. In our South African context, this would very likely be English. Empowerment and upward mobility, two implicit qualities pursued by most, are thus ultimately achieved through language competence.

It is therefore vital that students are assisted and guided to develop both in terms of language proficiency and cognitive ability, to be able to perform the intricate and complicated upper level cognitive functions that are characteristic of critical thinking. Unless they can do this, their academic literacy level will remain below the required standard or norm. Another related aspect of language proficiency is the ability to read with a critical mind.

2.4.3 Impact of reading competence on academic literacy

It is an accepted fact that students worldwide encounter basic reading difficulties. Hugo (2003:48) makes the assertion that research in the United States has shown that approximately 20 per cent of all students struggle with literacy. He continues that here in South Africa, the literacy levels of higher education students generally do not meet the demands set by higher education institutions (Hugo, 2003:48). Research conducted by the University of the Free State and later by the University of Pretoria has confirmed the theory that a lack of academic literacy is detrimental to student success (Hugo, 2003:48).

These two independent research investigations have revealed the following: In the University of the Free State project, 60 first-year students were tested. None of these students could read beyond Grade 8. In the second survey, Rademeyer (2001) as cited in Hugo (2003:48) established that 2000 of 6000 first-year students functioned at the language level of a Grade 7 learner, or even lower. The anomaly of the situation is that students are expected to cope with “relevant academic content at university level” (Hugo, 2003:48).
If we examine the first survey, the fact that not one of these students could demonstrate reading competence beyond that of a Grade 8 learner is cause for concern. The second survey shows that one-third of the students (literally thousands) could not cope with language beyond that of a Grade 7 learner, or even lower.

As the average Grade 8 learner is not able to read and evaluate Grade 10 learning material, we cannot expect him or her to function at higher education level. Students who find themselves in this invidious position, are doomed to failure right from the start. This is obviously one cause of the poor level of academic literacy displayed by South African students. This begs the question how higher education students that cannot give meaning to texts intended for secondary school learners can be expected to interact with texts meant for students at higher education level.

In addition, students at higher education institutions have to make sense of abstract academic texts. If they have difficulty deciphering prescribed texts, they will hardly be able to select and consult secondary sources. It is little wonder that our throughput rates have plummeted to a worrying degree.

Maclellan (1997:1) endorses these findings, stating that some disturbing evidence has emerged that students in higher education are not proficient readers. Many students read without any attribution of meaning. Underlying competent reading performance is the construction of meaning, to which the reader brings his or her own contribution. We read to broaden our knowledge. If we do not demonstrate this reading proficiency, however, we cannot give meaning to the text.

Reading influences the education situation in that students need to consult material in addition to the handouts and worksheets received at lectures. Maclellan (1997:1) acknowledges this, commenting that learning from texts has long been a central activity in higher education. If students have difficulty
in reading and accessing texts, they will find it difficult to process the information they require. This shows the interrelatedness between reading, epistemological access and academic literacy. The role of reading in higher education cannot be overemphasized. Students have to play an increasingly active role in the education situation. This necessitates the reading of academic texts themselves, instead of relying on notes from lecturers, as the vast numbers now accessing higher education are imposing a tremendous strain on the resources available.

Van Schalkwyk (2004:8) argues that the general success rates across a wide-ranging field of school achievement continue to fall. She states that lecturers blame an inability to read and write in a questioning and logical manner as central to the problem. This highlights the direct link between cognitive and linguistic ability.

How students respond to a reading text is directly linked to what they need the information for. This, in turn, determines which approach they will adopt in their reading – the ‘deep’ approach, or the surface approach. Those students who think that learning constitutes an accumulation of facts only, will treat the text accordingly. They will skim through the text to glean what is needed at the moment. The ones who acknowledge that a text might radically affect the way they think about aspects of reality, will engage with it in a similar mode to the line of reasoning expounded and evaluate it in terms of a range of criteria (Maclellan, 1997:7).

Kilfoil and Van der Walt (1997:167) believe that “reading is an interaction between the reader’s background knowledge and frames of reference (schemata) and the text.” The word investigation could describe the process. This has different connotations for different readers. Generally, it means to look into a matter. Someone reading for a degree will interpret it as a type of research, for example, a scientific investigation with suitable data collection to prove a point. Should a principal receive a complaint about bullying at the
school, on the other hand, the word *investigation* would take on a completely different character.

This gives substance to Maclellan’s statement (1997) that the reader gives meaning to the text. If the reader cannot identify with the text content, then no new knowledge can be constructed. As Hugo (2003:46) points out, should learners want to internalise subject matter, they firstly need to grasp new concepts and information and compare and contrast these with their prior knowledge. In this way, they construct their own knowledge. The author emphasizes the need for well-developed reading and thinking abilities.

Language proficiency hinges on well-developed reading and thinking abilities, which in turn lead to academic literacy. Reading is not an oral activity only; it happens in the mind. As Cziko (1998) writes, “reading happens in your mind, not in your mouth”. This underscores the fact therefore that reading is a cognitive activity. Schoenbach, Braunger, Greenleaf and Litman (2004:4) argue that “reading is an interactive process, a process of sense-making between the reader and the text”. This knowledge is both empowering and enlightening to students.

The discussion about reading, thinking and interpreting points to the fact that reading is a difficult activity. If we pursue the principle of reading as a cognitive function, we need to read with comprehension. To be able to read with comprehension, requires language proficiency. My own experiential knowledge has brought the realisation home to me that reading with understanding is something that we cannot take for granted in students. Nor can the information or connection between content and student background be taken for granted.

The socio-economic milieus from which our students are drawn do not necessarily allow for enabling environments. Libraries are luxuries and therefore reading, which is the main ingredient for building background
knowledge, is a rare pastime. Bernstein (1973) was a proponent of the effect of social class on learning and, more specifically, language development. Citing a mining community in the United Kingdom, he illustrated how the language of the community was limited to mining terminology, and little else, because there was no need for a broader vocabulary.

This brings us to how students' limited language proficiency and reading ability restrict their world. When the individual's world is limited, it means that his or her language is also limited. To limit means to confine or restrict. A definite line has been imposed, and nobody can proceed beyond it. The boundaries are already demarcated; as a result, all activity must take place within these borders. Because of these confines, the individual is bereft of that natural flow of enthusiasm and movement that usually accompanies the enquirer. Initiative is stifled and mobility is curbed in order to remain within these confines. Thus, a limited language proficiency imposes disadvantages socially.

A limited language proficiency disempowers people because their potential cannot be fully realised unless there is positive intervention. We are faced with the ambivalence of people striving to reach academic heights and knowledge, and eventual fulfillment, which continue to remain beyond their grasp as a result of the imposition of boundaries. Widening access to higher education is in itself not enough – without the ability to read critically and form one's own opinion, access will not lead to success.

2.5 Massification of higher education

Against the backdrop of higher education, the word 'massification' means placing formal access within the reach of the masses. In the South African context, the process of massification of the higher education system is perceived as the transition from an elite to a mass-based education system.
During the previous regime, a university education was reserved for the rich. This was because university fees, accommodation, materials and transport, to list a few items of expenditure, were outside the orbit of the working classes. The apartheid era witnessed the government pursue a system of education that was considered to be elitist. In the pre-1994 period, in the education system, funding was determined on a discriminatory basis. Harber (1997:139) relates how racial inequality was reinforced in terms of “spending on education, access to education and the content of education”. As a result, the majority of students were denied access to higher education.

In South Africa, the rich were the privileged whites while the poor were the disadvantaged non-whites. Whites could therefore access higher education institutions more easily than their less privileged counterparts, regardless of academic ability. When a student from an affluent family failed, he or she could repeat that year, whereas a student from a poor family would be forced to leave school and rather find employment to augment the family income.

In an attempt to redress these past injustices, it was advocated that higher education be made available to all. With the advent of a democratic government, this was realised, at least in theory. Henceforth, educational resources would be shared more equitably and a wider spectrum of the human resources of the country would be developed.

Mabokela (1998:1) confirms this line of thought, asserting that prior to 1994, the South African higher education system was structured along racial lines: “universities ... were divided along ethno-linguistic lines”. South Africa’s new government effected many changes on social, political, economic and educational fronts. In education, there was a concerted effort to make higher education accessible to the masses. This was in accordance with the government’s policy of educational transformation.
De Bruin and De Bruin (1999:129) describe massification as the period that followed onto the birth of South Africa as a democracy after the April 1994 elections. These democratic elections were directly responsible for the escalating student numbers, the fact that school-leavers continued along their career paths at higher education institutions, and the growth in the numbers of mature students. De Bruin and De Bruin (1999:129) add that this massification of higher education has challenged higher education institutions to cope effectively with the increase in student numbers. Entering higher education institutions is obviously also an enormous adjustment for students who have not been prepared to adapt to the critical thinking mode and self-discovery style of learning and teaching expected of them.

Diversity depicts difference, not inferiority. In pre-democracy South Africa, lecturers and students were generally from the same cultural and social backgrounds. They had the same system of values and subscribed to the same beliefs. This changed with the admission of students from diverse backgrounds. This does not imply that making higher education accessible to the vast majority has created problems. It is simply because of the increasingly diverse nature of the student population that certain difficulties have surfaced.

Students are nowadays drawn from all walks of life. We now have students who came from backgrounds and secondary institutions that negatively affected their academic careers. Many students are first-generation higher education students. Living below the breadline meant that education was a luxury many could not afford. More often than not, students come from schools where they were primarily taught according to the expository mode and not the discovery mode. These students are “under-prepared and therefore not schooled in the ways of the academy” (Luna, 2002:596).

In the previous dispensation South African communities were highly segregated and compartmentalized. Various departments of education
served the various communities. In addition, each department had its own set of standards. Educationists are familiar with our past system of education and the several discriminatory departments of education, that co-existed in our country for decades. These departments delivered unequal services to the different communities. Mabokela (1998:1) supports this, stating that “higher education access inequalities among blacks are partly attributable to their inadequate preparation at the primary and secondary education levels”.

Key was the inequitable distribution of the educational resources of the country. In this context, ‘educational resources’ included subsidies, qualified teachers, expertise, functional schools, sports facilities and learning materials. These inequalities were perpetuated in that students wrote different examinations, obtained different degrees and diplomas, and were equipped for different occupations, based on race and culture.

This unequal approach is now viewed negatively by democratic South Africa, as well as the rest of the world. Baskin (2001:9) states that “… in a self-proclaimed classless society higher education systems reflect an investment in egalitarianism; inequality is seen as exclusion from access to mainstream knowledge and the modes of information that furnish it”. Our own egalitarian efforts are still in the stages of infancy and the results therefore have not impacted significantly on our higher education systems. The inequalities of the past still haunt us and will continue to do so, until a concerted effort is made to address these.

Should a parallel be drawn with South Africa, massification has indeed provided opportunities for access to more students. Hopefully, our system of higher education has not been eroded in the process. Instead, it can be stated that the system needs to be adapted to accommodate the diverse nature of students at higher education institutions.
I want to affirm, at this stage, that massification per se is not responsible for any downward spiral of standards and lowering of academic literacy levels. However, increasing the numbers and diversity of students without simultaneously addressing issues pertaining to the development of academic literacy places both students and faculty members in a difficult position. The diversification of the South African student body has far-reaching implications for the teaching and learning environment and the development of academic literacy.

2.6 Teaching and learning environment

The teaching and learning environment at higher education institutions is often not conducive to the construction of knowledge and the development of academic literacy. Where lecturers cling to the traditional mode of teaching, students cannot be expected to interchange actively. This is substantiated by Van Aswegen and Dreyer (2004:295): “The primary learning environment for undergraduate students, the fairly passive lecture-discussion format where teacher educators talk and most students listen, is contrary to almost every principle of an optimal student learning setting”.

The traditional teaching mode is one where the lecturer talks and students listen. Too often the lecturer still dominates the education situation. Once this unequal partnership is established, there is a reticence on the part of students to question the content, still less challenge it. The lecturer is in control of the situation, determining the pace and outcome(s) in the process. This sequence of events results in minimum student participation. For maximum utilization of time, the lecturer should ideally initiate the discussion until a satisfactory level of response is evoked. In this way, students’ critical thinking skills, which are essential for independence of thought, are developed.

Van Aswegen and Dreyer (2004:299) further state that teacher educators should create a non-threatening atmosphere to build student confidence.
Drawing on their own experiences will encourage students to investigate and discover for themselves. Knowledge will no longer have the semblance of a commodity that is brought to the lecture halls and transferred to them. Students will learn to grapple with and solve problems and make discoveries without extraneous assistance. This serves to underpin the constructivist theory that knowledge is not transmitted; it is constructed.

The diverse nature of students plays a key role in the present education situation. Lecturers invariably look for the deficit factor within the students, associating ‘different’ with ‘deficit’ (Schroeder, 1993). The question arises whether lecturers’ style of teaching has been adjusted to accommodate these diverse students, or whether we expect changes to be made by the students only, namely, they have to conform to the lecturers’ methodologies and standards.

Toni and Olivier (2004:198) claim that some lecturers are impervious to change. They are not equipped to handle the changing character of the student population. Diverse students have diverse needs, and this aspect must be addressed urgently in order to secure the survival of both students and lecturers. This is substantiated by Delpit (1988:283), who asserts that the norms and practices relating to school literacy are indicative of the culture of power. As a result of this, a wide range of individuals of other cultural groups have been defined as illiterate and falling short of the standards of the culture of power.

The adjustment of teaching strategies poses a major challenge to the education transformation process. Waghid (1999:112) recommends that higher education programmes in South Africa should become diverse and educationally transformative. They should, *inter alia*, “develop attitudes of critical inquiry and power of analysis”. This again emphasises that enquiring minds and the ability to engage in critical analysis do not simply happen. They result from a process of academic and professional development that
has been consciously implemented over the entire career of the higher education student.

Implicit in this is the assertion that teaching and learning styles need to be adapted to suit the new intake of students. The transformation of teaching and learning styles should become a focal point. By adapting learning styles to suit the new intake of students, academics will not merely pay lip service to the policy of inclusion; they will concretize it.

Brown and Kelly (2001) believe that students are not mere receptacles of information, distributed and replicated to meet the demands placed by society in the economic sphere. They must instead be regarded as active participants that came to higher education institutions with their own value systems that have a definite impact on the education situation. Van Aswegen and Dreyer (2004:298) contend that years of the traditional teaching method, whereby teachers were the source of knowledge and students were subjected to the passive role of note-taking and the unquestioning absorption of facts, have given students a somewhat distorted view of what teaching really entails. This confirms the negative impact of the expository mode of teaching and learning, which is contradictory to the conditions required for the construction of knowledge.

The importance of receptivity should also be taken into account. According to Brown and Kelly (2001:502), the process of receptivity allows for different interpretations of a text. Any interpretation hinges largely on the social and cultural backgrounds of the readers who perceive the writer’s message according to their own beliefs and systems. There is therefore no guarantee that lecturer and students will reach corresponding outcomes regarding the text(s) read. This also underlines that a lecturer must be much more than a medium through which information is channeled.
It may be true that “there will always be tension between the competing demands of content-laden curricula and the development of students’ generic learning and communication skills” (Holder et al., 1999:28). However, I reiterate the need for an environment that is conducive to learning. Classrooms must provide an atmosphere of confidence and trust, thus providing opportunities for students to share and critically assess their experiences. In this way, classrooms will become lively centres for debate and forums for students to exercise and apply their knowledge and experiences in the presence of their lecturer and peers (Brown and Kelly, 2001:516).

Lea and Street (1998:157) contend that education at a higher level requires that students familiarise themselves with new ways of knowing, understanding and classifying knowledge. This terminology is reminiscent of the language used to discuss Bloom’s Taxonomy. The words new and familiarising and adapting have underlying assumptions of change and the disposing of old habits, to make way for new methodologies and the adoption of a new approach. A paraphrase of this quotation gives rise to the following: The new ways of knowing and understanding would refer to the self-discovery mode of teaching and learning. This is as opposed to the expository mode. At higher education level, students should take responsibility for their own learning. They are therefore expected to play an active role in their learning and use the newly acquired knowledge to build on their existing knowledge.

Students no longer have a passive role in their own learning. The lecturer’s presentation serves by and large to initiate the thought process, leaving the students to do follow-up work on the topic. Once students access additional literature, the onus is on them to understand and interpret what they have read. The interpretation of these sources hinges on the background and resources of the student (reader). This knowledge in turn needs to be organised and new knowledge must be constructed, to widen the horizon of the students and help them to develop their academic literacy levels.
There is a line of thought that academic literacy is the result of the activation of specific cognitive processes. A possible solution could be to develop this cognitive device, so that academic literacy can in turn be developed. This is underlined by Fischer and Van der Riet, as cited in Amos (1999:180), who advocate “a need for an academic development vision” in order that academic literacy may be developed. From the aforementioned, it can be deduced that the importance of academic literacy in the life of a student cannot be overrated.

A brief summary reveals that there are three tiers of literacy. The first is the functional or operational phase. The second is the cultural literacy phase. The third is the critical literacy phase. These three phases constitute academic literacy. This entails reading with understanding, for instance being able to conceptualize the subject being read about. Readers question, compare and contrast the text with their existing knowledge.

In this way, new knowledge is constructed. Readers then proceed to extract the salient points from the text and to extrapolate these. This substantiates the theory that students should take an active part in their own learning. Once students have arrived at the critical thinking phase they show that they have read with comprehension. They now have the ability to think critically and reason about what they have read. This also demonstrates that they can think independently. This is the desired outcome of the higher education process: critical, independent thinkers.

2.7 CONCLUSION

From the literature reviewed, it is clear that an accurate description of academic literacy is difficult. Many authors have proposed definitions, but most agree that there are multiple levels of literacy, with academic literacy regarded as the pinnacle of the other competencies.
Chapter Two provided a theoretical perspective on academic literacy in higher education. It included a glimpse of higher education in South Africa, its embeddedness in a social structure, the current transformation of higher education, and the concomitant challenges and changes that form part of any transformation process.

The scientific models of Green and Bloom were discussed as a conceptual framework. Some factors that impact on academic literacy were highlighted. These are *inter alia* language proficiency and reading competence. Chapter Two also highlights the commitment of government to sustainable development. The influence of personal and social skills on academic development was outlined as well as the massification of higher education. The importance of the teaching and learning environment, transformation and the need for change were discussed. Lastly, the themes emerging from the literature were examined.

The chapter concluded with an overview of academic literacy at higher education level. In the next chapter, a theoretical exposition of the chosen research design and methodology will be presented.
CHAPTER THREE
THEORETICAL EXPOSITION OF CHOSEN RESEARCH DESIGN AND
METHODOLOGY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Chapter One constituted a brief overview of the planned study. Chapter Two provided a theoretical perspective on academic literacy in higher education as well as a review of the relevant literature sources that were consulted. Chapter Three will provide a detailed discussion of the chosen research design and methodology. This will serve to demonstrate the researcher’s cognizance with the chosen research approach and its corresponding appropriateness for this specific investigation.

The aim of this chapter is to provide a framework of the research plan and how it was executed. The techniques and methods employed by the researcher to address the research questions will be detailed. The research design will fully explain the method of investigation into the perceptions of academics of the academic literacy of their students in higher education at present.

The following steps were adhered to during the implementation of the research (Heck, 2006:376):
Sketching the outline of the research topic, the focus and the purpose of the research;

Defining the research problem and shaping the research questions. It is important that the research question(s) be formulated concisely, as the questions strongly influence data collection and the analysis process.

Collection and organisation of the data;

The interview setting and interviewing of participants;

Transcribing the recordings;

Analysis and interpretation of the data;

Verification of the results;

Interpretation of the results, evaluation of shortcomings, recommendations and conclusions.

3.2 PROBLEM STATEMENT

3.2.1 Orientation

Academic literacy undoubtedly forms an integral part of the holistic make-up of higher education students. Unfortunately many of these students lack this competency, with dire consequences for their academic studies. Several reasons can be proffered for this pervasive lack of academic literacy currently experienced at higher education institutions. Some of these are:
Inadequate education. The previous South African system of education was firmly rooted in apartheid and structured along racial lines. This means that it favoured a select minority, and disadvantaged the vast majority. As a result of this differentiated system of education, students graduated from education institutions, *inter alia* colleges and universities, having attained different goals and having mastered different courses (Mabokela, 1998:1). These inequalities have left a legacy that has persisted into the present.

Language problems. The majority of our students are English Second Language speakers and are taught through the medium of English by teachers who are themselves English Second Language speakers and have in many instances not fully mastered the language themselves. The vicious circle is thus perpetuated, to the detriment of all concerned.

The system of schooling is such that *critical thinking and reading skills are neglected* (Winberg, 1999:172). As a result of this neglect, students experience difficulties with critical reading. Winberg (1999:172) argues that many essential skills related to critical analysis and information gathering are not specifically taught. The author contends that these skills should be developed explicitly and taught across all disciplines.

Literacy can be viewed as comprising “three interlocking dimensions – the operational, the cultural and the critical” (Lankshear, 1999:11). These different dimensions are subsumed in academic literacy. If students cannot come to terms with basic operational literacy, it follows that academic literacy will remain beyond their reach. Cognitive development will therefore be inadequate. It has already been proven scientifically that students who experience linguistic problems invariably experience academic problems (Bloom & Keil, 2001).
Furthermore, language and thought are inextricably linked. Individuals who have poor language skills will consequently be disadvantaged in that their critical thinking skills will be proportionally poorly developed. In short, language shapes thought. This underlying philosophy of “the correlation between language development and cognitive development” is expounded in Bloom and Keil (2001:352).

Language has a profound influence on thought. In order to read critically, the individual therefore needs to have a good command of language. If such command is lacking, much of the gist of the text will be lost on the individual who will therefore not be in a position to critique the text. It is within this context that lack of academic literacy should be viewed.

3.2.2 Problem formulation

The afore-mentioned issues have initiated this research investigation, and it is against this backdrop that the following research questions have been formulated for this study:

Primary research question,

*What are the perceptions of academics of the academic literacy of their students in higher education at present?*

Secondary research question,

*How can the academic literacy of students best be developed at higher education level?*

3.3 RESEARCH AIMS

The research aims of this study have been derived from the research questions and are to establish the following:
What the perceptions of academics are of the academic literacy of their students in higher education at present;

How academic literacy of students can best be developed at higher education level.

3.4 RESEARCH DESIGN

3.4.1 Introduction

The aim of a scientific study is to find out, and in order to find out, the researcher has to determine the best route to be followed. This means that there should be a plan. Babbie (1992:89) states that the research design is the strategy devised to effect this scientific inquiry. Henning (2004:146) maintains that a research design is utilised to establish the accuracy of the evidence gathered to address the research question. In this way, any ambiguity in respect of the evidence is obviated.

The research design focuses on the architecture of a research project. This is because the development of an appropriate design largely determines the successful outcome of the project. Trochim (2006:1) asserts that a research design provides the glue that holds a research project together. He further states that a research design serves as the framework of the research to illustrate how the most important parts of the research project complement each other in attempts to answer the central research questions. It is crucial to select and develop the most appropriate design for the project concerned, as this ensures that the data collected are capable of answering the research questions in a convincing way.
McMillan and Schumacher (1993:31) contend that the aim of research designs is to provide the most valid, accurate answers possible to give due attention to the selection of research questions. It is therefore essential that researchers work through this stage explicitly, as there is a definite correlation between the chosen design, the findings, as well as the interpretation of the research findings.

3.4.2 Philosophical foundation of the study

3.4.2.1 Constructivism

The philosophical foundation of this research is constructivism. The theory underlying constructivism is that individuals build their own knowledge through interacting with the world around them. Students construct knowledge; they do not passively absorb it. It is for this reason that constructivist theory is student-centred. This is substantiated by Clark (2000:7): “constructivists place the learner at the center of the equation”.

Epstein (2002:3) asserts that constructivism focuses on the act of learning, not on the act of teaching. It is an active process during which students build new knowledge by adding it to their prior knowledge. This prior knowledge therefore serves as the foundation on which new ideas and concepts can be built. The constructivist process hinges on what students already know and understand. This knowing and understanding enable them to make sense of the new information. Therefore, the more students know, the easier it is to learn, as their worldview is broadened correspondingly.

This principle that underpins constructivism, namely that knowledge is constructed, not discovered, leads us to the belief that constructivism involves an active process (Schwandt, 2000:197). Another feature of constructivism is
that it does not take place in isolation, but within the context of our social practices, language, and our “interacting with the physical and social world” (Epstein, 2002:3).

Should the key words be extracted from the foregoing authors (Clark, Epstein & Schwandt), the result will be knowing, understanding, learning and social interaction. Creswell and Clark (2007:22) argue that the following framework provides the borders within which constructivism functions:

- Understanding;
- Multiple participant meanings;
- Social and historical construction, and
- Theory generation.

This paradigm thus comprises the understanding and meaning formed by the participants of the study. The understanding and meaning result from social interaction and the ‘personal histories’ of the participants. The research flows “from the bottom up”. It commences with the viewpoint of the individual “to broad patterns, and ultimately, to theory” (Creswell & Clark, 2007:22). In this way, the literature reviewed corresponds with and confirms the characteristics of constructivism.

There are two types of constructivism: cognitive constructivism and social constructivism (Epstein, 2002:3). Cognitive constructivism is rooted in the theory of Jean Piaget, a developmental psychologist, and focuses on learning in a meaningful context. Social constructivism flows from the theory of psychologist Vygotsky, who emphasised the social context of learning. Other important advocates of constructivism are Dewey and Bruner (Epstein: 2002). In order to create an environment in which constructivism can take place, students require a constructivist teacher and a constructivist classroom. There is mutual respect in a constructivist classroom, and a constructivist
teacher respects students’ rights to raise their points of view and ideas (Epstein, 2002:8).

In constructivism, language does not fulfil the role of a tool that enables readers to secure knowledge; it enables readers to build on the knowledge that we already possess. Schwandt (2000:198) cites Gadamer and Heidegger, who state that language is part of our being. This is supported by Vygotsky, who maintains that language and learning are inextricably bound up with each other (Epstein, 2002:3).

The relevance for this study is that academic literacy is not something that can be learnt and retrieved at will. It is attained, like constructivism, by being built on some form of prior knowledge that serves as foundation, in conjunction with language proficiency. The teacher who elicits a critical response from learners respects their rights to question and differ, like the constructivist teacher, and at the same time creates a classroom atmosphere in which learners will interact with confidence, well on their way to the attainment of academic literacy.

Constructivism has nine general principles of learning as derivatives. These are: (1) Learning is an active process; (2) People learn to learn as they learn; (3) Activities should engage the mind and the hand; (4) Learning involves language; (5) Learning is a social activity; (6) We learn in relation to what we know; (7) One needs knowledge to learn; (8) It takes time to learn; and (9) The key component to learning is motivation (Epstein, 2002:3).

If we draw a parallel between the route to the attainment of academic literacy and these principles of learning, the following trends unfold:

Table 3.1 Illustration of characteristics of constructivism and academic literacy
### Principles of Constructivism

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principles of Constructivism</th>
<th>Academic Literacy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Learning is actively constructed</td>
<td>One works actively to attain academic literacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. People learn to learn as they learn</td>
<td>People learn basic functional literacy to learn cultural literacy to learn critical literacy to reach academic literacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Involves physical and cognitive aspects</td>
<td>Academic literacy impacts on the cognitive and affective make-up of the individual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Language influences our learning</td>
<td>Linguistic ability and academic ability are interwoven</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Learning is a socio-cultural activity</td>
<td>Literacy is a social construct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Learning is contextual</td>
<td>Components of academic literacy are situated within a context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. One needs knowledge to learn</td>
<td>Basic literacies learnt are subsumed in academic literacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Learning takes time</td>
<td>Development of academic literacy is a process that happens over time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Motivation is a key component of constructivism</td>
<td>Sustained motivation is key to achieving academic literacy.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 3.4.2.2 Interpretivism

My perception of *Interpretivism* is the ability of the researcher to extract meaning from the actions and experience relayed to him/her. In this instance, the participants share their experiences, to which the researcher in turn attaches meaning. Kinsella (2006:2) asserts that “qualitative research is informed by hermeneutic thought”.

Interpretivism is embedded in hermeneutics which, in turn, flows from theology, philosophy and literary criticism (Henning et al., 2004:16). In substantiation of this, Babbie (1992:340) postulates that the term *hermeneutics*, was primarily used in Christian theology, but has since been used in a secular sense as well, to mean the ‘art, science, or skill of interpretation’.

According to interpretivism, human action has meaning; it is the understanding or interpretation of this human action that is the aim of the human sciences. One can only reach this understanding, or *Verstehen*, through interpreting this action in a specific way. “Verstehen” literally means to empathise with the actor, the one who performs this human action. Understanding is attained through observation of and conversation about this act. It is clear therefore, that interpretation takes place within a specific context. This imposes a constraint on the researcher, as understanding has to be reached in the light of this context (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000:191-192). A second characteristic of interpretivism is a focus on understanding how the everyday life world is constituted. The third characteristic of interpretive understanding is its interconnectedness with language.

A discussion of the rationale behind detailing the aspects that constitute interpretive understanding is appropriate. It is to emphasise the interpretivist argument that researchers can form a value judgment of an act, yet at the same time remain impartial by distancing themselves emotionally. In this way, the cognitive and the affective are involved in the meaning making process, but without compromise to either (Denzin *et al.*, 2000:193).

Should the researcher relate this concept to the research study, the following scenario can be envisaged: The interviews conducted have been transcribed and an analysis is now in progress. During the interviews, participants have drawn on and shared their lived experiences. Events pertain to individuals and because individuals differ, their experiences are unique.
The researcher then identifies with the actor (in this instance the participant) by reading experiences and trying to understand their perspective. The next step is to place this action (experience) in the life world, thereby contextualizing it. By so doing, the interpretation of the researcher gains perspective. Human action is meaningful, because of the system of meanings, the ‘language game’ in which it is embedded (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000:193). This helps the researcher to remain focused, as language use enables both interviewer and interviewee to clarify any misconceptions that may arise. In this way, the accuracy and truth of interpretation of the data are ensured.

3.4.3 Qualitative approach

According to Strauss and Corbin (1990:1), a broad definition of qualitative research is “any kind of research that produces findings not arrived at by means of statistical procedures or other means of quantification”. Jacob (1988), as cited in Key (1997:1), states that “Qualitative research is a generic term for investigative methodologies described as … field or participative observer research”. Ploeg (1999:1) in turn, asserts that “the purpose of qualitative research is to describe, explore and explain phenomena being studied”.

A qualitative approach was selected as the appropriate choice for this study, in that it would enhance understanding of the perceptions of academics regarding the academic literacy of their students in higher education. Literacy is socially embedded, and as the purpose of qualitative research is to understand a specific social situation or interaction, it logically follows that a qualitative approach should be employed.

The research furthermore follows a phenomenological approach, as it endeavours to highlight the unique experience of each lecturer constituting the sample of the study. According to Ploeg (1999:2), the aim of a phenomenological approach to qualitative research is to describe accurately
the lived experiences of people, and not to generate theories or models of the phenomena being studied. Phenomenology is one of the traditions into which qualitative research is categorized. It concentrates on describing the essence and meanings of the experiences (Conrad & Serlin, 2006:408).

3.4.3.1 Naturalistic and contextual nature

Qualitative research is naturalistic and contextual in nature. Qualitative researchers are interested in meaning – how people make sense of their lives and experiences. Qualitative research involves fieldwork. The researcher physically goes to the people in their specific environment to observe and record their behaviour in its natural setting. This enables the researcher to gain a deeper insight into the world of the participant and to be highly involved in the actual experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2003:181).

In qualitative research, the relationship of the researcher and the participant is interactive and inseparable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In accordance with this maxim and for the purpose of this specific study, the actual interview will be conducted in the office of the participant at the higher education institution at which the said participant is employed. This will be in line with the qualitative research principle of meeting the participant in a naturalistic environment. At the same time, it will also provide the researcher with an opportunity to gain a broader wide understanding of the entire situation, which is characteristic of qualitative research.

Marshall and Rossman (1980) contend that human behaviour is subjected to and determined by the social climate in which it occurs; thus, one must study that behaviour in specific situations. Human conduct is to a large extent subject to surroundings, and as such, should be examined within the ambit of that environment.
Babbie (1992:285) states that one of the key features of field research is the breadth and scope given to the researcher. As a result of the social setting(s) in which it occurs, certain phenomena become evident which would not have happened otherwise.

3.4.3.2 Descriptive disposition

Qualitative research is descriptive by nature. This is substantiated by Ploeg (1999:1), who avers that “…qualitative research may produce a rich, deep description of the phenomena being studied or a theory about the phenomenon”. She states further that qualitative research reports very often contain direct quotations from the participants. These, in turn, provide rich illustrations of the study themes.

The data that emerge from this study will describe a reality as portrayed by the participants. This implies that the data will not be in the form of numbers or statistics, but will consist of the participants' words.

3.4.3.3 Exploratory character

When a researcher initially embarks on a relatively new area or interest, it is often common practice to undertake an exploratory study (Babbie, 1992:90). This allows the researcher to become familiar with the problem or concept to be studied. This is underscored by Mouton (1996:103), who states that exploratory research allows the researcher to gain new insight in and a better understanding of the phenomenon to be studied. Exploratory research can be described as the initial research, before more conclusive research is undertaken. In this way, researchers search for the essence or the underlying meaning of the experience (Miller & Salkind, 2002:151).

Babbie (1992:90) outlines three purposes of exploratory studies, namely (a) to satisfy the researcher’s curiosity; (b) to test the feasibility of the study; and (c)
to develop the methods to be employed. An exploratory design is particularly useful when a researcher needs to develop an instrument based on the findings, because one is not available. It is also appropriate when a researcher wants to transfer results to different groups (Creswell, 2007:75).

The problem of academic literacy is not unique to South Africa, nor is it a new phenomenon. Partly because of a misplaced focus and partly because of the complex language policy of South Africa, together with the superior status enjoyed by English, the country's academic literacy problem has not received the attention that a problem of this magnitude merits. The exploration of this research project could generate new interest in what appears to be a problem with far-reaching consequences, both over short and longer terms.

### 3.4.4 Inductive inference


The inductive method allows the researcher to achieve secure knowledge of the natural world. Its underlying logic is the role of experience in the pursuit of knowledge. The relevance for this study is that lecturers with experience will relate their perceptions of the academic literacy of their students in higher education.

### 3.4.5 Holistic description

The aim of a holistic approach is to obtain data covering various aspects of the entire situation. Key (1997:2) states that the researcher seeks to gain a
total or complete picture when conducting qualitative research. He adds that a holistic description of the events, procedures and philosophies occurring in their natural settings is often needed to make accurate situational decisions. Conrad and Serlin (2006: 406) have substantiated this, affirming that qualitative research is holistic, in that it is more focused on the “process and context”, rather than simply outcomes. In the same vein, the qualitative researcher seeks an overview of the whole situation and how it unfolds.

3.4.6 Interpretive nature

The purpose of the qualitative mode of inquiry is, inter alia, interpretation. This has been substantiated by Creswell (2003) in his statement that qualitative research is primarily interpretive. The researcher therefore interprets the data by studying participants in their natural setting, while attempting to understand and interpret phenomena.

The focus of this particular study will be the interpretation of the perceptions expressed by participating lecturers regarding the academic literacy of their students in higher education.

3.5 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research will be conducted in two phases.

3.5.1 Phase One

Phase One will explore the perceptions of academics of the academic literacy of their students in higher education.

In an attempt to explore, interpret, describe and record the perceptions of academics regarding the academic literacy among higher education students, the following steps will be taken during this phase:
3.5.1.1 Sampling of participants

Participants from the population selected, will be *purposively* chosen from an *availability* sample, with the aim of selecting all accessible participants who can provide accurate and reliable information regarding the research problem and not necessarily or particularly those that the researcher personally may have selected. According to Creswell (1998:118), purposive sampling will ensure that only those participants who can make a meaningful contribution to the research will be included in the study. The relevance of this for this research problem is that only academics involved at a higher education institution will be selected to participate. I will approach lecturers of repute for prospective interviews. In this way, the requirement of interviewing worthwhile people will be met (Conrad & Serlin, 2006:420).

The researcher took the following criteria into consideration when deciding on the participants to be selected:

- Are there a sufficient number of participants from which to choose?
- Are the participants selected representative of the diversity of the population of the country?
- Does the sample group consist of academics from both genders?
- Are academics drawn from a cross-section of scientific disciplines, for example, law, languages, psychology, nursing science, architecture?
- Have participants from the various language groups been included in the sample?
- Does the research population and the sample taken from it relate directly to the problem statement of the study?

The participants shared one common variable, that is, the group comprised higher education lecturers from the same higher education institution. The above-mentioned criteria were borne in mind by the researcher when
approaching participants. This was so that participants could be of value to
the study in supplying relevant feedback and information. Conrad and Serlin
(2006:420) expressly state that the researcher should justify his or her choice
of intended interviewees.

In addition, my selection of these participants has been based on the
knowledge that they will not simply adjust their responses to what they
perceive I would want. We have interacted in various situations and I hold
these academics in high esteem. In our interaction it surfaced that they were
genuinely interested in the academic literacy problem, and appreciated
research efforts directed at the alleviation of this problem.

McMillan and Schumacher (1993:382) indicate that the insights generated
through a qualitative inquiry depend more on the information richness of the
cases and the analytical capabilities of the researcher than on the sample
size. It is conventional and appropriate that a smaller number of participants
be used in qualitative research.
## TABLE 3.2: Biographical details of participants

The following is an overview of the participants, their years of lecturing experience and faculties, together with their racial grouping.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PARTICIPANT</th>
<th>YEARS OF EXPERIENCE</th>
<th>FACULTY</th>
<th>NATIONALITY AND RACE</th>
<th>GENDER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>15+</td>
<td>Library Science</td>
<td>S A White</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>8+</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>S A White</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>6+</td>
<td>Science Education</td>
<td>American</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>20+</td>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>S A White</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>20+</td>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>S A White</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>20+</td>
<td>Languages</td>
<td>British</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>12+</td>
<td>Remedial</td>
<td>S A White</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>8+</td>
<td>Health Sciences</td>
<td>Coloured</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.5.1.2 Data collection

Data collection literally means the process of gathering information relating to the research topic, by the researcher. In the interviews conducted in this study, participants spoke of their experiences of academic literacy encountered in students. The researcher then made the process of the study accessible and wrote descriptively as tacit knowledge may best be communicated through the use of rich, thick descriptions (Myers, 2002), as quoted in Neill (2006).

Creswell (2007:111) identifies specific phases in the data collection process:

- Demarcation
- Sampling procedures
- Permissions needed
- Collecting information by means of observations, interviews, existing documentation and visual material
- Establishing the procedure for the recording of the information, and
- Administering data collection
There are three main qualitative data collection methods (Myers, 2002):

- *Interactive interviewing*, during which participants are asked to verbally describe their experiences of the phenomenon.
- *Written descriptions by participants*, where they are asked to write descriptions of their experiences of the phenomenon.
- *Observation*, which entails descriptive observations of verbal and non-verbal behaviour.

Fieldwork was conducted over a period of three months, from the latter part of June 2007 until the end of September 2007. The academics concerned were all from the same higher education institution and, being specialists in their fields, were all capable of rendering a clear account of their perceptions of the academic literacy of their students at said higher education institution. I was accompanied by a researcher from the Research Unit of the Eastern Cape Department of Education, who felt that a saturation point was reached after five interviews had taken place.

In my view, this was too narrow a sample to be regarded as a fair reflection of the perceptions of the academics. I justified my perception by reasoning that too few disciplines had been represented. Another justification was that although it appeared that a saturation point had been reached, my previous interactions with academics from this institution had led me to believe that there was potentially still much untapped information available. Therefore, I continued with the interviews until I thought that a saturation point had been reached. In a discussion with my fellow researchers, it was brought to my attention, however, that the interviewees, except for two members, constituted a homogeneous group and thus did not qualify as being diverse.
Subsequent to that, I interviewed a further three academics (two blacks and one Indian) to reach true diversity status. The interviewees were eager to participate and shared their perceptions spontaneously. The interviews have all been transcribed verbatim and analysed.

3.5.1.2.1 Phenomenological interviews

The main method of data collection used for this research study was the interactive interview. This took place by means of a series of personal, phenomenological, unstructured interviews with the selected sample group of lecturers from the same higher education institution. The natural setting used for participant observation, was the office of the lecturer concerned. The researcher observed the behaviour of the participants during the interviews.

In phenomenological interviews, the researcher is granted the opportunity to study ‘lived experience’ in a specific field of interest. Such interviews ‘involve a one-to-one relationship’ between the researcher and the participant (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992:99). The interview is regarded as an exchange between at least two people: the interviewer and the interviewee. The interaction between the two arises from the foreknowledge that the interviewer has of the research topic.

It is accepted that the vast majority of people are familiar with the phenomenon of interview. Atkinson and Silverman (1997) state that the United States is referred to as “the interview society”. Denzin and Lincoln (2000:646) claim that everyone has come to be dependent on interviews as a means of data collection. Miller and Salkind (2002:309) define the interview as a “personal contact” between the interviewer and the participant.

In an unstructured interview, participants are permitted to talk openly about the research topic. The researcher does not ask leading questions that could distract or influence the participant’s line of thought. These interviews
generally continue until a saturation point is reached and no additional information is forthcoming.

The data collection from interviews can be recorded in several ways. For the purpose of this study, the researcher made use of an audiotape recorder and field notes. The recorded interviews were outsourced for transcription to a specialist transcriber, as the researcher believed that this would enhance the accuracy of the transcriptions.

It is recommended that the interviewer, that is the researcher, briefly inform the interviewee of the nature and aim of the research, while at the same time assuring him or her of absolute confidentiality. Conducting personal interviews holds many advantages, but I will mention only three. According to Miller and Salkind (2002:310-311), most people are eager to participate. Another advantage is that the information will generally be accurate, because any doubts or misunderstandings on the part of the respondent can be cleared up immediately. The third important advantage is that any sensitive issues can be dealt with more diplomatically and efficiently than through some of the other techniques.

When participants share their experiences with the researcher, their experiences can be confirmed by making a comparative study with the chosen literature. This has been substantiated by Henning et al., (2004:51), who maintains that the experience of the interviewee is confirmed by relating it to the relevant literature.

3.5.1.2.2 Role of researcher

The qualitative researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis. Data are mediated through this human instrument, rather than through inventories, questionnaires, or machines. The researcher physically goes to the people, in this case the academics who are being interviewed, in
their own familiar setting, to observe and record behaviour in its natural environment (Creswell, 1994).

In this study, the researcher took field notes and an observer noted the setting and climate to facilitate triangulation (Mouton, 2002:100). Key (1997:2) re-emphasises several types of triangulation. This process, in terms of which different research methods are employed to test the same finding, is referred to as triangulation and is regarded as a “valuable research strategy” (Babbie, 1992:109).

Keen observation skills are required of the researcher. In addition, Henning et al., (2004:103) postulates, that the strength of an inquiry is not based exclusively on the various methods of data gathering employed, but is also measured by the different approaches used by the researcher in the interpretation of the data gathered. During the phenomenological interviews, the following open-ended questions were posed to participants:

- **What are your perceptions of the academic literacy of your students at this university at present?**
- **How can academic literacy of students best be developed at higher education level?**

3.5.1.3 Data analysis

Data analysis is the act of transforming data, with the aim of extracting information. Creswell (2002:258) states that it is the process in which the researcher tries to make sense of the information. Data analysis assumes different forms, and possibly different names, in different fields. Qualitative data analysis (QDA) refers to the analysis of non-numerical data, for example words, photographs and observations. This has been underscored by Ploeg (1999:1), who asserts that qualitative data analysis “… is not concerned with
statistical analysis, but with analysis of codes, themes, and patterns in the data”.

Once all the fieldwork has been completed, the data need to be analysed and interpreted (Mouton, 2002:108). Mouton states that “analysis involves ‘breaking up’ the data into manageable themes, patterns, trends and relationships”. Before this process can take place, all the recordings need to be transcribed verbatim. This was done for the purpose of this study.

The analysis of qualitative data requires a coding process. Coding is done by examining the detail found in the field notes, together with the information gathered during the interview. Coding is the method used to divide the data into parts by means of a system of categorising.

The analysis of the data of this study was performed in accordance with the eight steps of Tesch, as outlined in Creswell (1994:155).

Step 1: The researcher read through the transcriptions, jotting down possible emerging themes.

Step 2: The first interview that the researcher selected, was the one that appeared to be richest in information. The researcher read it again, in an attempt to discover underlying meanings that presented themselves. These were noted in the margin.

Step 3: The researcher repeated the previous step for the second time, in order to list all the emerging themes. Similar themes were then arranged together into columns as main themes, categories and sub-categories. The researcher repeated this process with all the other transcriptions.
Step 4: The themes were subsequently abbreviated as codes and written next to the linking paragraph within the text. This assisted in identifying additional categories and sub-categories.

Step 5: The researcher made a note of what seemed to be the most descriptive categories, while also grouping together any related themes.

Step 6: Once a final decision was made on the abbreviations for each category, the codes were placed in alphabetical order.

Step 7: A pilot analysis was performed as soon as the data material belonging to each category was grouped in one place.

Step 8: The data was re-coded.

An independent qualitative researcher was requested to perform an independent re-coding of the data, in order to establish if the same categories or themes and sub-categories became evident and could be confirmed. The triangulation of researchers ensured the reliability of the data analysis process that took place.

3.5.2 Phase Two

In Chapter Five, the researcher presented suggestions and recommendations regarding the discussion and interpretation of methods and strategies to develop academic literacy at higher education level, as well as the outcomes of the interviews and subsequent changes necessary to ensure improved academic literacy development.

3.5.2.1 Data collection, data analysis and literature control for Phase Two
The results of the data analysis and literature control in Phase One of the research served as the data to be analysed during Phase Two. This was to enable the researcher to derive relevant recommendations from the findings, to devise a system to best develop academic literacy at higher education level. A literature control once again validated the information presented in this phase.

3.6 MEASURES TO ENSURE TRUSTWORTHINESS OF RESEARCH

Key (1997:3) argues that “researchers need alternative models appropriate to qualitative designs to ensure rigor without sacrificing the relevance of qualitative research”. Guba’s model (1985) for qualitative research was employed to ensure trustworthiness and to confirm the authenticity of the findings. This model describes four general criteria for the evaluation of research, and then defines each from a qualitative perspective.

The four essential criteria, as listed and discussed below, allow for researchers to make judgments. The discussion is followed by a table, which provides a brief overview of the strategies implemented to guarantee the trustworthiness of the study.

3.6.1 Credibility

Krefting (1991) states that credibility corresponds with the concept of internal validity and refers to truth value. Credibility reflects the degree to which the results of a study are factual and is suggestive of whether they truly reflect the goal of the research and the social reality of the participants. It means, in actual fact, that a scientific study has indeed taken place. The word validity means “the truth and correctness of a statement” (Kvale, 2002:302).

According to Key (1997), the participants of qualitative research should provide the majority of the research input. It is therefore incumbent on the
researcher to properly interpret the responses of the participants. In order to achieve this accuracy of interpretation, the researcher should expend enough time to ensure a thorough understanding of the research setting so that data analysis and interpretation are placed in perspective.

Lincoln and Guba (1985:301) propose the following activities:

- *Prolonged engagement and continued observation*; this assists in ensuring that the findings and interpretations are credible.
- *Peer debriefing/examination*; this provides external research control.
- *Referential adequacy*; this entails a comparison between the research findings and the raw data.
- *Member checking*; this refers to checking with participants whether the data gathered was accurate.
- *Triangulation*; this entails, in this study, recording of the interviews by means of an audio-tape. A second researcher should participate in the process, in order to take field notes, enhancing the reliability of the data analysis. Observation should also take place during the interviews.

The following measures were taken in order to ensure the credibility of this research:

The researcher ensured that the prospective participants were fully aware of what was expected of them and demonstrated the necessary expertise and integrity to be able to acquit themselves well of their responsibility as participants. Participants were all academics of repute, thereby lending the necessary credibility to the research study. Discussions were held with an experienced researcher on a regular basis, and findings were discussed with objective colleagues. Examples of the transcribed material are included as an annexure in support of the findings.
For the purpose of triangulation, field notes were taken by the fieldworker during each interview. The interviews were recorded on individual audio cassettes, and the raw data was sent to a specialist for transcription. All the raw data has been kept in a file and is available as an audit trail to compare against the findings. An independent coder was used to perform re-coding. A consensus meeting was held to confirm the results. An in-depth literature control was also done.

3.6.2 Applicability

The second factor for ensuring trustworthiness is applicability. This refers to the degree to which the results of the research “can be applied to other events, settings or groups in the population” (Krefting, 1991:216).

Lincoln and Guba state that applicability is used to determine whether the findings from one study can be applied in other contexts with other participants. Important to the qualitative research approach is that it is conducted in a context where each situation is unique. Krefting (1991:216) argues that findings from a particular research phenomenon or experience can merely be described, but not generalised to other situations.

For this research study, the following strategies were implemented to achieve applicability (Krefting, 1991: 216, 220):

- **Purposive and availability sampling:** this method was used to select appropriate participants for the study. All the participants were carefully selected from an availability sample, according to set criteria, and they were all academics of repute and integrity, with an intrinsic understanding of what academic literacy entails.

- **Thick description of the research:** The study provided a full, detailed and accurate description of the methodology followed. The participants
also gave sufficiently detailed descriptions and accounts of their experiences with students who did not demonstrate the required degree of academic literacy. A great deal of time and energy was expended on the collection of the raw data.

3.6.3 Dependability

Dependability implies that the findings of a research study are consistent and accurate. It is essential to have a detailed description of the research context. Dependability and consistency are allowed for to some extent in an audit trail. This also allows readers to follow the researcher’s path in order to see how conclusions were arrived at.

A further purpose of an audit trail is to guide other researchers who may want to undertake similar research. An audit trail is also known as an ‘inquiry audit’. This enables an independent auditor to scrutinize and examine the research documents, including all the data gathered, the findings, interpretations of the findings, and the final recommendations. After this process, the confirmability of the research can be established.

During the research process, all the raw data collected in the form of field notes and audio recordings were stored, forming an audit trail available for cross-checking. The detailed, semi-structured, personal interviews were independently coded and re-coded. This took place under the supervision of both the supervisor and the independent coder. In order to ensure reliability, the research process, data collection and findings, interpretations, limitations and recommendations were continually controlled by the supervisor. The chosen method was applied throughout the study.

3.6.4 CONFIRMABILITY
Confirmability is also referred to as *neutrality*. This is an intricate process that supports the fact that the data verifies the research findings, recommendations and interpretations (Struwig & Stead, 2001:124). The major technique for establishing confirmability is the confirmability audit (Lincoln & Guba, 1985:319).

In this research, neutrality referred to the degree to which the findings are a function solely of the participants and conditions of the research. The academic literacy expected and experienced at higher education institutions by academics was transmitted through the medium of interviews and was a function solely of these academics.
The following table provides a schematic overview of the strategies implemented to guarantee the trustworthiness of the study:

**TABLE 3.3 MEASURES TO ENSURE TRUSTWORTHINESS OF THE RESEARCH**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CRITERIA</th>
<th>STRATEGY</th>
<th>APPLICATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Credibility</strong></td>
<td>Prolonged engagement</td>
<td>I spent sufficient time with the participants.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(truth value)</td>
<td></td>
<td>A relationship of trust was formed and used as a basis for data gathering.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Peer examination</td>
<td>Continuous discussions were held with an experienced researcher.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>The research findings were discussed with impartial colleagues.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Triangulation</td>
<td>Field notes were taken in the course of all the interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>All the interviews were recorded by means of an audiotape.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>The raw data was transcribed verbatim.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>An independent coder was used.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Re-coding was done.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>A literature control took place.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Referential adequacy</td>
<td>Raw data has been kept and an audit trail is available to compare the findings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Transferability</strong></td>
<td>Purposive sampling</td>
<td>Participants were carefully selected for rich information.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(applicability)</td>
<td>Dense description</td>
<td>Detailed descriptions from the participant's experiences were given.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Applicable quotations will be used.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Time and working contextually</td>
<td>Sufficient time was spent on the collection of raw data.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>All the participants were experienced academics from the same higher education institution.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Interviews took place in the work setting of the participants, that is, in their offices.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.7 ETHICAL MEASURES

Swann and Pratt (2003:198) state that in research, the term *ethics* is used to refer to codes to which researchers are expected to conform in order to protect their research subjects and themselves. It is the responsibility of the researcher, when undertaking a research project, to conform to a morally acceptable code of conduct, as determined by the scientific community (Mouton, 2002:238). Ethical measures include:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependability (consistency)</th>
<th>Code-recode</th>
<th>✓ The raw data (field notes and voice recordings) are available for cross checking.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Triangulation</td>
<td>✓ Information gathered from the individual interviews has been subjected to a literature control. ✓ Field notes were kept.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reliability</td>
<td>✓ The search, data collection and findings, interpretations, limitations and recommendations were continuously controlled by the supervisor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Description of research method</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓ The chosen method was fully described and used throughout the study.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preservation of raw data</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓ All field notes, audiotapes and additional material given to the researcher by the participants have been kept.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Confirmability (neutrality) | Scientific distance | ✓ I made every effort to remain impartial to participants’ responses, so as not to influence them. |
3.7.1 Professional ethics

Research ethics is a serious issue. Obtaining ethical approval for research is an institutional requirement. It is the researcher’s responsibility not to cause harm to participants. In order that participants may be protected, specific rules have been designed. Research should benefit the participant in the research, and also protect society from ignorance.

Searching for the truth is the goal of all scientific research. Researchers have a moral obligation to search for truth and knowledge. This is known as the ‘epistemic imperative’ (Mouton, 2002:239-241). Researchers need to remain impartial and show integrity during the research process. They may not change or falsify data in any way to make their research findings more acceptable. Techniques of analysis and the methodology used, should be clearly explained and readily available for disclosure to interested parties.

In order to ensure that my integrity remained beyond reproach, the following measures were put into place:

- I wrote a formal letter to prospective interviewees, detailing the research question, asking for voluntary participation. This letter forms part of the audit trail.

- Prospective interviewees were also guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity.

- I was accompanied by a second researcher, who also took notes, thus obviating any possibility of falsifying and/or manipulating the data.

- Informed consent was made explicit. Prospective interviewees signed a letter to confirm that they understood the implications of participation in the research project.
3.8 CONCLUSION

This chapter rendered an explicit account of the chosen research design and methodology. The orientation, philosophical foundation and contextual nature of qualitative research were all incorporated in this chapter. The researcher gave a detailed study of the descriptive nature and exploratory character of this type of research. There was an inductive inference, in addition to a holistic description of the qualitative research method.

The actual data collection, role of the researcher and data analysis were described at some length. Measures to ensure the trustworthiness of the research were discussed, referring to the credibility, applicability, dependability and confirmability of the research.

In conclusion, the importance of professional ethics was highlighted. This was followed by a discussion of the results, supported by literature and participant quotations in the following chapter.
4.1 INTRODUCTION

The aim of this study is to establish the perceptions of academics of the academic literacy of their students at higher education level. These perceptions form the basis for the data that will be analysed and subsequently recorded. Henning et al., (2004:107) states that “writing is thinking in print”. The writing up of the process therefore assists in the reasoning of the process. As certain issues are clarified during the writing process, writing thus also represents a tool for reflection (Henning et al., 2004:2).

Chapter Four comprises a discussion of the results that emerged from an analysis of the data collected. This data emanated from unstructured face-to-face interviews conducted with reputable academics from various disciplines at a higher education institution in Nelson Mandela Bay and is therefore the product of interaction between researchers and participants (Temple, Edwards & Alexander, 2006:2). The rationale behind choosing unstructured interviews is that the respondents can converse informally with the interviewer and respond to open-ended questions. At the same time, however, the interviewer may probe for additional information, should the need arise (Conrad & Serlin, 2006:380), but without planting ideas in the minds of participants. This statement is supported by Key (1997:1), who contends that the information forthcoming in an interview can be utilized “to determine or define further questioning”. It also conforms to the “rich descriptions” and “depth of explorations” that characterise qualitative research, as expressed by Myers, cited in Neill (2006:2).

Data gathered in this manner for qualitative research constitutes a wealth of information, as participants are the best judges of their own experiences
(Conrad & Serlin, 2006:361). This is what qualitative research strives for: to capture the lived experiences of people and the meanings and values that they attach to them (Temple, et al., 2006:2). In this chapter, I will write up these descriptions, and in compliance with the principles of qualitative research, the literature will be used inductively, thus serving as a control around which discussions of the research findings will revolve. Denzin and Lincoln (2000:389) substantiate this line of thought, stating that the qualitative researcher uses inductive analysis. The underlying meaning of this is that after having read the literature, a pattern will be located in the literature and then used as a comparative study in the data analysis process.

4.2 Research findings

The interviews conducted, revealed several emerging strands of thought. While some of the themes were confirmed in the literature, the significance of others receded. This displayed a shift in focus from the theoretical aspect, the literature, to the practical aspect, namely the interviews. One such example where this shift is illustrated is the substantive role played by economics in the world of education. Economics is regarded as one of several factors impacting on the education situation in the literature consulted, but it does not warrant discussion as a separate theme. However, the influence of economics loomed large in the interviews, in comparison with the importance accorded to it in the literature. I mention this so that the reader does not interpret certain outcomes as anomalous, but rather remains conscious of the differences, albeit subtle, that separate theory from practice. This is termed the “initial perspectives”, portrayed through the interviews, versus the “evolving perspectives”, as depicted in the literature (Conrad & Serlin, 2006:382).

In qualitative research, the lived experiences of the participants are communicated through the interpretation of these experiences by the researcher. This sharing of experiences is then compared with, and
confirmed or refuted by, the literature review. One could draw a parallel between the interview and the first impression gained of a topic. The researcher does not have pre-knowledge of the perceptions and experiences of the participants. As the themes and categories unfurl, the preliminary lines of thought are often substantiated. On the other hand, these lines of thought can be supplanted by others, hence the reference to “evolving perspectives” (Conrad & Serlin, 2006:382). It is therefore appropriate to regard this as the ‘initial perspectives’ lens through which the experiences are viewed. It is for this reason that researchers have to allow the participants to share their lived experiences and not impose their views by making suggestions or manipulating the data in any way. This is reiterated by Denzin and Lincoln (2000:389), who assert that the most convincing manner in which to relate a story is by remaining close to the data. Miller and Salkind (2002:151) concur, stating that researchers search for the essence of the experience, thereby “setting aside their own prejudgments and experiences” in the process.

I will now embark on the discussion of the themes that have been extracted from the interviews and make reference, where necessary, to specific quotes from the participants, as well as the literature sources, in substantiation.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Sub-themes</th>
<th>Categories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Theme 1. Lecturers perceive students to lack academic literacy skills.</td>
<td>1.1 Students are not independent learners. 1.2 Students do not have a foundation in basic language use. 1.3 Students do not possess critical thinking skills. 1.4 There is a cultural dissonance emanating from diversity.</td>
<td>1.1.1 Students cannot locate information for assignments. 1.4.1 Diversity in the classroom. 1.4.2 Diverse cultures of the university. 1.4.3 Lack of exposure to technology. 1.4.4 Lack of exposure to higher level written assignments. 1.4.5 Lack of exposure to different teaching strategies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme 2. Inequalities of the past contribute to present academic literacy problems.</td>
<td>2.1 Unequal distribution of educational resources.</td>
<td>2.1.1 Lack of quality education. 2.1.2 The impact of socio-economics on education.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme 3. The need for change in a changing education environment exists.</td>
<td>3.1 Time for reflection.</td>
<td>3.1.1 Lecturers do not critically reflect on own practices. 3.1.2 Discrepancy between teaching and learning styles.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme 4. Academic literacy comprises several aspects.</td>
<td>4.1 Language shapes thinking, reading and writing.</td>
<td>4.1.1 Different ‘languages’ students have to contend with. 4.1.2 Reading and writing as aspects of academic literacy.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
THEME 1: Lecturers perceive students to lack academic literacy skills

On the whole, lecturers perceived students as under-prepared for furthering their post-school education. A closer inspection of the term *under-prepared* reveals that, in the eyes of the lecturers, students did not demonstrate the appropriate cognitive or affective skills expected and required at higher education level. Lecturers regarded this as a deficiency located within the students. The possibility that the deficiency actually lay within themselves, did not warrant consideration.

This tag of “disadvantaged” and “under-prepared” resonates in research conducted by Tisani (1996:2), who describes how certain students were regarded as not fitting the mould at the higher education institution where she taught. The concept of under-preparedness is also underpinned by Hendrich and Schepers (2004:250), who state that it is “progressively being experienced at South African higher education institutions”.

I want to raise awareness, therefore, that in this investigation the student profile is built on lecturers’ perceptions of what constitutes students who are prepared for university life. In the interviews, lecturers displayed an intransigence to reflect on the effectiveness and appropriateness of their own teaching styles, with reference to the changing student intake. Schroeder (1993:3) outlines the differences between the preferred teaching styles of lecturers and the learning styles preferred by the new intake of students. He emphasises that these differences are responsible for much of the frustration experienced by both students and lecturers. It is obvious, therefore, that a changing student profile calls for new teaching styles, strategies and methods. Importantly, it also calls for some honest and objective self-examination by lecturers to assess whether a change in attitude towards their students would not enhance their learning.
Sub-theme 1.1: Students are not independent learners

Category 1.1.1: Students cannot locate information for assignments

Of the academics interviewed, several were in agreement that students did not demonstrate the maturity required at higher education level to attain success. For example, it transpired that students could not locate the information required for assignments and tasks independently. They found it quite acceptable to depend on others (in this case, the University’s library staff) to institute a search on their behalf. Leaving the search to others is equivalent to handing over the reins to someone else.

One participant commented: “Some will try Google (laughs) and be satisfied. Others will come straight for assistance. They are happy for me to look for relevant journal articles and they will then go and use the material to get their assignments”. Students were offered courses and training sessions to develop these empowering skills. University staff responsible for skills development courses advertised these sessions via e-mail. They found that “students then respond to those advertisements, but often on the day of the training they do not come and attend the training session”. Those students who did respond and attend, benefit greatly from these training sessions. She stated: “Students are always very positive about the experience … because of what they’ve learnt at such sessions, because they can then apply it directly to their academic work”.

The participant highlighted the need for change in the students’ approach to accessing information: “The students must be able to find the information themselves. They must know where to look for the information. They must know how to find the information”. According to this participant, students did not possess that metacognition alertness that translated into academic aptitude should the need arise. This also became apparent in the literature
study. Most learners prefer concrete examples to abstract thoughts and examples. Lombard and Grosser (2004:213) state that many learners cannot “evaluate, classify and analyse”, meaning that they cannot form a judgment, which reflects an inability to think independently. They cannot construct their own knowledge either.

This lack of independence re-emerged in another interview: “You have to go sometimes to the point of spoonfeeding them”. The interviewee then added: “they lack that metacognition skill that they need”. Winberg (1999:168) also raises the metacognition issue. Citing research, she states “that metacognition awareness is a key element in proficient reading”. Lack of this metacognition alertness thus detracts from the student’s reading proficiency and, in turn, the ability to learn independently. Fisher (2001:11) asserts that metacognition is our ability to think about our thinking, and that this metacognition is “unique to human thinking”. An inability to portray this metacognition reveals the lack of a facet of critical thinking that is inherently human. This lack, in turn, reduces the students’ potential of advancing towards academic literacy. Critical thinking is one of the steps that constitute academic literacy, hence a flaw in this area impedes the process of higher order thinking.

I argue that it is impractical on the part of academics to expect students to display this independence, when they have not been guided towards it throughout their school careers or university preparation programmes. This argument is based on the assertion that the accomplishment of effective literacy skills is implicit in tertiary education (Holder, et al., 1999:20).

Studies confirm, however, that while many students may not possess these skills on enrolment at university, they do manage to graduate without having become adept at these skills (Holder, et al., 1999:20). It does not augur very well for higher education if such an essential element of academic literacy is still lacking after years in an academic environment. Academics should
instead shift their focus to designing strategies that will assist students in achieving this independence.

Sub-theme 1.2: Students do not have a foundation in basic language use

I wish to clarify at the outset of this discussion about language and its role in the academic literacy process that language per se is not responsible for students’ literacy problems. English Second Language students find the language problematic, but it is what we accomplish that is significant, for example, making an oral presentation or writing a paragraph.

Kame’enui, Carnine, Dixon, Simmons and Coyne (2002:45) state that the area of language is where students generally encounter problems that are related to failure. Limited language proficiency, therefore, is a disabling factor, and students who fall into this category will of necessity experience academic challenges.

One of the interviewees recalled how her own research findings made her realize “that it was irrational to give no value to the knowledge of mother tongue and insist on a third language being taught when children didn’t even understand the first language of the school”. This was a reference to isiXhosa-speaking learners, who were attending a school where the LOLT (language of learning and teaching) was English. Afrikaans, the second language of the school, would then be the third language of the isiXhosa-speaking learners.

The interviewee admitted: “So they were very, very severely disadvantaged”. With the introduction of isiXhosa at a first language level for mother-tongue speakers, and at a second language level for non-isiXhosa speakers, the situation changed dramatically. She stated: “That made an absolutely radical difference to the academic output of the children who were otherwise marginalized in the school”. This increased their confidence and “really
reinforced for me the role of language in academic literacy … increased their ability to achieve”. She elaborated, “language is really our social means of thought”.

Lemmer, Meier and Van Wyk (2006:51) assert that students from a multicultural background are rich in “cognitive, social and linguistic skills”. As these skills have been developed in their mother tongue, and are therefore not readily recognized, educators assume that students do not possess them. Lack of language proficiency places academic knowledge beyond the reach of students, thus hampering their progress (Lemmer, et al., 2006:51).

One participant claimed that students struggled “to properly formulate a sentence. They often omitted the beginning of a sentence, like they won’t say ‘the cat jumps over the wall’; they just say ‘cat jumps the wall’”. The participant underlined the implication of this for their formal assignments. “You know, you use these short terms, because you’re summarizing, but that’s the way they will present their work in professional or academically set assignments”. There was also the perception that “they don’t get this academia kind of way of seeing things, or it’s even worse, … they can’t think beyond the, the er, what they’re reading”.

Delpit (1988:293) equates the use of different registers to different modes of eating. There is the informal mode that is most common, at a picnic, for example. Then there is the formal register that “is more like a formal dinner”. People dress up for this dinner; there are rules; gleaming cutlery, bone china, and people “speak only formal English at this meal” (Delpit, 1988:294).

This is how an academic assignment should be presented. The way the assignment is ‘dressed’, should be indicative of the occasion: an academic occasion; not in untidy writing, but in beautiful print, with formal English, to underscore that it is a special occasion. It is an academic assignment. Once students appreciate the differences between various registers, they will realise
that the use of formal language will enhance their assignments. There is indeed a place for informal language, but academic work should be properly ‘dressed’ in academic discourse.

Sub-theme 1.3: Students do not possess critical thinking skills

Linked to this state of under-preparedness, was the students’ reticence to question. Some participants accepted this as a direct result of how the lecturer/student relationship in the class was perceived by the students. Students could not apply knowledge, because they did not question that knowledge. One participant recalled, “Let’s take language development, and they will read the processes of Piaget, and they can re-give it to you verbatim, but they cannot apply it”. Literature cautions against this memorisation without attribution of meaning. Epstein (2002:3) argues that: “Education is about using knowledge, not acquiring it”.

Another interviewee claimed, “I think a lot of schools are in a position where students don’t really question, they don’t really question what’s happening. We spend a lot of time on questions that we can investigate in class and that takes up a lot longer than what they’re used to, because they say, ‘Why do we have to come up with a question to investigate? Why don’t you just give us a question to do?’” The participant then argued: “Science … it’s looking at certain things around you and questioning why something is”.

One interviewee emphasised that students should be in a position to make information that they accessed, their own. This could be construed as evaluating the information that they find. Evaluating in turn entails judging, questioning, casting a new slant on what they find, so their understanding of the subject matter is also represented in that assignment. If they do not question, they cannot evaluate the subject matter with the authority required of one at higher education level. Against the backdrop of academic literacy, students should approach all information “from a position of strategic doubt”
Fisher (2001:78) contends that “a question is an invitation to think and to respond”. The response should be equally concerned with the student’s thinking as it is to finding the right answer. As researcher, I suggest that this idea of a question being an invitation to think, should be made explicit to students, as they may not consider it to be so. The fact that students do not question, may primarily stem from their self-consciousness to express themselves in a second language. This reluctance is then interpreted as low levels of thinking, laziness and passiveness by the lecturer.

Secondly, it needs to be highlighted that critical thinking cannot be paralleled with intelligence, that is, a lack of critical thinking ability does not mean that a student lacks intelligence. Intelligence has traditionally been viewed as a property of the brain; something that we inherit. Critical thinking, on the other hand, involves “the use of reason and the generation of ideas” (Fisher, 2001: 4-5). The global job market is such that employees are expected to cope and demonstrate the ability to draw on their “critical thinking and problem-solving skills” (Lombard & Grosser, 2004:212).

A participant maintained that the concept of critical literacy “is problematic, because lecturers at the University always expect to see learners with all those critical thinking skills”. He argued that these skills were not taught at primary schools, and “in many high schools that is not actually taught”. He continued, “My conviction is that people always think that when you get to university, you should have been trained how to think critically, and yet that is not the case”.

The same participant elaborated, “Some people also think that the word analysis is actually kept for researchers, post-grad students”. He then
explained, in great detail, how he had introduced the concept of analysis to his students and narrated how he had familiarised them with the concept. He then proceeded to discuss synthesis and the importance of empathy. The participant emphasised that critical thinking skills could be taught. He asked the students: *How would you feel if you were a student in Iraq, whilst there’s a lot of war taking place there?* This is how he inculcated a sense of critical thinking and an ability to identify with others in his students. He reiterated the necessity for having these skills, as they contributed “towards critical thinking and helping our learners to become critical at the university”.

The participant acknowledged that most students had not been exposed to thinking critically and that lecturers had to revisit their expectations. He stated, “*We are unfair! We need to teach those skills to the students*”. He was adamant that “*People need to be aware that students do not have critical thinking skills*” and “*that they (the skills) should actually be taught*”.

An argument regularly proffered in defence of this, is that in certain cultures, older members of the community are not questioned by younger members, as a mark of respect. These ‘older members’ would include the teachers. Blunt (2005:1028) supports this aversion to questioning on the grounds of age. In traditional African culture, challenging people in more senior positions is not permitted. In Botswana, for example, age is rooted “in a set of ancestral relationships” (Harber, 1997:47). Ageing is regarded as a process through which the individual moves closer to death and the ancestors. As the ancestors are perceived as the cornerstone of society, the adults, by virtue of their wisdom and experience, enjoy a superior status. Younger people will therefore always be in a subordinate position to their seniors.

So, while lecturers may regard African students as not being actively involved during lectures, “they were socialised not to engage in critical debate with lecturers” (Blunt, 2005:1028). As a result, they still regard their teachers as their main source of knowledge. Powell (1999:104) maintains that knowledge
is often simply conveyed from educators to learners who have not been urged to dispute knowledge in the teaching environment. It is therefore incumbent on lecturers to explain to their students, in the education setting, that it is sound practice to question, and that it would in fact be welcomed if they do so. In this way, they direct students in their pursuit of academic literacy.

Sub-theme 1.4: There is a cultural dissonance emanating from diversity

Category 1.4.1: Diversity in the classroom

A factor contributing to student under-preparedness is a lack of exposure to people from diverse backgrounds and cultures. Some students have never associated with anyone outside their own society.

One interviewee told of two students (a young boy and girl) who had been trained as waitrons for part-time positions in a restaurant. Their backgrounds were similar: Both were isiXhosa-speaking, from the same geographical area, same age, grade and community. The telling difference, however, was that the boy had attended a typical township school, whereas the girl had attended a former Model C school. As a result, the boy had no concept of life other than that in the township, whereas the girl had been exposed to different modes of life and customs. During the training, he was obviously at a disadvantage, and the girl was quick to detect this. By her own admission, his lack of exposure was the source of his ignorance – “he doesn’t know what chips or sautéed potatoes are” she said. “He doesn’t know what prawns are”. His sheltered lifestyle was limiting his opportunities.

The young girl attributed her ability to cope in a diverse society to having been educated at a predominantly white school. In this way, she had been exposed to other cultures and different family structures and customs, which advantaged her tremendously, because the university culture was predominantly Western. Delpit (1988: 283) underlined this by stating that
institutions invariably reflected the dominant culture, namely the culture of those in power, the underlying reason being the negative view taken of minority cultures. This perception is reinforced by Lemmer et al., (2006:83), who claim that studies conducted in the United States have revealed that “educators of this dominant cultural group” do not hold out high ideals for students from minority cultures. The relevance of this for academic literacy is that students from the upper and middle classes “have all the accoutrements of the culture of power” (Delpit, 1988:283). They do not have to adapt to another culture and are therefore advantaged.

Category 1.4.2: Diverse cultures of the university

In references to lack of exposure to other cultures, it is appropriate to also incorporate the culture of the university, as this was often mentioned during the interviews.

One of the participants maintained that when students entered university straight from school, they had to face and grapple with many new issues. The participant listed acclimatising to the culture of the university as one of these. He stated, “When most of the students come to university, sometimes they have problems about socialising and acclimatising themselves to the university climate”.

The university environment is entirely foreign to most students. At high school life was determined by being told and the ringing of the bell. As one participant observed: The bell rings for them to go to class; the bell rings for them to go out, and all that stuff”. From the school environment in which they spend twelve or more years as the subject of rigid discipline and authority and in which success is ensured by obedience and compliance, they enter higher education, where they are regarded as young adults and expected to make their own decisions, display a critical and questioning attitude in the lecture-room, and study independently and successfully, in between all the freedom
and distractions of campus life. The participant perceived the second level of literacy, that is, cultural literacy, to be the most difficult. He argued, “I think this is the area where they have to battle first”. This is “because they are meeting different kinds of people, from different kinds of backgrounds”, in class and in their residences. Suddenly, they see themselves in relation to other cultures, and their identity is viewed in a new light.

In view of the cosmopolitan make-up of our population, diversity plays a prominent role, especially in education. Lemmer, et al, (2006:8) support this in their statement that a multicultural society requires an education system that recognises diversity. Coping with this diversity demands tolerance and growth, otherwise it could result in cultural dissonances. A lack of exposure to cultural diversity could possibly be regarded as an inhibiting factor. The aforementioned participant stated that it “inhibits them (the students) from probably performing in a more quality, academic kind of standard”. Ignorance of the culture of the university (and others) subsides “when they meet around” until they eventually “blend together”. In this way, acceptance of the culture(s) of the university leads to a sense of belonging within the community of the university. However, developing such acceptance and integration is another major challenge facing students exiting a school environment that lacked diversity.

**Category 1.4.3: Lack of exposure to technology**

Cultural dissonance can also be caused by the lack of exposure of mainly disadvantaged students to modern technology, particularly computer technology. As one participant stated students expect library staff to search for information to do assignments. Many students are not cognizant with the mechanics of electronic and Internet searches, impacting on the speed and success with which they complete their academic tasks. The participant stated, this is probably “a huge adjustment for them” and “I would assume that if they never had the exposure”; they “need to catch up with those skills”.
Their lack of exposure to modern technology is causing students to lag behind academically. I argue that when a country is highly mechanized, its citizens should be sufficiently technologically literate to avail themselves of the many benefits of this mechanization. An inability to do so will impact on their self-concept and create a cycle of negativity. South African students from disadvantaged backgrounds are therefore still held in bonds of ignorance of industrial and economic progress in spite of having been liberated politically.

1.4.4: Lack of exposure to higher level written assignments

A lack of exposure to assignments that require higher level thinking skills, and reading beyond the text, is all the more detrimental to students who are still disadvantaged by the legacy of the apartheid regime. Historically disadvantaged students are faced with a tremendous backlog in terms of quality education and resources. Any additional form of deprivation would therefore weigh heavily on said students. One interviewee stated, “that in many instances, when they have to write an assignment, they will basically just plagiarize”. Students will write an assignment without having a thorough understanding of the requirements and how to approach it. He stated, “So they will read the sources and then sometimes copy information directly from the sources and sometimes … not even understand what the assignment expected of them”.

Language proficiency again presents itself as a key element. The interviewee stated that students’ language proficiency was inadequate and seemed to be deteriorating. The fact that many students have attended “better” schools, in that learner populace is no longer determined according to racial criteria, has not ameliorated the problem. The interviewee speculated that language proficiency was a problem in all schools, because “what we’re discovering now, is the newer groups coming in, they tend to be poorer in their use of language compared to people who were here previously”. It was mentioned in
another interview that students did not read; this could possibly compound the language problem. In one interview, reference was made to “an overload of information available on the Internet”. If information is readily available electronically, students can construe this as a reason not to read, as it is accepted that reading is time-consuming, especially if there is no real need to do so. He made reference to an assignment handed in by fourth-year students, “but I’m telling you, you can ask any member of staff; it was an absolute nightmare!” Even though the students had been given the better part of a year to complete the assignment, the quality was below the expected standard. He stated, “even after spending time with some of the students, and even after mentoring them, I found that some of them still were not able to grasp certain concepts”.

The participant ascribed this absence of quality in a written assignment to the way language was being taught. “The construction and analysis of sentences may have fallen away”, he stated. “What seems to predominate, seems to be the focus on the communicative approach, which is a good approach”. The interviewee argued, however, “there is some room, I think, for grammar as well, because the grammar will help them to improve their writing skills”. He admitted to seeing “very little grammar being taught, by his students, during the recent teaching practice”. He suggested, “that there needs to be a close connection between writing and grammar”.

I wish to point out that the teaching of grammar is prescribed in the language curriculum. One of the learning outcomes is language structure and use (RNCS Policy, 2002: 80). This is detailed as, “the learner will know and be able to use the sounds, words and grammar of the language to create and interpret texts” (RNCS Policy, 2002:80). Teachers who do not teach grammar therefore do not comply with this instruction, thus risking disciplinary action by the Department of Education.
Fisher (2001:197) maintains that writing can enhance thinking skills. Writing enables the reader to put certain things on paper, and not memorise extensively. Writing, in reality, concretises the abstract, for instance, an idea (the abstract) can be written down and developed (made concrete). Writing is a form of expression. Fisher (2001:197) postulates, “to see children writing is to see intelligence at work”. This is indicative of using writing as a platform for cognitive development. Failure to master the art of academic writing by, for instance, not acknowledging sources in their essays, underlines students’ inability to construct knowledge in their writing (Hendricks & Quinn, 2000:1).

1.4.5 Lack of exposure to different teaching strategies

One participant claimed that students from historically disadvantaged schools were lagging behind their counterparts at ex-Model C schools with regard to language use. He stated, “There’s a very big difference in terms of what happens in your previously disadvantaged schools and your ex-Model C schools”.

The participant stated that the progress of Second Language speakers who had attended these ex-Model C schools was more rapid, “They’re also able to express themselves better through the medium of English”. He reasoned that in these schools “they use the target language on a regular basis, because they come into contact with their friends who speak English”. Another contributing factor was “the teachers who are teaching them, are only using English. All their teachers are English-speaking; no kind of mixing of languages that you would find in your previously disadvantaged schools”. He stated that in the latter schools, “a teacher may tend, fifty per cent of the time, to use the vernacular language and fifty per cent of the time to use English”. He contended that in many instances, when learners talked together in their groups, they conversed in the vernacular. He perceived this as a barrier, “a barrier in the sense that they don’t then have a command of the target language, that is, English”. He underlined this by stating that teachers also
felt more comfortable using the vernacular, because they could also express themselves better in their mother tongue than in English.

At ex-Model C schools, the learners had evidently been exposed to teachers whose home language was English. These teachers had “the ability to extend the learners’ vocabulary and are able to take the learners to a higher level of thinking and a deeper understanding of the language in terms of the nuances of the English language”. If we examine the situation at previously disadvantaged schools “teachers who are Second Language speakers, may not have the, er, confidence or the ability to be such good models in terms of taking their learners to a deeper level”. He continued, “So that could actually result in learners who have the better models performing better and also speaking more fluently, as well”.

This interviewee claimed that students were exposed to passages that lent themselves to reflection. They could then “bring in their own views, critically analyse and in this way the cognitive ability of the learner would then be at a higher level”. This stemmed from their exposure to “tasks which are on a higher level, rather than lower level kinds of activities”.

The participant stated emphatically that “what you find happening is, there’s a mismatch between the two systems. Although we say we have one education system, but you go into your previously disadvantaged schools, and the kind of tasks that your teachers expect learners to do, are on a very lower level”. In this way, “the learner’s cognitive ability is not being developed”. In response to a question from the interviewer, the interviewee stated that a lack of exposure to more difficult passages and higher order questions was contributing to the academic challenges experienced by students at higher education institutions, “because, ultimately, they were only taught to think in one way, and that is to respond to the teacher’s questions in the way that the teacher wanted them to respond to it, without them having to question and interrogate”. This resulted in students feeling “stifled, and in some instances,
some of the students feel demoralized, especially if they haven’t had experience of doing this when they were at school”.

“In terms of exposure” the interviewee continued, “you find that in your ex-Model C schools, your learners are exposed to critical thinking … and they have to look beyond the passage”. In contrast, “they don’t tap into the creative and critical thinking skills of your learners in your disadvantaged areas”. This statement is controversial because in the recent Grade 9 CASS moderation, evidence to the contrary came to light. Incompetent teachers may be found both in ex-Model C schools, and in historically disadvantaged schools.

He reiterated that learners’ lack of exposure to English was their undoing, because when they entered university life everything was in English, causing “a mismatch between what they’ve learnt in the past and what they’re able to do now”. The views of this academic were somewhat outdated. In the writing component of English First Additional Language, Grade 9 learners had to conduct an investigation. They were given a framework and then had to complete the unit on their own, from conducting an information search to writing a polished piece (CASS: 2007).

THEME 2: Inequalities of the past contribute to present educational problems.

The theme of the inequitable distribution of resources has been raised in theme 1, but because of the inter-relatedness of the lecturer / student / education situation, an overlap is inevitable.
Sub-theme 2.1: Unequal distribution of educational resources

Category 2.1.1: Lack of quality education

South Africa is still a very young democracy and the inequalities of the past have not been eradicated completely. Consequently, there was a strong sentiment among participants that the oppressive practices of the apartheid era still exerted considerable influence on present-day issues in general, and education in particular.

A concern about the lack of quality education emerged strongly from the interviews. One participant stated, “I must really say, I’m amazed at the (low) quality of writing that comes from them in terms of answering questions; structure of sentences, the use of language”. The participant elaborated, “I mean, to have people not being able to spell properly, or write sentences accurately, you know, structure their sentences, then where are we going to be?”

This low language level has its roots in the past. We have subsequently inherited it because of the unequal distribution of educational resources. One specific problem identified, was the inability of students to spell correctly. The participant felt very strongly that correct spelling was an important component of written language proficiency. The subject area of the participant demanded precision: a word wrongly spelt, could have disastrous consequences – “there might be some other medication that has a similar spelling, which the patient could be allergic to”. Against this background, she regarded the ability to spell as imperative. The participant felt that if this deficiency (of not being able to spell) had been highlighted earlier, lecturers would not still be wrestling with the problem.

Earlier in this interview, the participant had stated that the schools in the Northern Areas of Nelson Mandela Bay, had to cope with unacceptably high
teacher:learner ratios. This made it extremely unlikely that any weakness in a learner would be identified early. As a result no corrective measures would be implemented to benefit the learner. This was in direct contrast to the situation at the former Model C school that her children were attending. Children at this school were divided into manageable numbers, which eased the load of the teacher. In addition, this school was well resourced and fully equipped to meet the needs of its learners, in sharp contrast to the situation at the school in the Northern Areas.

She stated that her son was attending an ex-Model C school and, earlier in the interview, had rated it much higher than a school in the Northern Areas, yet she was still concerned about his semantic and syntactic use of language. As an official of the Department of Education, I want to highlight that there is a perception among parents, especially from historically disadvantaged population groups, that all ex-Model C schools are representative of quality education. This mindset can be equated to what the well-known African writer, Ngugi wa’ Thionga (1986), terms being ‘colonized’. It is one of the legacies of apartheid, whereby being white was regarded as being superior. Even though apartheid is no longer on the South African statute, many people still cling to this fallacy. According to wa’ Thionga (1986), people’s minds need to be decolonized in order to dispel this myth.

This participant took her argument further, stating that, if anything, life for these people has deteriorated under the new, democratic government. She said: “Your people in the Northern suburbs, some of them [sic], it has become worse for them”. This disparaging discourse that emerges in phrases like “these people, your people” is indicative of the lack of transformation evident after more than a decade of democracy. This theory of deterioration is substantiated by Morrow (2007:7), who posits that the quality of education for the majority “might actually have deteriorated”, and this in the face of the democratic government’s efforts to train and retrain teachers in scarce fields, at considerable expense.
These statements about lack of quality in the current school education system is a cause for concern and places a question mark against our integrity as educationists. It is suggested that this perceived lack of quality be addressed as a matter of urgency. Our education policies are rated amongst the best in the world, but they do not “become reality in our classrooms” (Lombard & Grosser, 2004:213). Wilhelm, Baker and Dube (2001:1) support this view of theories that are “underarticulated, unrecognized and underspecified”. These theories are meant to inform teacher planning, but are never really made explicit. They add that if our theories are stated clearly, then our teaching can be adapted to the advantage of all stakeholders. Morrow (2007:6) reiterates the ambivalence of our universally admired set of education policies and “lack of implementation”. He attributes this wide margin between theory and practice to factors such as the failure of some educational institutions to embrace transformation. The other key indicator is the inability to put our policies into practice capably (Morrow, 2007:6).

This lack of quality in education is perpetuated at university level. Students do not take preparing for assignments seriously. “I found that many of them go to web and cut and paste and not know”. Another interviewee felt “we’ve really done a disservice to a whole generation …”. This stemmed from an inadequate focus on quality. One participant felt that the fact that students passed, despite poor performance, was unacceptable, “You can’t just allow people to go through from grade to grade, with the same type of errors recurring … recurring”.

Kame’enui et al., (2002:28) postulate that it is difficult to maintain “consistent high-quality instruction”. This is, firstly, because no government department has unlimited educational resources. Another very real contributing factor is the changing student intake, especially in terms of diversity. These factors impact on the quality of education provided, in the sense that educators have
to accommodate under-prepared students, yet continue to achieve the expected success rate despite the many challenges that these students bring.

Conversely, academics should engage in reflection on their own teaching practice, for example through self-assessment, peer assessment, encouraging students to engage in lively dialogue, and generally establishing rapport with their students. The feedback given will enable academics to assess what impact their teaching has.

Category 2.1.2: The impact of socio-economics on education

One of the threads that emerged very strongly in this study was the significant role played by economics in the education situation. In one interview, the participant quoted Bernstein to underpin her theory that ‘education is a middle class enterprise’. Implicit in this is the conviction that economics cannot be totally excluded from the attainment of academic success. Throughout the interviews, there was a pertinent focus on the determining influence of the economic position of people.

It is acknowledged that children from a middle-class background have access to the parental stimulation and all the amenities that ensure a privileged start in life. These include having stories read to them ‘even before they could sit’. They have colouring books and crayons, and know how to hold a pencil. In short, they are familiar with the rudiments of learning on arrival at school. The participant stated that ‘those are all things that middle-class families emphasise’.

Should one compare this with a child from a less privileged environment, then ‘that child arrives at any school with massive disadvantages’. What adds to the disparity in home conditions is that there is no reinforcement of what has been taught at school in the sub-economic home. This statement is supported by Kame’enui, et al. (2002:3), who maintain that children from
middle- and upper-middle class families receive strong parental backing in their academic activities. Children from lower income families rely largely on schools to advance academically and for ultimate achievement. This participant puts forth a strong argument, leaning heavily on Bernstein, on ‘how the class system functions,’ maintaining that the education system is developed in a way that marginalises learners. Economics is obviously a deficit factor that is established long before school readiness is reached.

Bernstein’s concept of education as a middle-class enterprise, as quoted by one participant, is extrapolated to illustrate how economics is instrumental in the creation of social class, and this class system in turn “has affected the distribution of knowledge” (Bernstein, 1971:175).

This deficit factor becomes even more pronounced at higher education level. One participant highlighted that university policies were interwoven with economics. In certain courses, a minimum number of students was required. Assuming the required number was twenty and fifteen good students enrolled, then the institution “will push … we’ll shove in another five just to get twenty, regardless of capability”. The participant perceived “policy of university to be denigratory to these students”. She added that the administrators admitted to be looking for numbers rather than quality. Conversely, good students will be excluded if minimum requirements of numbers are not met.

THEME 3: The need for change in a changing education environment exists

Sub-theme 3.1: Time for reflection

Category 3.1.1: Lecturers do not critically reflect on own practices

What emerged decidedly from the interviews was that there was very little introspection relating to their own teaching practices on the part of lecturers.
One participant stated, “Students think that I must perform” and “that I’m there to entertain them”.

By the lecturers’ own admission, students did not meet their expectations. The question arises: Who should revise their approach: the lecturers or the students? Broadened student access to higher education has resulted in the student intake becoming more representative of the general South African population, thereby changing the character of these institutions. Schroeder (1993:5) emphasises this in his statement that the larger numbers entering university “reflect the makeup of the population” of the country.

Given the differentiated backgrounds of these students, it logically flows that an adaptation in teaching styles will go far to narrow the gap between lecturers and new students. Many lecturers still regard the education process as one where the informed minister to the ones who need to be informed. Even those teachers who employ novel methods, acknowledge experiencing a sense of diffidence when not in charge of the situation. In the literature, one teacher stated pointedly that he did not believe his students were learning when engaged in independent activities (Hargreaves, 1994:220).

Delpit (1988:282) relates how “issues of power are enacted in classrooms”. It is accepted that teachers and lecturers and their students have an unequal relationship, as the one group accompanies the other to adulthood, and thus enjoys a higher status. This image of the teacher as representing a figure of power is reflected in the attitude of the teacher (discussed in the text) who felt uncomfortable when he did not control events (Hargreaves, 1994:220).

The significance of this for academic literacy is that the educational experiences of students are limited in view of the dynamics of power (Luna, 2002:601). This will pose a major stumbling-block should lecturers remain recalcitrant in their reluctance to change their practices. Luna (2002) enlarges on this image of power, recounting how one student feared for her relationship
with the professor and subsequently for the successful completion of her grade after a conflicting situation had arisen between them.

In his self-reflection, November (2005:1132) reasons that education, which includes both teaching and learning in this context, is a process that needs constant reflection and monitoring. There is a need for introspection at regular intervals to assess its innate value. This does not in any way minimise the face value of the education situation; it means, instead, that both the outward and inward values of education should be reviewed. This is referred to as the \textit{extrinsic} and \textit{intrinsic} values of the education process (November, 2005:1132).

Self-reflection on the part of academics is essential if they are to stay on top of their field. It transpired in several interviews that students lacked analytical skills, but that no tangible measures had been put in place by academics to remedy this shortcoming. Instead, lecturers bemoaned the fact that the newer students were even more poorly equipped than the previous ones. Self-reflection was instrumental in November’s discovery (2005:1133) that his own teaching style was authoritative. This was because he perceived himself to be an expert in his field in the classroom and, as a result, had become intolerant of questioning.

While purporting to be “an advocate for change in apartheid South Africa”, he did not realise “his teaching practice was paradoxical”, thereby inadvertently upholding the apartheid system of teaching (November, 2005:1133). It was only after a course in metatheory that he became aware of his own conflicting approach to teaching and the subsequent need to transform from within. This, however, entailed a major paradigm shift, both cognitively and affectively.

By recounting his initial perspectives of himself as traditional lecturer, followed by his evolving perspectives of himself as reflective practitioner, November (2005) progressed from the operational literacy level to the critical literacy
level. There is a need for more of this type of deliberation, where academics take the route of introspection and establish whether their teaching styles have to be adapted to suit the new intake of higher education students. It is only through self-questioning and an openness to change that they will correct the prevailing teaching /learning mismatch.

3.1.2 Discrepancy between teaching and learning styles

Schroeder (1993:3) examines the preferred learning styles of students. Instead of lecturers lamenting how convenient life would be “if students were more like me” they should instead try and match their styles to those of students. A study of learning styles employed by students reveals that two styles appear to dominate: sensing and intuitive. Sensing is dominant among the new intake of students, while lecturers are proponents of intuitive learning styles. The differences between these learning styles, as indicated in the table below, cause enormous frustration among students and lecturers alike. Lecturers should be prepared to accommodate students’ preferred learning styles, in this way capitalizing on students’ strengths.

**TABLE 4.2: Difference in learning styles of lecturers and students** (adapted from Schroeder, 1993).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sensing learning styles (students)</th>
<th>Intuitive learning styles (lecturers)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Direct, concrete experiences preferred</td>
<td>Abstract, imaginative possibilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus on specific</td>
<td>Global thinkers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need high degree of structure</td>
<td>Open-ended instruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack confidence in academic ability</td>
<td>Demonstrate a high degree of autonomy in learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low tolerance for ambiguity</td>
<td>Comfortable with complex, ambiguous ideas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependent on others for ideas</td>
<td>Critical, independent thinkers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need a practice to theory approach</td>
<td>Prefer a theory to practice approach</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Yet, one cannot generalize as exceptions surface in all spheres. Some students may, for instance, lean towards intuitive learning styles, while some lecturers may favour sensing learning styles. With the broadened student participation in higher education, it is logical that the student profile will change. Whereas students and lecturers were previously drawn from the same population groups, this is no longer the case. The massification of higher education is responsible for the changing student profile. Lecturers and students hold views of knowledge and learning that differ considerably. Schroeder (1993:7) refers to this as a mismatch, “an increasing disparity between faculty and students”.

This mismatch (Schroeder, 1993:7) between students and lecturers’ styles has its origin in the granting of access to students at higher education institutions when they are not adequately prepared to meet the challenges of university life. These students have been subordinated to a system of traditional teaching at school and now find themselves in a world where they have to demonstrate remarkable academic competence. Harber (1997:49) emphasises the power wielded by tradition. He states teachers still conduct their teaching along the same lines that they were taught, while lecturers base their teacher training model(s) on the traditional model, in terms of which teachers talk and students listen. Students have their own learning styles and teachers, after years of teaching, have their own teaching styles. Terry (2002:155) substantiates this when stating that students show a preference for teaching styles that match their learning styles. The onus is on the teachers to adapt their presentation methods to accommodate this new intake of students. This will go a long way to bridge the chasm that currently separates teacher and student.

Despite the development of various new teaching models, recent research by leaders in the field (Lombard & Grosser, 2004:213) reveals that,
The focus is still on the ‘telling method’;

Hardly any time is spent on knowledge construction and the development of thinking skills;

Teachers are worried that they will not complete the curriculum if they involve themselves in developing thinking skills;

The majority of lecturers and teachers lack these skills themselves.

A pattern is thus established where the teacher is still the dominant figure in the classroom, transmitting knowledge to students who eagerly absorb it. The final outcome is students who are under-prepared to pursue their academic work independently. Kamper (2004:234) states that research is hampered by this lack of quality in education. He cites “poorly prepared students with regard to language proficiency” as one of the compromising factors. This can be interpreted to mean that students do not meet the requirements of language. Obviously this calibre of education will not yield candidates for future research.

De Bruin and De Bruin (1999:130) aver that “active knowledge construction results in quality learning”. This gives credence to the constructivists who maintain that knowledge is not transmitted, but constructed. Students will therefore have to be accountable for their own development, both cognitive and affective. If academics are sincere about education, then they will understand how their teaching methods impact on their students. They should examine their styles of teaching and methods of assessment and, where necessary, “respond to those changes” (Schroeder, 1993:2).

THEME 4: Academic literacy comprises several aspects of literacy

Sub-theme 4.1: Language shapes thinking, reading and writing
While English is the *lingua franca* in South Africa, research has shown that the majority of students in South Africa are English Second Language students. It naturally tends therefore that language, both reading and writing aspects, will affect the greater part of the population, irrespective of race and culture.

Bernstein (1971:43) perceives language to be interwoven with the cognitive, affective and emotional aspects of humans. In his opinion, language is by far the most significant means of communication, his emphasis being, in particular, on the relation between language and thought. He states that language is the vehicle used in “initiating, synthesizing, and reinforcing” our thoughts, feelings and behaviour.

A close examination of the aforegoing reveals that we use language to engage in dialogue with others. This is the *initiating* phase. In the course of the dialogue, there is a need to *synthesize* the many points raised. Certain points are more important than others, and these are then *reinforced* by means of the language used by the participants. We use language, therefore, to express our thoughts, feelings and the stand we take pertaining to issues, both individual and societal. It is our means of communication. However, if this means of communication is flawed, then it follows that the message we wish to convey, will also be flawed. Viewed within this context, language can facilitate our communication on the one hand, yet be a barrier on the other hand.

This inter-relatedness of language and thought is highlighted by Fisher (2001:189), who claims that the four language skills of *speaking, listening, reading and writing* constitute linguistic intelligence, “which is the powerhouse of a child’s intellectual ability”. St Augustine, in his Confessions (Fisher, 2001:188), states that he learned, not so much “from those who taught, but from those who talked” with him. This further illustrates the affinity between language and thought and speaking and listening.
The relevance of the detailed discussion of language and thought for this investigation is to show to what extent our language competence determines our thinking and how it impacts on our academic literacy. Poor language ability impedes our thinking; a good command of language advances our thinking proportionally. Critical thinking, an essential ingredient of academic literacy, is interwoven with our language proficiency, and this directly influences our academic literacy development.

**Category 4.1.1: Students contend with different ‘languages’**

One interviewee stated that students struggled with four ‘languages’ once they entered higher education institutions. These were, firstly, the language that they spoke at home. This differed from their home language, which would be Afrikaans or isiXhosa, for example. It simply means their means of communication at home. Secondly, there was the language that they spoke at university. Thirdly, there was the language of the academia and, fourthly, there was the subject specific language. Skillen (1996:1) substantiates this acknowledgement that students face a new language at university. She states that first years find themselves having to master a whole new register, together with a new culture, if they hope to survive.

Implicit in this is the ability to discern between the different registers; a skill that has not yet been mastered by most students. The language problem is thus exacerbated by the failure of students to recognize the subtleties and structure of language. One direct consequence is that students have to work especially hard to learn their subject content. Their language competence also determines the quality of their written assignments. This lack of language competence can ultimately stand between the student and success.

Failure to interpret assignment questions and read examination questions correctly is detrimental to students, yet this is what higher education lecturers have to contend with daily. Alternative forms of assessment, such as oral and
seminar presentations, may be introduced, but whether these forms are practicable, is debatable. One interviewee admitted that her students all functioned at the operational level.

The interviewees in this study maintained that the language barrier was seemingly insurmountable. The possibility that the language issue could be exaggerated was dispelled by the interviews themselves. The language problem is a real one and positive steps should be taken to address the aspects that influence the literacy situation most profoundly. One participant stated that students “struggle to spell and to properly formulate a sentence”. Students from the poorer communities especially, experienced difficulties with their English.

In another interview, the participant contended that students’ levels of language did not meet the formal requirements of higher education institutions. If we analyse the examination scenario, the following emerges: The lecturer will contextualise the question, thinking that by positioning the question in relation to the topic, the students will find it easier to cope. The students are, however, confused and do not see the relevance of the context. This suggests that their command of language has not been developed sufficiently to engage in academic discourse “…the vocabulary needs to be developed academically as well”. This raises the need for language teaching and academic support, as propounded by Van Schalkwyk (2005:7).

Jones reiterates that if learners are simply required to answer questions without a context, then they are denied the opportunity to apply their critical thinking skills (Jones, 2007:4). Skillen (1996:4) suggests an incorporation of skills development into the curriculum. In this way, there will be a simultaneous acquisition of skills and knowledge. These skills could include critical reading and thinking skills, which will in the long run enhance the students’ level of understanding.
Schroeder (1993:8) also highlights the need for students to acquire critical thinking skills. Lecturers should be sensitive to how they can “meet the needs” of their students and create a better match between student learning styles and their own teaching styles.

4.1.2: Reading and writing as aspects of academic literacy

The inability of students to think analytically, surfaced in several interviews. Participants stated that this lack of analytical skills was evident in both reading and writing exercises. One participant stated, “When we talk about academic literacy, the first problem that I experience with students is they lack reading skills, proper reading skills”. She continued: “What do I mean by lacking proper reading skills? They don’t read with an analytical mind”.

The interviewee recounted how she had expressly warned her students not to simply accept information as it was. She used the term interrogate to accentuate her point. “They need to interrogate the information. They can’t interrogate information; they will write a report”. She also commented that students could not interpret analytical texts. “The analysis is not there. They are struggling”. This image of struggling students is mirrored in Bartholomae (cited in Baskin, 2001:2), who contends that when they write, “they must for that occasion struggle to reinvent the university”. Baskin (2001:8) adds that it is not a rare occurrence for students to struggle with the structures of academic writing. This is where lecturers have a major role and responsibility: they should take it upon themselves to show students what constitutes analysis and how to go about it. It is a specialised form of writing and should be taught specifically.

When students cannot analyse a text, it means they cannot evaluate it, that is, they cannot form a judgment. Compared to Bloom’s Taxonomy (Bloom: 1956), they cannot function at a higher order level and as such are not equipped with the necessary skills to analyse and form a value judgment.
One participant emphasized that, for her, literacy comprised writing, in conjunction with reading. Students, however, could not discern between the different registers. She argued that an assignment was a piece of academic writing, “yet students forget that they are not sms-ing their friends and will use those abbreviations, 2 (for ‘two’) and ur (for ‘you are’)”. The participant stated that sms-language had aggravated the academic literacy problem. She added that her “biggest frustration is in terms of writing, is in terms of reading, with a specific purpose”.

The participant gained the impression that “that they were not required to do it at school”. As a result, this was all totally new and strange for students. They found themselves in a situation where “they have to write in a way that requires them to cite sources and to use the Harvard method”, yet they had not been schooled in these approaches.

She repeated that the academic literacy problem stretched across year groups. She maintained that “interaction with the written text is not only a first year problem” and that “I find myself dealing with university students as if I’m dealing with high school students”. She was adamant “that somewhere in their language modules they should be prepared for writing”, either in Grade Eleven or Grade Twelve. This interviewee did not demonstrate an accurate understanding of the school system. Continuous Assessment (CASS) moderation is in progress countrywide and learner portfolios reflect various forms of writing. Both teacher and learner portfolios are subjected to intense scrutiny by the subject specialists to validate the marks allocated by teachers.

Fisher (2001:193) describes reading as an exercise that requires thinking. In the context of academic reading, we do not mean surface thinking. This type of reading “involves critical thinking and creative thinking” (Fisher, 2001:193). Reading is a process and as such does not take place in a vacuum. When readers interact with the text, they are not supplied with all the answers that they require. The degree of their success in reading is to a large extent
determined by how they represent the text. In order to accomplish a meaningful representation, they require both critical and creative thinking skills.

The participant added that a major disadvantage that students experienced was that “when they come to university, they lack the skill of analysing material”. Consequently, when they read for assignment purposes, “they read, read material and they feel in many instances that this material is the gospel”. This material will then simply be restated, without challenging the content in any way. “They feel that they have to regurgitate this material in some way without critically reflecting on the material”. This led the interviewee to the perception that because the students themselves had never written an authentic piece of writing, they “actually don’t have faith in their own ability to critique, if you look at it from that angle”. This lack of self-confidence had its origin in the fact that students still regarded literature and teachers as their only sources of knowledge.

The participant stated that he was sometimes transported back to the teacher-centred days. He stated, “they don’t really respond and, er, ultimately you find that you end up doing most of the talking, like we used to do in the traditional approach”. Again it surfaces: students do not question. They still resort to rote-learning to get them through an examination. This suggests regression on the part of this specific lecturer. The learner-centred approach has been in use for decades, and for an academic to admit to reverting to this outdated practice, is to confirm this regression. The participant related how “your students who come from your previously disadvantaged schools, they depend heavily on rote-learning”. He added: “And you find that their memories are so amazing that they’re actually able to regurgitate many, many pages”.

In another interview, the issue of rote-learning emerged again, this time relating to the field of mathematics. The interviewee used her own daughter as an example. At school, her daughter had achieved excellent results.
However, as a university student her marks were disappointing. It then transpired that the daughter had memorised the theorems without much understanding at school, and she now faced the consequences.

Certain assumptions are therefore made of readers. They are expected to bring specific competences to the text, *inter alia*, cognitive skills, linguistic experience and prior knowledge. They also bring away certain competences from the text: meaning, purpose and understanding (Fisher, 2001:193). The importance of reading is epitomised in the statement, “Reading opens up the world for children and is the doorway to learning” (Kame’enui, *et al.*, 2002:54).

Students, especially our diverse student population, hold different views of what academic literacy entails and the expectations of the world that awaits them on the completion of their studies (Baskin, 2001:12). Teachers at high schools and academics need to be more explicit about these issues, so that students will become more aware of the requirements and demands of the real world. If the teachers themselves cannot identify these requirements, then they should enquire about these.

The participant who depicted the students’ inability to read with an analytical mind, and then elaborated on the absence of writing skills, was greatly concerned, as resonated in the statement, “*If students can’t write well, I don’t see evidence that they can think well*” (ICAS, 2002:11). This cements Bernstein’s theory of the interdependence of language and thought. In this respect, language is the superordinate term (incorporating writing), while thought comprises both critical and creative thinking skills.

The value of the proposal of the same participant that students be taught these skills, is reflected by ICAS (2002:12), “reading and writing … are the lifeblood of educated people”. Students demonstrate a remarkable apathy to structure their work. The interviewee claimed, “*I always tell them, you need to structure your work in such a way that your reader can follow your line of*
thinking”. When she randomly browsed through their work, however, she found that they had written, “just one thing, without headings, without subheadings … it’s pointless”. This phrase “it’s pointless” epitomises the attitude of the participating lecturers; it encapsulates the frustration and helplessness experienced by them. However, a change of attitude among teachers and some proactive measures such as guiding students through the exercise, would pay dividends to both lecturers and students, who are possibly equally frustrated.

The participant extrapolated “that’s also an aspect of literacy” and “academic writing forms part of literacy”. The way in which students present their work, especially their written work, reflects the way in which their thoughts are ordered and presented. Baskin (2001) affirms this in his statement that “academic writing is a socio-political act of identification”. This argument is supported by Henning, Gravett and Van Rensburg (2005:89), who underline the importance of an “academic style” and a “vocabulary shift”. In academic writing, the language used is more formal and rational. We can interpret formal to mean the discourse of the field, and rational to mean that the writing needs to be scientific.

This distinction between registers; the self-identification portrayed by the student in the writing process with regard to the structure and presentation of work; and the emphasis on a logical flow of thought, are all marks stamping a well-written and -constructed academic assignment.

4.2 CONCLUSION

This chapter constitutes a discussion of the research findings, supported by literature. The themes emerging from the narratives of the participants were identified, as illustrated in Table 4.1, for easy reference. These themes were, in turn, divided into sub-themes, and the sub-themes were finally grouped into various categories.
The major difficulties as perceived by academics were extracted, and possible sources of these difficulties were traced. Some of the sources identified, included a lack of academic literacy skills on the part of students, the lingering impact of the inequalities of the past, the need for change in a changing education environment, and the various aspects that comprise academic literacy. The need for reflective practice and teaching styles to be adapted and modified to suit the changing student intake also form part of the issues for discussion.

There was general consensus that the lack of critical thinking skills currently experienced in the field of education, warranted urgent intervention. The conclusions and shortcomings of the investigation, together with recommendations and suggestions for further research, will be discussed in Chapter Five.
5.1 INTRODUCTION

The aim of this study was to examine and explore, through a qualitative research approach, what the perceptions of academics are of the academic literacy of their students in higher education at present, as well as the ways in which academic literacy can be developed at higher education level.

The information obtained during this study will be utilized to formulate recommendations in respect of the themes that emerged, and to develop practical strategies that are relevant to the academic literacy problem. These strategies will be refined for implementation in the classroom, so that low levels of academic literacy can be identified timeously.

Chapter One presented the background to the study, the problem statement, research aims, clarification of key concepts, research methodology and research design. Chapter Two constituted a theoretical perspective on academic literacy in higher education in South Africa. The scientific models of Bloom and Green were discussed as conceptual framework, and the impact of diversity on the student body was highlighted.

Chapter Three provided a theoretical exposition of the chosen research design and methodology for the study. In Chapter Four, the most important findings of the study were presented thematically. These were in turn divided into sub-themes and categories, substantiated by direct quotations from participating lecturers, as well as a literature study. This final chapter, Chapter Five, consists of the research conclusions and recommendations for
higher education institutions, teaching practice and education research. Finally, the limitations of the research are identified.

5.2 CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS OF RESULTS OF STUDY

The findings of this study resulted from fieldwork conducted with academics at a higher education institution. This was done in the form of in-depth, individual face-to-face interviews. The data collected, provided the foundation on which the design was extrapolated.

5.2.1 Main conclusions

The focus of this study was the perceptions of academics of the academic literacy of their students at higher education level.

A brief summary of the results revealed the following:

- Lecturers perceived students to lack academic literacy skills in that students did not portray independence of thought. This was further compounded by serious shortcomings in students’ basic language skills. It also emerged that students did not possess critical thinking skills. A cultural dissonance, emanating from diversity, also surfaced.

- The inequalities of the past contribute to the academic literacy problems currently experienced at higher education institutions, and are related to the historical unequal distribution of educational resources.

- There is a need for change in our rapidly changing education environment. Lecturers need to reflect more critically on their own portrayal of academic literacy, especially in terms of their teaching styles.
• Academic literacy comprises several aspects of literacy; the academic literacy problem can therefore not be viewed in isolation.

5.2.2 Detailed conclusions and implications thereof

5.2.2.1 Theme 1: Lecturers perceived students to lack academic literacy skills

One of the qualities that a higher education student is expected to demonstrate, is academic literacy. A key element of academic literacy is language proficiency. Students who are proficient in the language of instruction find it easier to cope with the challenges that tertiary literacy presents than those who have a low level of proficiency in that language.

Sub-theme 1.1

• Students are not independent learners

The terms spoonfeeding and lack of metacognition emerged in both the interviews and literature. The general consensus among participants was that students could not read beyond the text. There was little or no evidence of independence of thought.

The fact that students struggle to locate information for assignments independently, could contribute to their inability to analyse the assignment question, form a hypothesis, select the relevant literature to corroborate their viewpoints, and then to synthesize the elicited facts into a cohesive piece of writing.
Sub-theme 1.2

- **Students do not have a foundation in basic language use**

The basic language alluded to would in the South African situation be English; yet, the majority of students are English Second Language speakers (Narsee: 1999:2). However, English is the *lingua franca*, hence academics need to brace themselves for persistent language related problems. One participating lecturer stated that what largely accounted for poor student performance in English, was that most English language teachers at historically disadvantaged schools themselves did not possess a high level of English language proficiency. The implication is that a vicious circle of poor education is perpetuated.

Sub-theme 1.3

- **Students do not possess critical thinking skills**

Critical thinking does not simply happen; it is a skill that should be explicitly taught. For instance, when presenting a lesson, teachers should employ different stimulating and thought-provoking strategies.

Participants felt it unfair to expect students to be critical thinkers, when they had not been taught these skills. Lombard and Grosser (2004:213) confirm these "low, concrete levels of thinking" exhibited by many educators as evidence that they themselves do not possess critical thinking skills. The development of these critical thinking skills could result in the refinement of students’ metacognitive skills (Schoenbach, *et al.*, 2003:3).
Sub-theme 1.4

• There is a cultural dissonance emanating from diversity

An increasingly diverse student body accompanied the process of massification (Makobela, 1998:1), reflecting differences. Implied in this is the need to foster tolerance of other cultures and beliefs. This does not happen readily; it is something that needs a specific focus. In addition, change at an inner, deeper level should be brought about. This can be paralleled with what November (2005:1132) terms the intrinsic value of education. It transpires that should this change not be achieved, the implications would be a negative portrayal of cultural tolerance.

Category 1.4.1

• Diversity in the classroom

With the abolition of the apartheid regime in 1994, education institutions were forced to admit all students, irrespective of race, culture and creed. This put paid to the homogeneous framework within which the South African education system had functioned for approximately five decades. One area of immediate change was the classroom. Diverse students came from diverse backgrounds, and educationists could no longer assume that all students understood what they taught. There, provision had to be made for the diverse intake.

The classroom climate is a major factor in ensuring harmony among diverse learners. Features indicative of supportive climates include treating all students with respect; accepting individual differences; and the creation of a non-threatening atmosphere (Cotton, 1991:9). Where these features are lacking, students tend to become demotivated. Olivier (2006:62) emphasizes this link between teacher attitude and student performance; teachers should show and demonstrate that they care. In this way, they help students form a positive self-image.
Category 1.4.2

- Diverse cultures of university

Many students move outside their culture for the first time when they enter university. They now have to demonstrate the necessary discipline and maturity required at a higher education institution in order to become part of this community of practice. The implication is that until such time that they can fit in with the diverse cultures experienced at university, they will remain outsiders, looking in. Once they have adapted to the cultures of the university, they will gain acceptance (Boughey, 2000).

Category 1.4.3

- Lack of exposure to technology

The use of the singular term literacy has become more the exception than the rule. There is a tendency to refer to literacies, in view of the many literacies that are encountered in this era of technology.

Technology serves to advance activities. For example, computers have become so commonplace, that it is difficult to imagine life without them. If students are not computer literate, however, it implies that living in a mechanized society has little benefit for them.

Category 1.4.4

- Lack of exposure to higher level written assignments

It emerged very strongly in the interviews that few students could produce a quality written assignment. They wrote phonetically, and lecturers complained about poor spelling. This led to the assumption that the writing aspect of literacy should receive more attention.
The writing process is generally regarded as one of consolidation, yet several interviewees raised the issue of students’ inability to structure their writing. In addition, students paid no attention to layout and had difficulty discerning between their own voice and those of secondary texts.

At university, student writing and learning are assessed against the backdrop of epistemology. Formal access has been granted, but the route to epistemological access is through the achievement of academic literacy, of which writing is a component. If student writing is flawed, therefore, the implication is that academic literacy will be affected adversely.

**Category 1.4.5**

- Lack of exposure to different teaching strategies

One conclusion arrived at is that different students have different learning preferences. This is confirmed by the literature (Terry, 2004:10). Students from schools where the traditional teacher-centred method is dominant, generally find it difficult to adapt to a more learner-centred approach (Terry, 2004:1). This could give rise to frustration on the part of both lecturers and students.

**Theme 2:**

**Inequalities of the past contribute to present academic literacy problems**

These inequalities prevailed for five decades and it is accepted that they will be rectified over an extended period of time only.
Sub-theme 2.1

- Unequal distribution of educational resources

It can be concluded that the unequal distribution of educational resources represents one such inequality of the past. During the apartheid era, there was a distinct difference between the conditions to which blacks were subjected, and those of whites. An example would be the overcrowded classrooms that have become synonymous with township schools. These schools have a history of being under-resourced. This is underlined by Steyn and Kamper (2006:116), who refer to lack of resources and facilities as characteristic of the apartheid dispensation. If this inequality is not addressed, the implication for academic literacy is that students who were disadvantaged in the past, will continue to be so.

Category 2.1.1

- Lack of quality education

A lack of quality education forms part of the inequalities of the past. The differentiated systems of education in South Africa resulted in a lack of suitably qualified teachers among the disadvantaged communities of South Africa.

A conclusion is that the shortage of suitably qualified teachers has persisted, especially in Mathematics and Science, and particularly among the historically disadvantaged (Nkopodi, 2006:67). Consequently, there is a high failure rate in these subjects. One of the interviewees maintained that conditions had grown progressively worse for some people.

This is supported by Lombard and Grosser (2004:213), who assert that South African learners fared very badly in an International Mathematics and Science Study in 1995. Darling-Hammond (1997:8) gives credence to the correlation between poorly qualified teachers and learner achievement by postulating that
“nothing can fully compensate for weak teaching”. Darling-Hammond (1997:26), states: “teachers cannot teach what they themselves have no knowledge of”. This may be perceived as stating the obvious, yet it reinforces the importance of quality education. If quality education cannot be provided for all, it will imply failure on the part of government to honour one of the basic human rights enshrined in the Constitution.

Category 2.1.2

- The impact of socio-economics on education

One of the participants was convinced that education is a middle-class enterprise. Olivier (2006:62) cautions that teachers should not set standards that are unattainable. They should rather temper their expectations to bring them in line with the socio-economic background of their students. Where a mismatch between student potential and unreasonable teacher expectations persists, students may begin to doubt their capabilities.

Theme 3:

There is a need for change in a changing education environment

It can be concluded that the South African education system has undergone a radical change following the advent of democracy in 1994. Change on such a massive scale is termed transformation.

Another conclusion that has been arrived at is, education has an extrinsic value, as well as an intrinsic value (November, 2005:1132), and that the two values cannot be mutually exclusive. The process of transformation brought about extrinsic changes. One such example is that all students may now attend institutions of their choice. Research has shown, however, that intrinsic changes are more difficult to put into effect. If these changes do not materialize, our entire system of education could disintegrate.
Sub-theme 3.1

- Time for reflection

Change requires time to be effective, in conjunction with time for reflection. If lecturers do not take time to reflect, it could imply that they will find it all the more difficult to assess the merits and demerits of a transformed system of education.

Category 3.1.1

- Lecturers do not critically reflect on own practices

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that the higher education lecturing system has undergone little change. Participating lecturers expected students to comply with their subject approaches and teaching strategies. They did not contemplate a change in their teaching styles to facilitate student acclimatization to university life and its many challenges. A paraphrase of Schroeder (1993) showed that even though research findings portrayed low levels of language proficiency, together with a corresponding low level of academic literacy among first-years, there was little attempt at change among academics.

Instead, academics dwelt on a past “golden age”, where lecturers and students shared much common ground, namely the same socio-economic and cultural background and the same Euro-centric approach to university life. The conclusion drawn from this is that a paradigm shift is essential. Academics should adapt and move towards a more progressive mindset.

There was concurrence among university staff that corrective measures should be implemented before students commenced their higher education careers. However, participating academics did not consider instituting measures of their own to compensate for these inadequacies, again
demonstrating an inflexible attitude during a period of great transition and transformation in the South African education system. This reluctance could be interpreted as an attitude of exclusion on the part of academics and could be a potential cause of racial friction.

Category 3.1.2

- Discrepancy between teaching and learning styles

This study confirms that lecturers generally prefer the more abstract style of teaching, also known as the intuitive style, whereas students prefer the concrete style of learning, also referred to as the sensing style. According to the findings, these two styles are obviously discordant with each other and a source of dissension between lecturers and students.

This calls for change on the part of lecturers, as they initiate the education process. Should they continue with a style that is foreign to students, it may be expected that the downward spiral of results will persist.

Theme 4:

Academic literacy comprises several aspects

The findings illustrate that academic literacy constitutes several aspects of literacy. These include thinking, reading, writing, speaking and listening skills. It is widely accepted that language and thought are inter-related and that language therefore shapes these skills.

Sub-theme 4.1

- Language shapes thinking, reading and writing

It is concluded that language shapes thinking, reading and writing and that it is in the area of writing in particular that students need help. Participating
lecturers described students’ academic writing as “a nightmare”. They emphasised that students did not know how to interact with the text. One interviewee stated that her experience enabled her to provide scaffolding for her students, although she had no formal training in this technique. The concept of scaffolding is supported by Wilhelm (2003:5) who, citing Bruner (1975), postulates that students acquire the necessary reading skills by means of this type of intervention.

The implication is that if no effort is made to familiarize students with this technique, they will be deprived of the confidence and support that this type of support system renders.

**Category 4.1.1**

- Different ‘languages’ students have to contend with

A conclusion relating to language is that it is an integral part of life; it is the individual’s identity and culture. This is supported by Rosenkranz and Holten (2007:1436), who cite Wittgenstein’s theory that concepts and views of the world are related to language (1953:2). A concept only assumes life once it is steeped in a discussion.

Another conclusion is that language is complex. One may be fluent in a language at operational or cultural levels, but once it is used within an IT context, or as a scientific source, then it represents something other than a mere means of communication. This is what students have to contend with at university – different ‘languages’. These different forms of proficiency can be interpreted as basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) (Kilfoil & Van der Walt, 1997:115).

It is concluded that students have to be cognizant with such subtleties of language, in order to achieve academic literacy. It is said that in order to
interpret a text, readers must make it their own, that is, put it in their own language.

Category 4.1.2

- Reading and writing as aspects of academic literacy

It is concluded that part of communicative competence is fluency in reading and writing. Some students encounter difficulties with “dense and complex texts” (Hirst, et al., 2004:71).

The implications are that if students fail to demonstrate this competence, their chances of academic success will be minimized considerably.

5.3 Recommendations

The recommendations presented in this section are made in respect of the themes that emerged from the data collection, namely:

- Lecturers perceived students to lack academic literacy skills.
- Inequalities of the past contribute to present academic literacy problems.
- The need for change in a changing education environment exists.
- Academic literacy comprises several aspects.

5.3.1 Recommendations: Theme 1

It is recommended that:

A mentoring system should be put in place for the specific purpose of having lecturers guide students to work independently. Students could be given an assignment topic around which a series of steps is devised. For example, Step One may deal with the discussion of the assignment topic; Step Two may entail the selection of relevant literature, and so forth, until the last step,
during which students discuss their draft assignments. The execution of these steps will be monitored by the mentor (lecturer).

A concerted effort should be made at schools to conduct small-group reading classes, so that a foundation can be laid for language improvement. Small-group reading activities are less threatening and there is a reduction in self-consciousness, as readers read in their own small circle and not to a large class. Reading is mentioned *per se*, because spelling, writing and oral activities all flow from reading.

Critical thinking skills should be explicitly taught and incorporated into the school programme. It is widely accepted that *ad hoc* programmes do not enjoy the same success rates as formal school programmes.

Learners should be invited to adopt a questioning attitude. Before commencing reading, the teachers should ask questions, based on the text to be read. In this way, the teachers could establish the existing subject knowledge of the readers. At the same time, they also whet the readers’ appetite, making them want to read. This is one way of developing inquiring minds (Wilhelm, 2003:2) which it is widely accepted, are predictors of critical thinkers. With reference to cultural diversity and the constraints imposed by certain cultures, teachers should inform learners that questioning is part of the teaching and learning situation.

If teachers still have difficulty in evoking a response from learners, inviting them to create a semantic map, based on the topic being taught, presents an alternative and practical strategy. At the same time, learners are introduced to the formation of associations. This latter strategy helps them to construct new knowledge, as an association can be formed only with what is already known.
5.3.2 Recommendations: Theme 2

The problem of the unequal distribution of educational resources can be alleviated by some innovation and initiative on the part of teachers. At a workshop presented by the Eastern Cape Department of Education during August 2007, one very under-resourced school demonstrated what could be achieved with minimum resources and maximum imaginative enterprise by enthusiastic teachers. Teachers in similar circumstances can be given the opportunity to view these lessons and assisted to emulate them.

Practical example:

There was an unused box with the label ‘cardboard’ affixed to it. This one word (cardboard) could not be used for a reading lesson, but it could be used for a spelling lesson. This is illustrated below:

**Step One**
Using the word ‘cardboard’ as your base, build as many words as possible.

**Step Two**
Here are some of the words that were built:
Car, card, boar, bar, crab, cab, bard, drab, cad, cob, rob, cord, road, roar, bad, dab, dad, cod, rod, dada, broad.

**Step Three**
How well can you spell? Teacher dictates five words; learners write them down.

**Step Four**
Sentence building. Learners are asked to use words in different sentence.

**Step Five**
Sentences can be sequenced, for example, to form a paragraph.
One can continue indefinitely; the options are endless.

5.3.3 Recommendations: Theme 3
It is recommended that:

Academics should be equipped to make the paradigm shift to recognize the need for adaptation in their attitude towards the diverse student intake that is increasingly characterizing the South African higher education environment.

Academics move towards a more progressive mindset. Academics engage in self-reflection on their teaching styles to establish whether these have been modified in any way to accommodate the broadened student participation at higher education institution.

I propose at this stage to deliberate on November's observation that education is composed of an extrinsic dimension, together with an intrinsic dimension (2005:1132). He postulates that there should be “a complementary relationship” between these values (November, 2005:1132). A complementary relationship of any kind presupposes harmony. Lack of this harmony suggests an underlying encroachment of one dimension on the other.

Buecker (2003:5) uses the term “the intentional teacher” to describe teachers who are committed to their vocation. Some of the qualities he raises, are: teacher efficacy; openness to feedback; and a reflective disposition. An intention stems from within. I argue, therefore, that academics should not be prescribed to. If they genuinely have the interests of education at heart, they need to make that conscious decision that will make them intentional teachers. A combination of extrinsic and intrinsic factors stem from the higher education structures which, together with the attitude of academics, have resulted in the discord between the perceptions of academics and those of their students.

The results of the study show that the first aim of the research has been met, as there is now clear insight into the perceptions of academics of the academic literacy of their students at higher education level.
The second aim, stipulating how the academic literacy of students can best be developed at higher education level, is addressed in the recommendations. However, no detailed programme has been devised to serve as a formal guideline to educationists.

5.3.4 Recommendations: Theme 4
It is recommended that:

The various aspects of academic literacy should be made clear to students. Intervention, for example in the form of scaffolding, should be implemented, to assist students in coping with the various aspects of academic literacy.

5.4 Limitations

The limitations of the research are outlined below:

The fieldwork was conducted at a comprehensive university in the Eastern Cape. Conclusions therefore pertain to this specific higher education institution only and cannot be extended to universities outside the Province, nor to those that specialise in certain disciplines.

I felt that what curtailed the investigation to a degree was the reluctance of some people to be interviewed. Even though I was convinced that they were competent to provide information and that their contribution would be valuable, they intimated that they were not the ‘right people’ for the study, although some of them did in the end participate in the study.

Several academics came across as staid and conservative, resolute that the deficit factor was on the part of the students. Many of the new generation of lecturers also did not identify with the students, adopting an ‘us and them’
stance. This was a limitation; I detected a lack of empathy on their part and also an attitude that change was due on the part of students, not academics.

5.5 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, the researcher summarised the conclusions reached in respect of the study. Recommendations were made for higher education institutions, teaching practice and education research, and, finally, the limitations of the research were identified.


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Interview 1                           Dept: Library Science                21 June 2007

Introduction
I’m the faculty librarian for the Faculty of Education and I’m also responsible for co-ordinating and planning training activities on the different campuses. Our experience of training and the training is then specifically geared towards helping students become academically literate so that we advertise our training sessions and what we find is that students then respond to those advertisements but often then on the day of the training that they do not come and attend the training session.

The students who do attend the training sessions are always very positive about the experience when they leave because of that they’ve learnt at such sessions because they can then apply it directly to their academic work. Er, we have different levels of training that we give to the students – at a very basic level we teach them about the different sources of information, like books and journal articles that they can use for their, for their research and then on a further level we teach them how to use specific databases for their research because as you know it’s an international phenomenon that they all want to ‘google’ (laughs) …

Er so as I say it’s normally a positive experience for the students when they do attend, er but we would like many more of the students to attend these sessions and we have also now looked at the way we advertise these sessions to bring it more under the attention because it seems that if you advertise on e-mail that they don’t all read those university e-mails and respond to it so we have quite a few new plans now to let them attend. Er as a faculty librarian what I find is when students have an assignment to do or research to do that some will try on Google and be satisfied with what they find there, and others will come straight for assistance where I will then help them to find books and journal articles. Er not that very many seem to be interested in finding the information on their own. They are happy for me to look for relevant books and journal articles and they will then go and use the material to, to get their assignments. Er so that is something that we are trying to change in the library with the training sessions, is that the students
must be able to find the information themselves. They must know where to look for the information. They must know how to find the information and they must also be able to evaluate what they find and that’s the one big caution that we always try to tell them in terms of just googling for information; that when you find information on the Internet you have to be very careful and you need to evaluate that information because what you find is not necessarily academic information or peer reviewed information as you would find when you use the On-line data bases.

Researcher: And you feel that they have a problem with that, the evaluation?
I think many students don’t realize that they can’t just take the information that they find and apply it for an assignment or for research. Er, one of the solutions, if I can call it that, lately is that there is now a google scholar, where the emphasis is on academic articles and academic information. So we now try to encourage them, if they want to google to then at least to google scholar, because then you are moving towards academic information. Er what you also find, especially with undergraduates is that they want to take the information that they find and to use it exactly as they found it. They don’t work through the information and make it their own before they re-present it in an assignment, or a project, or whatever.

Researcher: So what do you feel they should do with that information?

They should work through information and then make it their own knowledge and from that then give a new perspective er and so their understanding of the subject matter is also represented in that assignment because I think many of them are just taking what they find and putting that in an assignment without really benefiting from that assignment in terms of new knowledge coming in.

Researcher: Now why do you feel it important for them to make it their own? Can you be a little more explicit?
A student should be an independent thinker. I think that’s one of the main reasons why people do tertiary studies and also they need to learn how to work with information not just for academic purposes but it benefits them through their entire life, with everything that they do and especially with the way information is presented in our modern times. There is an overload of information and not all of it is correct, ethical or academic in terms of a student who needs it and they need to be able to, to evaluate it and to make their own conclusions from what has been written because otherwise they add nothing new to a subject and also their understanding to my mind is then limited because they haven’t really researched the topic properly but they are just giving back what has been written already.

Researcher: And you feel it important for them to make a contribution?

Yes, I think one of the mains reasons for being a student is to grow as a person in terms of knowledge but also in terms of skills and to be skilled in the use of information is, is a lifelong skill, because what they, if they start off properly at a tertiary institution, that ability or skill to use information correctly, they take it throughout their lives because if they go into the job market, they still need to do lifelong learning. It’s a process that will/should take place as long as they are economically active.

Researcher: Do you feel that they need a particular skill to be able to, as you coined the phrase, make this information their own?

Yes er we call it information literacy in the library world and if you look at a continuum of literacy where it starts at the bottom end with being illiterate, you’ll see that being information literate on a continuum will come after, for example, computer literacy and it will come after library literacy because you need to be computer literate as well as library literate to be information literate, because (you call it academic literacy hey), and we call it information literacy. But at that point a student is able to find it, he knows where and how,
to use it, to evaluate it and to give a product of his own where all of this has been synthesized into something that is now their knowledge. So you can be able to use a library but still not have that skill to take information and make it your own. And with the movement towards information being available electronically more and more, they need to be computer literate as well, cos that is, the electronic information is what is increasingly used.

Researcher: Tell me, do you think this is anything to do with their socio-cultural background?

I would assume that if they never had the exposure and the training, if you could call it that, for example, in their schools. If there weren’t school libraries and there weren’t computer labs at their schools then I think it I probably a huge adjustment for them when they join a tertiary institution. And I would say that they are disadvantaged in that sense in that they then need to catch up with those skills, to become computer literate and to become library literate, to learn how to use a library er before they can actually work on their skill of becoming information literate. Er.

Researcher: Can I take you back to the part where you said they need to evaluate the information. Now do you think they need any specific skills to be able to do that?

I would think that something like the writing centers that are on the different campuses can play an important role because I think they need to be taught how to take information and to make it their own because if they’ve never been expected, before to sift through different pieces of information, decide what is important in those pieces of information, and give a logical er intelligent account of that we can’t ust expect them to have that skill because that too is something that they are able to earn and as there are computer classes for them, I think there should be attention paid to the fact that they need to learn how to go about with information.
Researcher: So would you then say this ties up with the methodology that the teachers or the instructors used before they came to the higher education institutions?

Yes, I think there is often a big leap for many of the students coming from school to the university where maybe they’re not expected to work as independently as they are now suddenly expected to work at university level, so ideally if we can start in primary school for example, to teach them how to find information and not just give it back as you find it but to think about it and to make your own conclusions from the information that you find. Then by the time they reach university level, they won’t have the problem that they have now because that skill will then come right through the years with them and they will be able to apply the skill.

Researcher: So you feel that should be incorporated in their curriculum?

Yes, I think that will be the ideal situation. The school should have a library and a computer lab because we don’t want them to just use electronic information. It’s important that they know that there are so many different sources of information. For example, for a primary school child, I already see a tendency to just also run to Google and do a search for a small, little project whereas for them, going to a good encyclopaedia, is exactly why they, what they need. Er so I would like an emphasis on the different types of resources and that you should use them for the different purposes that, that you need them for. Sometimes a book or an encyclopaedia is exactly the right source of information for what your project or your assignment is and if you move on and you need more detailed information then the journal articles become important or a research report or statistics or whatever the topic will then require.
Researcher: You spoke about an overload of information earlier on. Can you just enlarge on that, maybe?

Er, especially at university level, er we find for example, the last couple of years there have been so many new databases er presented that we can use. And apart from that there’s the Internet that’s growing day by day so when you search and you search successfully, there’s so much information available on any given topic that it becomes more and more important for the student to be able to make a choice and make good choices about the information they find because even if they just google, there are sometimes millions of hits on their topic and for them to be able then to look at all those and to be able to decide that this is a worthier source than that. So whenever you search for information these days you get so much more than what you really need for a specific project or assignment, and then it comes back every time to having to be able to make choices and to evaluate what you find.

Researcher: So when they make choices they need to compare …

Yes.

Researcher: And that is when they need that critical thinking skill?

And if we don’t make them aware of the fact that you need to critically read, and then critically think about what you’ve read, we can’t expect them just to know that. Er we teach them all sorts of things which equip them to then to apply that in whatever is needed in studies or academic work and that too for me is a skill that needs to be taught so that they know er for example there are so many students who know nothing about plagiarism. Er for the simple reason that it’s never been brought under their attention properly, so that they know what it is and why you’re not allowed to just take someone else’s information and present it as your own and also what the consequences of something like plagiarism can be.
Researcher: You spoke about synthesis earlier on. They should know how to synthesize and so on. What skills do they need for that? Should they also be made aware of that?

I think the whole idea of becoming information literate is really a process that needs to take place and it typically starts at the point where you will tech them first of all, where you can find certain kinds of information. Secondly, then you want to teach them how will you go about finding that types of information that you’re looking for and you’ve got that, then the evaluation you, you evaluate already in the choices that you make in the information. Once you’ve collated all of this, then you need to evaluate all these different sources and choose which are applicable for your research and the synthesizing then comes in where they have to take all of this and make their own and have a product at the end of that and for me it’s, they need to be taught the whole process and we, for example, have er an On-line product where that is divided into five modules and it’s broken up into those components, so the student can actually go and do this course On-line, on his or her own, and see the natural progression of what the searching for information or a research project then should entail.

Researcher: Now would you say it’s the majority of our students who are not on par when they get to higher education institutions? That they don’t have this independent thinking that was spoken of, that you mentioned earlier?

I’m not sure if it’s the majority, but I would say there is a large percentage of our students who come ill-equipped with these skills and then – I don’t think it’s always successfully addressed at university level either, to then take these students who come ill-equipped and to give them those skills. Er I would think it has two sides, in the sense that the institution needs to provide these opportunities but also, and then I speak from experience, is that we always say we can bring the horse to the water but we can’t make it drink and that’s
often the case with students that we do provide these opportunities, but it’s then, many of them choose not to either attend sessions or to make use, and take up the opportunities to learn about these things. So for me personally, I think one of the solutions would be to make it a compulsory course and er I recently took part in the Chalsa tele-conference where they’re now compiling their status report on Information Literacy countrywide and there might be a move then towards a or an Information Literacy programme that adheres to all the different standards and the idea worldwide is for these programmes to be accredited programmes and compulsory programmes. So as we have first year students who must do a computer literacy course, of 6 months or so, we would really like for the university to enforce if you want to call it that, an Information Literacy course where we teach them all the basics of being Information Literate. Because it definitely impacts on the quality of their studies. An information literate student will produce a much better assignment or project than someone who is unsure or scared even of finding information and they do not know how to start so how can they have a very good end product if they do not know how to go about it.

Researcher: Do you think maybe the fact that some of them don’t attend these courses even though they are available would have anything to do with the volume of work that they suddenly encounter now at university?

I think the volume of work is definitely a factor because I think for the first time they have to be able to work with so much more than was expected of them before. Er also we have found that the timing of presenting or having these training sessions seems to work well if you can present it at the point of need, because then the students are much more positive and enthusiastic to attend stuff when they can see the direct benefit for themselves to come to a session. So, one of the solutions would then be for a lecturer to combine an assignment with such a process of becoming information literate. To take an assignment, for example, to break it up in those components and to then make sure that they start off on the right track by sending them out for
information and then maybe report back on that. So to break up an assignment into those logical steps instead of just giving an assignment and expecting an end product.

Researcher: So it sounds like a lot of responsibility rests with the lecturers as well.

I think so, yes. Because if they emphasize the importance of good quality assignments and that a good quality assignment will be a logical outcome if you become information literate. Er and also if they can in a certain sense pressure them to make use of certain minimum requirements for an assignment, for example, tell them you need to use at least three books and five articles from peer reviewed journals. They need to know what peer reviewed means. Er and where do you find them and how will you go about finding that quality information. Tell the student I don’t want just a bunch of websites as the sources of information but we want academic and proper …

Researcher: So, from what you say, the way I perceive it, it’s almost as if giving that assignment, the lecturer needs to spend like say a lecture period on explaining what he or she expects, so that they know what is expected of them. So the lecturers must then be very explicit and say, ‘look, you need to go to the library’.

Like you said, ‘you need to, to do a search and you need to make it your own and to be selective. But for them to do what that lecturer then advises them to do or expects them to do, they must still have the skill to be able to search successfully er because when we teach the students in our classes it’s about putting a search strategy together, that you actually plan your whole search before you go and sit in front of a computer, because your research starts at looking at your topic, doing some background reading and then putting a search strategy together and then searching for information. And that you cannot teach them in one lecture. Er they should be in a position where they
can do a complete course in gaining those skills to be able to search for information.

Researcher: You see you hear the argument sometimes that students don’t know what to expect and even lecturers when they are asked, they say, ‘Well I don’t really know, but I do know a good essay when I see one’.

But surely there are certain minimum standards and requirements and if those are spelt out then it’s so much easier to adhere to them than to just get a topic and you are expected to deliver an end product, which is your assignment. Er so yes, I would like to see an accredited course that’s compulsory, cos then you ensure that they have those skills and what they then choose to do with those skills is up to the individual.

Researcher: And then this making the topic their own, do you think their reading skills per se have anything to do with that?

Yes, it seems that the quality of students’ reading is often not what it should and I think that often comes from school. Many of these things that now manifest as a problem at university level I think comes from the lack of certain things at school level. Because if we can equip them at school level then they come into university life er much better equipped with the basic skills and they can then give their attention to becoming a successful student because it’s a huge leap for them and there are so many things that they need to become used to, not just on an academic level, so if we can make that academic jump a bit easier then there’s also more time and energy for the other levels of their lives that they need to become used to, all the big changes that are taking place.

Researcher: Can you elaborate on these other changes, for instance?
Take freedom; they have so much more than they used to have while they were at school and yes I think ideally that can also start at school where you have er talks and certain classes where you prepare them for how you should go about handling all this new-found freedom. That it comes with certain responsibilities as well as the enjoyment er being treated like an adult for example, er, so it's just not for the academic maturity that we are talking about. It would be the whole student makeup that needs that lift. Or if you have a student that comes from a small town or a rural area to suddenly have to live in a city and there are many new things added to their lives. The environment is new, what is expected of them is so much more demanding than it used to be at school. The environment might not be as protective as they were used to and so they need to concentrate on so much more than achieving their academic goals. Because I mean the person is a whole person and the academic side is but one part. And if you’re unhappy socially, where you live or your friends or whatever then that will also impact on their academic …

Researcher: Thank you, very much.
Introduction

I’ve been at the university now for about the last eight years; previously involved for about four years

to these students. I’m not directly involved with language teaching, but mainly through Life Orientation, but my experience with them for self-studies, for reading abilities, writing, spelling, comes from the fact that the modules I teach are academic modules. And we do expect their work, whatever they present either for a class task or for an assessment, to be of an academic level. So I mainly will base my impressions on that. What’s very interesting is
that we have found that often our students will leave the institution, even after their fourth year, and they are not capable of writing a proper academic assignment.

They do not know what referencing is; they do not have a clear understanding of plagiarism; they plagiarize but because they don’t know it is plagiarism, not because they intentionally want to; they just do it. That is one thing we’ve picked up even with our senior students. With the younger ones coming in, first year, (I had a big group of first years this year, 2007); took them for Child Development, where you do expect them to think a little bit creatively, to be critical practitioners, reflective practitioners, that they seriously lack, I don’t know if it’s confidence or ability, to think creatively, to for instance read in the text book about the middle childhood, say let’s take language development and they will read the processes of Piaget, and they can re-give it to you verbatim but they cannot apply it. I would for instance say to them, “Take this theory, go to a school and actually see or compare with the way learners talk at a certain level with what Piaget have told you and they can’t. They’re stuck. They seem, I don’t know if they think what they must see must be of a higher level than what they actually are seeing, or whether it’s just a skill of really applying, and creative thinking. Another quite a serious concern and that comes out even in their scripts, small class tests, even when they do a worksheet in group work is a serious problem with spelling; that they, they, and of course now one generalizes, but I would say more students than what we had in the past now struggle to spell correctly, to properly formulate a sentence. They often will leave out the beginning of a sentence, like they wont say “the cat jumps over the wall”, they just say “cat jumps the wall”. Now it’s difficult with students, are they just lazy or is it a fact that they can’t properly formulate sentences anymore. Er that’s quite scary, but what what’s confusing me is that it’s fine if you do it in a group work discussion, you know, you use these short terms, because you’re summarizing but that’s the way they will present their work in professional or academically set assignments.
Researcher: So do you feel they don’t know the difference between just casual, informal register and then the academic formal register of the academia?
Ja, yes, that to me is serious problem. They, they often, also in their assignments, and even in class, they talk like they would talk to their friends. They, they, don’t get this academia kind of way of seeing things, or er it’s even worse, if you for instance ask them, “What is your take on something; now explain yourself”. They, they really can’t. It’s like they can’t think beyond the, the er, what they’re reading. They can only see what they are reading; they can’t explain to you why they think that they for instance do not agree with a certain, a certain matter. And of course again one will say that’s not a hundred per cent of your students.
Researcher: Would you say it’s the majority of students?
I would take it that when one look at it it’s maybe out of a group of, I’ve looked at the first years, out of a group of 138, that was only Foundation Phase and Intermediate Phase, and I would say about a quarter of them have that problem. So the majority or actually are doing quite well and some even would really impressed me with their thinking skills, their creativeness, the way that they can engage with academic texts, so no, for me it’s the minority who really struggle

What do you think is the cause of that? Well, what I’ve tried to determine with these students, because it came quite, early in this semester, I picked up that about 40 per cent of this class run the risk of failing so I tried to implement other methods, tutorials, er talking to them, to try and improve that and what, what became very clear to me, is that firstly, that this children’s, lots of our students and it’s really standing out that our students from our poorer communities struggle with their English, probably because its their second language and although it teachers them in even the teachers themselves are often not that strong in their English so they, they teach children the wrong thing and they bring that over to, to university er, again a very strong point that you’ve probably heard the debate or read lots of times it’s again very
apparent that your Afrikaans student coming from your Afrikaner, Afrikaans high school or the English was either their second language or not their home language often do better with the English than your student coming from the English schools.

Technical interruption. Volume, where’s the volume. It’s a blank spot. Stop it and put it the other way.

In your home language …

Researcher: Apart from the language, just in general, their approach are they prepared, are they intellectually, emotionally, are they cognitively developed enough to cope with tertiary education?

The one thing that I want to say is that the group that we took in this year, the first year group, emotionally they are very ready. It’s as though these kids are really they can function independently they arrive here in previous years we’ve often seen them falling around, struggling to get to the right venues struggling to get into the drill of the academic world, but the first years for me this year, I didn’t pick that up. Very soon in their course I gave them an assignment where they had to work independently on the computers in the library. We gave them various Internet addresses they had to consult and I really hanged very low there. I did not give them lots of pointers and I was amazed with what these students came up with. They really impressed me with that, proving to me that as far as the technological world, they’re actually quite competent and they managed very, very soon to sort themselves out, to have them registered at the labs, to get around faculty, by themselves. We don’t have the same problems of late arrival, showing that they can plan. They can time manage, especially if they travel from far areas they know they have to get up earlier, to get earlier buses. To me it was really obvious this year for instance to have this year’s students and all of their classes was at quarter-to-eight, to have them waiting there for you when you walk in. Where in the past we often sort of reverted to only starting the class at 8 o’clock I didn’t have to do it this, this year.

Researcher: Previous years?
Previous years we had serious problems with that and very lame excuses like transport or couldn’t get up in the hostel, breakfast was served late. It’s as though students are taking their studies more seriously. They er;

Researcher: What do you think can be the reason for that?

I wonder if maybe the whole schooling system, the way that we focus on the holistic development, teaching them that partly it’s their responsibility; if I’m going to be late because I didn’t have breakfast, I had to weigh up what is most important to me, eating breakfast or attending a lecture. In the past they would just say, “we waited for food”. Our students will now be on time. It was very interesting; we ran; I had this first years and I had a group of in-service teachers attending workshops. They stayed in hostel. They had no reason to be late but every day they were late because they had to have breakfast. Students will skip it. It’s as though the younger students are taking more, getting more serious with their studies. I dunno if it’s because they know it costs a lot of money and because lectures are conducted in such a way that’s the other very strong point for me. We get them very interactive; we open up a debate and we facilitate. And they’ve learnt that they really miss a lot if they were not in class.

Researcher: So you feel that this methodology that you adopt, that that contributes to the fact that they realize if we don’t come to classes then …

Yah …It’s I can’t depend afterwards anymore on the lecturer’s power point what he will e-mail me because my friends have come to different insights or they have challenged the lecture and the lecturer has presented an explanation beyond the reader and the power point and I will have that gap if I wasn’t part of it there. So they seem to, they also seem to, enjoy it, to be very much part of your discussions. Look, there’s always the ones who will not participate, who will not come prepared but there’s definitely er er going in the direction of being prepared for lectures, reading extra sources, challenging us. They challenge us as lecturers now.

Researcher: So you do feel that the lecturer goes to the trouble of making the lecture interesting; that they can’t just depend on a note or a handout, that the actual methodology makes a big difference.
Yes. Your students will wait and they will wait for you in class. They, and what I’ve also picked up when we started trying to go also the more, er approach that schools are following now, where kids do co-operative learning, they had to share in groups, we often found that students will hang back. Now we, we sometimes find it hard to control the discussions so that it doesn’t take all your time. In the past we found only from about second or third year we could ask them to come to class and present something there in front of the rest of the group. Now we can start doing it with our first years and they’ll talk, they’ll come, they’ll get up, they’ll talk, they actually are, it’s as if to me, emotionally, they are definitely much more ready to, to say, to not be embarrassed if I say er I is late, er and it’s also as if the other students will rather help them than just laugh and in the past we found our students were not so strong in English and were very scared to participate because of other students and they would feel embarrassed. It’s as though we’re overcoming that.

Researcher: Now the way I interpret your discussion here um I feel that what you are trying to say that it is the whole learning / teaching environment that makes that big difference.

Definitely. Er the other thing that I really sense with our students, I don’t know, maybe I’ll give my age away, but when I was at varsity I would never approach a professor or a senior lecturer out of classroom time. It was just beyond me. I would rather struggle with something, go and ask somebody else. We now have a very open door policy. You’ll see the tables in our foyers. They come and sit there and work. They’re welcome in our offices the whole time. It’s very much more a taking your hand and walking this road with you and it’s just, I think they just feel they are in this environment where it’s really a support from our side. The interesting thing that we did; we’ve only started it now. In the past our first years mainly was at the service faculties; we’ve changed that. We bring them to us, to the family for the first year and we make them familiar with us and in the second year, once they’re more mature, we send them to the service faculties where you don’t find the same almost kind of passionate or empathetic approach. You know the lecturers at
Science are still very sit down, listen to me, I will give you the facts, so we try and prepare them a little bit more for that harshness before we send them, and I think we’ve done the right thing. They, they feel so welcome, they chat and they’re really just part of the big, big team.

Researcher: And the quality of their work? Do you think there’s a big adjustment? They need to adjust, to get used to this quality that they …

Well, the one thing that we would still pick up. If you pick up a student and you read an assignment, then you see this is quality work from the start. You often can’t help yourself but go and look at where is the student coming from. And it’s still indicative that some schools are doing a better job than others. You, you often will find a strong student like that will probably come from a school that you would have read in the newspaper had 100% matric pass rate. A school that where there were strikes may be part of it for the first three days but then they’re back to their job and you still pick it up that when they come from other schools that we get to know through our teaching practice as not always really so well managed, that they do perform – they under-perform.

Researcher: So do you feel that the background also contributes a lot to …

A lot to the … especially when it comes to intellectual performance, cognitive performance … Ya.

Researcher: Well, thank you very much.

It’s a big, big pleasure. If there’s anything else, just come back.
Interview 3  Dept: Science Education  22 June 2007

Introduction

I’m a lecturer in Science Education. I’ve been so for the past three years, but I’ve worked on various research projects here in the country for the past six years. I teach in-service and pre-service teachers for Science Education.

The question: What level of … to have at the level at present?

In my experience as a Science Education lecturer there are three things for me in Science. You know, there are three languages I think students come in with, actually four. There is, there’s a home language, that students speak at home and I’m not talking Xhosa, Zulu, Afrikaans, it’s just basic everyday, almost informal language that they speak at home. Then they come to university and they have an academic language that they speak. And then they come to Science, and believe it or not there’s a Science language that they also have to learn too. So, I’ll be talking in the background and the context of academic and Science, Science because that’s what I see every day in terms of academic language or academic literacy, excuse me, the reading and the writing and the speaking. Students come in at a generally decent level of academic language. They have the ability to read, they have the ability to write, er the quality of that reading and writing in terms of reading comprehension and academic writing is a little bit lower than maybe where I would expect them. So I don’t know what the kind of norms and the national expectation is, but for me and let me give you an example of an assignment I had them write.

The first assignment was to discuss their experiences in Science. So it’s a personal reflection. They had some guiding questions on there. And although they could, they could speak about themselves and their experience
and relate that information through writing, the writing itself, the grammar, spelling, the format of it, was not very good. Some of them failed to answer certain parts and when I questioned them ...and many of them got below 60%. That’s very, you know, 50’s to 60’s... and they were very cross with me and said, ‘Ma’am we had English last year’, and these are my second year students. ‘We’ve had English, I’ve done a lot of writing, this isn’t fair and I said there’s a level of writing that’s okay for certain classes. Or it’s okay if you’re writing a letter to your friend but it’s a different expectation of what I would have in a Science class. They have the rubric hmm you have the guiding questions. Use it. You know. So it was difficult for them to get out the different way of writing so I think some of them are reverting back to that home language (that we were talking about) when they were writing.

Researcher: so what you are saying, or is this what you are saying, that they should be able to discern between the different registers?

Yes, yes, very much so. Very much so. Er so that actually took a while because all of my, most of my assignments are writing assignments for the first Science class so it took them a while to get used to what an academic paper might look like. So that took a while. Er reading for purposes of writing tests, that was also difficult. They would say ‘Ma’am, we don’t exactly know what you want in this question’. We spent a lot of time, we have two tests and an exam, looking at sample questions, saying what am I asking here because when I give questions in my tests or exams, I set the context of it. So I might give them a piece of information in the beginning and then ask the question. And many of them were saying, ‘Oh why do you put that information at the top? It just confuses me’. You know, because if they read, er let me give you an example. We do, er, we do a section on Science notebooks, getting students to write what is traditionally called lab books but there are certain differences to that. So in my question I might say something like er Researchers so and so say that Science notebooks provide a good framework and then my next question would be: ‘Explain how Science notebooks would
be er diagnostically or pedagogically helpful for teachers’. So then they said, ‘but you just asked …’ They would answer by telling me everything they know about Science notebooks. They said well that that’s the question, it’s on Science notebooks. And I said, it’s not. List how they can be diagnostically helpful for teachers. I’m not asking you the contents of the book. So it’s really discerning what’s the gist or what’s the importance of the question.

The words *diagnostic* and *pedagogic*, the vocabulary needs to be developed academically as well. I said at the university if your code for your classes is PICN201, do you know what the ‘p’ stands for? They say ‘no’ and I said, it’s Pedagogics. What does that mean? Not really sure and these are Education students, at university level. That’s worrying, so how do I perceive … let’s go back to the question. How do I perceive … the level of academic literacy?

They have reading and writing skills in terms of actually doing it. But in terms of the comprehension, thinking critically, writing with a certain style or technique to fit the purpose. I think that needs to be developed further. Your second part, how can academic literacy best be developed at higher education level, you know to be honest with you I don’t think that academic literacy should start necessarily at a higher education level. Those are, in terms of the questioning, in developing thinking skills, to discern what questions are being asked, ‘how you gonna answer a question, or how you gonna evaluate a piece of literature or an article. I don’t think it starts at higher education level. I think reading skills, reading skills, yes, it’s a progression. But that should start to be introduced at high school, at least. Er maybe matric, I’m not quite sure, but er yah. I don’t think that we can strengthen that at higher education level. academic language needs to be informed throughout their education.

Researcher: You see this is what is bothersome, just to come back to the question. That er they are here now and it hasn’t been done so … I don’t want to use the word, whose fault is it? But can we sort of look for the deficit
factor in the student all the time? Are we also as we go along, let’s say we are teachers, we are high school teachers. Do you feel that we should already have started there?

To some extent yes, yah, to some extent yes, but I tell you, we do not want to put blame. It should have happened before. What am I actually doing now? We’ve tailored our first semester Science class to introduce scientific literacy. So what does that mean to be scientifically literate? Well, it means that you read for Science, you are able to go through a cognitive process and procedural process of planning and doing an investigation so that also lines up with the LO’s in Science. Then again they have to write for Science in terms of a Science notebook or a lab book. Er and that’s why we introduce more and more vocabulary, talk about Science concepts, but then they have to go back and read more to build their knowledge on that and then we do, the last part is a form of argumentation or presentation; where they have to present their findings. So we do, in Science we do work at getting them to read and write at an academic level, but an academic scientific level as well, because we do know that they come in slightly lower than we would want them to.

Researcher: Er, can I just ask this at this point in time? You mentioned something about PS…Now if students at that level don’t know what the ‘P’ stands for, what does that say about their questioning and their critical thinking, I mean. Can you just elaborate on that?

Yah…their questioning and their critical thinking. Er you know it’s hard to say but let’s … I’m just trying to think of how to answer this. The level of critical thinking at this point, where they go into, when they’re at university is … maybe average or slightly lower than average. I think a lot of schools are in a position where students don’t really question. They don’t really question what’s happening. We spend a lot of time on questions that we can investigate in class and that takes up a lot longer than what they’re used to
because they say, why do we have to come up with a question to investigate. Why don’t you just give us a question to do?

But that’s not the point of Science and that’s not the point of critical thinking at all. It’s looking at certain things around you and questioning why something is. And, yah, it’s a bit lower than what I expected.

Researcher: And the actual assignments? The actual assignments, when they do assignments?

Their actual assignments, again, Like I said many of my assignments are writing assignments, so it’s not something that they can actually look up in a book, copy or write down, because I ask them to analyze certain situations. The writing assignments, they do improve, improve over a semester but as educators, I think we have to be clear in what we want, so making sure that we have an appropriate assessment tool, so they know what the rules of the game are.

Researcher: I’m glad that you’ve mentioned that er as educators we should be more explicit because very often when you ask the tutors, the instructors, ‘Have you made it explicit to the students?’ then they themselves are not very sure.
Yah.
Researcher: That’s why I’m saying, you know, we’re very quick to transfer the blame to the students. So if you can just … As educators we definitely have to. We have to set the expectation and we have to have the means to get them there.

It’s through our assessments; it’s through our guiding; and through our actual physical help. I spend a lot of time with students, actually crafting their writing assignments. It takes a lot of work from the educators as well so it’s not just
the students that are coming in who are of a poor level, but we need to assist them along the way.

Researcher: So do you agree that this problem is not a problem for language lecturers or language educators, *per se*?

Oh, definitely not. Definitely not. It’s across the spectrum.

Researcher: So do you feel that everybody should be involved? In trying to do something, take some corrective action, and implement some corrective measures?

Yah, we should. I think that is why I mentioned the difference in Science. Your language in science and writing will be different in what your English or your literature lecturer expects from you. So even though the university provides a writing service, a writing centre, it’s still, the onus is still on the lecturer of that particular class to help them craft, crystallize or develop their literacy skills in that particular subject.

Researcher: And this writing centre. They do have … what type of service?

I think if you go there, with the draft of an assignment, or an essay, or whatever, then they. We have this on campus. I hear that they help you develop into a good assignment or a good thesis, whatever they need to do.

Researcher: And tell me, do you ask them to sort of go and read up something for the next lecture?

Yes, yes. We have to.

Researcher: And?
Oh, do they actually read it? Some of them will, some of them wont. But that’s all students, you always have your students who will do the assignment and read. Some of them wont. We spend a lot of time during lectures, discussing the actual reading, because the book that we use, it’s meant for teachers but the language level of that is high. There are guiding questions in the book as well. We just, we do discuss the readings to make sure that it’s clear. Anything else, we did reading, we did a bit of writing. In terms of speaking …

Researcher: Yes.

In terms of speaking, I find that … my students are very good communicators in terms of speaking and language, even the ones who say, ‘I don’t know how to explain it in English’. And I say, explain it, however you can and what’s nice is when we’re speaking in class, and somebody says, ‘I don’t know how to explain in English”, somebody else will help them and then we build on … and we build on language and vocabulary. We use that type of strategy, a discussion strategy, and that seems to work very well for all students and English and non-English speakers, so I would say, yes, generally they speak very well.

Researcher: So would you say the environment, the actual learning environment has to be conducive to that?

Yah…because somebody must say, the Afrikaans speaker, ‘I don’t know to explain in Afrikaans’ then another will say, ‘What are you trying to say and they’ll talk and say, ‘Don’t explain it this way, explain it that way’. And they’ll try to construct that together, which I think is very valuable and then they’ll say. This is what means, in English. They’re a type of support structure for themselves, their peers in class and the ability to er … the envir… that we are able to say, talk about it and let me know…It’s nice.
Researcher: Okay, last question from my side, … Methodologies, do you feel that our methodologies are relevant or?

The literacy methodologies? I don’t know. I’m not a literacy …

Researcher: From your perspective.

Oh, from my perspective? I’m trying to make them very relevant but I told you that 1st semester class we introduced the scientific literacy more at looking at reading and writing and developing explanations for concepts and theories. When they come in for the first year of Science, I don’t start off teaching content straight away. There’s no use in me doing that, when I already know that. There’s a Science literacy issue that I need to address first, so that’s how we tackle that.

Researcher: Is it, does it work?

I think it does. Their reading, their writing improves. Now the test will be next semester when I teach Science, when I teach the content of Science. Will these strategies that I employed in the first semester help them in the second semester. I hope so and that’s why we’ve done that and I will be able to tell you that … Actually, I just made that change, this year, yah.

Researcher: Thank you very much.
Informal talk at commencement of meeting developing into interview.

Researcher: Yes, er, it’s a general thing because like we said, I mean if they can’t read …When I started teaching, then I realized very quickly, in Paper One, there was this essay and a letter, and they would memorize these things and I found it wasn’t a proper reflection.

Is still very much rote memorization, so when they get to university level, they actually haven’t had much experience in critical thinking. They’re given the facts; they learn them; they regurgitate them. When they get to university, we expect them to be able to critically reflect on things and to read with understanding but that has not been the experience up until that point, so,

This is Interview no 4 in progress now.
Researcher: Could you just give us a bit of your background, not your name or the institution that you’re from, just so as we can see what authority, where you’re speaking from.

Well, I’ve been at the university for 14-15 years working a lot with Inset teachers and also with Preset teachers. So I’ve had the privilege of seeing it from … new students coming into the system and those who’ve been in the system a long time and I’ve had 17 years of classroom experience. That has stood me in good stead to know where these students are at and what’s been happening in the classroom situation.

Researcher: So would … like to share some of those experiences? And where … think they are at when they get to university, to coin your phrase.

Oh, I think students are, when they get to university is often a big wake-up call for them er my own daughter aimed for an A for Maths in matric and when she got to university she passed Maths with a 50 per cent. So where she thought she was really good at Maths, she was really just learning. It meant she was able to learn and regurgitate, so for school level that was considered to be enough, whereas at university level they are expected to think about their thinking, understand where things are coming from, critically look and analyse and I don’t feel that even our 1st language speakers are in a position to do that. They haven’t had that training at school.

Researcher: What would that be? Would that be the development of the critical thinking skills or is it a language problem?

Firstly, it’s probably a lack of development of the critical thinking skills but secondly to add a language barrier on top of that, just puts some of our students at a huge disadvantage when it comes to achieving at university level.
Researcher: Can I just ask you because I don’t normally interrupt, but you mentioned now about the 50 per cent and the A-plus and I wasn’t aware that you can attain very high marks through memorization in Maths. Can you elaborate on that?

Well, in Maths at school level, it’s basically learning theorems and applying those theorems to problems that are given to you. I think, if any, there is minimal interpretation of understanding where the formula comes from. Er if I take for example down to senior level, the area of a circle is ‘pi r squared’. They must learn that formula; they apply it; get the answer and they get full marks for a sum. But what is pi r squared? Where did the radius square come from? So there is absolutely no depth in the understanding, where the formulas come from, as long as they can learn them, apply them.

Researcher: So even when they get an A, it doesn’t mean that they have an intrinsic knowledge, is that what you’re trying to say?

Absolutely not! They probably have a high recall ability, where they are able to learn something, regurgitate it, soothe understanding is a very small part or has been. Maybe it’s changing and I think with the Maths literacy some schools may have, but certainly where my daughter came from it was a case of I you can learn it and regurgitate it, you are going to do exceptionally well.

Researcher: I must say for me this is a wake-up call, because for us the Maths was always the yardstick. If students could do Maths, then they had that critical literacy skill necessary for coping at university.

Yah, and that I think a lot of our 1st year students – you know the failure rate at university is as you know particularly high and yet they come into the university systemer thinking.
Researcher: And what is the, is there a difference between the type of assignment that they get at high school and at university? Are you explicit about …

I haven’t been in the classroom for 15 years, so I wouldn’t like to attest to that, but certainly I think our assignments at university even at the primary level at which I’m teaching, they’re certainly asked to think about how they would tech it in the classroom, how they would weigh it up, the best methods to actually implement it and get some research about it and make decisions for themselves which I don’t think to that extent they do at school level.

Researcher: So, would you say then our Methodologies, especially at the schools need upgrading or diversifying or something needs to be done about our input …

I do think that maybe we should do more research of students at FET level. When they get to the university they are feeding into them at the FET levels, the sort of skills that would be needed at university level; that they’re actually meeting the needs of the er university student.

Researcher: And the quality of the assignment? Er when they write the assignment?

Er, I was thinking about it, I did jot something down, if I could take it from here. Firstly, if I could just go back a step and say that in the lecture room, er it’s much easier for students who have a barrier, a language barrier, to be understood because they have the opportunity to clarify their thoughts and ideas because lecturers are able to re-phrase questions, to ask probing questions, and eventually get full understanding in the classroom situation. But when it comes to writing tests and exams, I think that’s really hard for many of our L2 students because in marking them I then have no idea what they’re trying to say, and yet if I ask them that same question after the test,
and with probing and re-phrasing questions, they’re actually cognitively have an understanding but they are unable to express that in written form, in a second language, that’s not their home language. So I think that’s hugely disadvantageous to our students er I think sometimes that’s why we get a sometimes big discrepancy between an exam mark and a Cass mark, because the students that I teach at the university, any assignment that I give them, or any task, they have the freedom to pass it thought me as many times as they like before the final submission date.

With this passing through me I’m able to guide them and direct and to encourage them and they’re able to improve it before the actual final submission date. So they sometimes end up with a higher mark than they would have got had I just set the task and said this is your submission date. Now in a test or an exam they don’t have this opportunity to refine their thoughts or clarify if their understanding of the question is correct.

Researcher: So would you then say that the students are in need of scaffolding?

Definitely. And also just some continued support. You know very often we find that students sit in groups because we work in groups in the lecture situation; they mostly gravitate towards same language speaking groups. I found that where I make a specific effort to create heterogeneous groups, that it’s a much more positive climate in that group, because they’re learning from each other, they speak, they ae from different backgrounds, and there’s a lot more discussion that takes place whereas if the Xhosa speakers sit together, they’ll speak. The Afrikaans speakers sit together, the English speakers sit together, and that has its advantages in that you speak the same language, you can get the task done much quicker. But I think a lot more learning takes place when they are able to discuss with each other, from different backgrounds.
Researcher: Can we speak a little bit about the backgrounds of the students?

Sure. Er …

Researcher: Do you find that their social, their socio-cultural background situation impacts on their studies?

Definitely.

Researcher: The way they present themselves and so on?

I think so and just going back to allowing students to pass their work through me for a feedback. I had one student who failed my Maths course last year and when I called him aside to ask why his marks were so low, and I said you didn’t take advantage of the opportunity to give it to me, he said, ‘We don’t do that. We don’t feel it’s right to do that’. So somewhere I had failed to understand where he was coming from so after a long discussion, he eventually agreed that next semester he would pass it through me. He saw the advantage but I think there’s a lot of, I don’t know if it’s cultural or just personality or what it is, but some students didn’t take the advantage of that and we need to try and understand the students but of course in the limited time we often don’t have time to have those discussions until it’s too late.

Researcher: Now then, you gave an opportunity to pass these assignments through you. Now normally the first thing teachers tell us, ‘We have large classes; we have such large classes’. Now did you have the time? Did you have to put in extra time?

It’s a huge amount of extra time on the part of the lecturer. I think it’s very worthwhile because the amount of learning that takes place, with the direction given and the positive feedback. I think is well worth any amount of time that is given. Definitely, I think my largest class is 38, though that’s not huge and
not all of them will pass work by me, because many of them feel they can cope on their own. But I do feel it’s a support system for those who want to achieve and are just struggling to come to terms with the work.

Researcher: Do you feel it’s just laziness on the part of those who don’t want to avail themselves …
Yes, certainly. I mean they are students and some of them feel they don’t want to go to all the extra trouble, but I do feel it’s important that they know, should they need support, the support is there.

Researcher: How do you feel about creating an environment that’s conducive to learning? Do you think that lecturers should consciously go about that? Is it important?

I think it’s important and I think if our students don’t feel relaxed and comfortable in the lecture situation, they’re not going to ask questions if they don’t understand. And I think it’s important also for lecturers, even if students don’t put up their hands, to ask them questions, but make sure that they are questions where they’ll be able to respond and to get positive feedback and encouragement, just to build their confidence, because some of them in a whole situation will not put up their hand.

Researcher: I was gonna ask you now, the word ‘response’ appeals to me. How do they respond in class in general?

In general, I think you’ll always get those who respond to every question and talk as much as they can and I think you’ve got to guard against that and just nip it in the bud and those who never respond, to somehow draw them in … participation and just ask them to respond even if it’s something that’s not hugely difficult but just that they become part of the whole class situation.
Researcher: You see, one of the professors some time last year said that er the students also don’t know what to expect, because they go around to the schools, especially when it’s the teaching practicum, you find students at high school getting something like 20-odd per cent in Maths or Science or so, but they are going to make those learning areas their majors because those are the skills that are required and he says, you know, it’s quite a sad story because he knows that they wont even pass matric Maths, so … They’re not sufficiently … is there no depth in telling students, look, it’s fine, these are scarce skills, but this is what’s expected of you?

Well, I can really only speak from Intermediate Phase and I really believe that every single person can do Intermediate Phase Maths. It’s, I think the problems in to the ‘How do we teach this?’ What are our entrance levels? What are our exit levels? How do we get learners to understand this? So, I think some of our students who come with really poor Maths results, are pleasantly surprised in the end, if they dedicate themselves to it because with all the discussion and all the support that they get, I think they can do it. I don’t think there’s any …

Researcher: So you feel that jump, from matric to 1st year for instance, can be bridged if they apply themselves and …?

And if they have the necessary ongoing support and monitoring.

Researcher: So you feel those three go together – the application on the part of the students, then the scaffolding, the support and then the ongoing monitoring.

Ongoing monitoring.

Researcher: That’s important, do you feel?
Yes, and if both the lecturer and the student want to achieve, and they apply themselves and there is that ongoing support and monitoring, I don't see why they won't achieve. I think the language is a huge barrier. I don't know how we're going to overcome that but I think the people who struggle with language definitely need additional support.

Researcher: So you feel we're not dreaming. There is a solution. It can be …

I think it can be done. The 'how' I don't have the answer to that. I was speaking to L M yesterday and he said the 3rd year Maths is increasing from 2 double lectures a week to 3. I suggested to him that couldn't we have 2 just for everyone, and the 3rd one be support for those who are really struggling. And give them the freedom without the ones who cope really well in the class to discuss what they might consider to be arbitrary questions but really aren't. And just really have a small support group.

Researcher: Is that what he does?

No, he doesn't. He has 3 double lectures for all students but if they're coping with 2 double lectures, would it not be a good idea to use the third one for those who feel they need extra?

Researcher: Then we also found once, that when we had these classes, that the ones who didn't need them, came, and the others …

I think that's probably the reality of it, but I also feel that students must know, if they don't pass, they've had the opportunities. They've had the offer of all the support that they might need to pass and therefore as a university we can say we gave them all the opportunities. That's important.

Researcher: Is there anything you still want to add?
Er, I think I’ve probably said … I think, written language for L2 students is just a huge complex issue, that I don’t know how we’re going to solve that. Er, you know the spoken language is bad enough. It can be, with the interaction and the probing questions and the re-phrasing, we can get to a point where they all understand it. Whereas the written language, I do think we need a programme specifically for writing skills for L2 students. I do know that our communications department – there is a department that is offering that. I think we should take advantage of that.

Researcher: Er and assignments. Do they hand them in on time? Do they take time with the assignments? Are they proud of … do they want to hand in a product of quality?

I think as the reality is that you’ll always get the ones who don’t really care and who don’t set themselves a high enough standard. Er and I had an interesting conversation with one student on teaching prac where he actually showed incredible natural talent while teaching, but when it came to the worksheets he gave to the students, I said to him, ‘Are you proud to give that worksheet to the student?’ And he said ‘yes, what’s wrong?’ And it was handwritten, which isn’t a problem when the writing is neat and uniform, but it was very untidy, with mistakes in it, lines drawn without a ruler and he seemed quite surprised that I felt it was not acceptable. So I’m not sure if he was genuinely surprised, but he really seemed genuinely surprised and I said if you haven’t got access to a computer then write it out, but neatly. And he said, ‘well my handwriting isn’t neat’. So I said well, what about a colleague? And there was a colleague there, and I said would you have written this for him if he’d asked you, she said ‘yes’. So, sometimes they just need to be a bit more resourceful. Er if I think about our students’ level of academic literacy many of them I would put at Intermediate Phase L1 speakers which is incredibly dismal for a university situation but I think that’s the reality of it and I do think we need to work together on it to improve this. It’s not very often the students’ fault that they’re at this level but I do think some of them show incredible talent, incredible
potential and if we give them all the assistance that they could take advantage of, then at least we’ve done everything that we could do for that.

Researcher: Er then, this that you spoke about. You said now he gave them a handwritten worksheet. Er was he not aware of what was expected of him?

I don’t know how he couldn’t have been er but given the benefit of the doubt that maybe he didn’t, I mean he’s a 3rd year student, so he was probably taking a chance, but I was very disappointed that he actually got to the point of giving students a worksheet of this calibre.

Researcher: I think sometimes we also do as little as possible and see if we can get by …

Hm hm human nature (laughter).

Researcher: Anything else you want to add?

I don’t think so. I think it’s just an incredible privilege to work with students, and to help them reach their potential, and try and make them the best teachers that we can. Obviously, that’s got to come hugely from them as well, but I wouldn’t swop it.

Researcher: That’s what I love to hear. Thank you very much.
I’ve been involved with Education for, gosh I can’t even count the years. I actually started teaching in the U K in a very mixed er secondary school and realized the difficulties lots of learners had. I moved from that into doing a remedial diploma and working with learners who had learning disabilities and from there I moved into gifted education where we were really looking at the whole issue of being able to read critically, challenge concepts, develop own ideas and so on. So we worked very intimately with er how you could expand and increase opportunities for learners.

Er and then I moved into the environment where learners from different backgrounds were coming into a predominantly English speaking school with a very long tradition er of middle class values and er experienced the difficulties learners had in adapting to the social, educational and language environment of the school which was an enormous problem for us. Er by then I did a fair amount of research, using my remedial background and so on, er and arrived at the conclusion that we should very much support mother tongue and that it was irrational to give no value to the knowledge of mother tongue and insist on a third language being taught when children didn’t even understand the first language of the school. So they were very, very severely disadvantaged.

Er so then I worked on a programme which introduced Xhosa at a first language level. I sustained it from grade A, grade 1 now, and where our non-Xhosa speaking learners learned Xhosa at a second language level and were therefore actually able to communicate with the Xhosa speaking children at
the school. Er that made an absolutely radical difference to the academic output of the children who were otherwise marginalized in the school.

Researcher: So you mean the first language speakers learned Xhosa as a second language?

No, they learned it as a first language. The Xhosa speakers.
Researcher: Yes, and …
And the non-Xhosa speakers learned it as a second language.
Researcher: So they could communicate.

They could communicate. Er, in fact what happened was that because they were hearing Xhosa all the time, the English speaking children became very, very much better at speaking Xhosa than they became at speaking Afrikaans, because they never heard Afrikaans. It was just what was taught to them in the classroom. Er that really reinforced for me the role of language in academic literacy because of that, you know, what increased their ability to achieve. And you can’t divorce it from all the other issues, like language and identity, language and culture, all the things that make up who I am, er and I’m not going to be very confident to be critical, or to challenge concepts, and things like that, if I don’t feel really okay in who I am.

So I think the whole psychological, social issues around culture and identity are very, very closely tied to language and then er you know language is really our social means of thought. So if we aren’t really, really competent in language we truly are not going to be able to think very adequately, nor are we going to be able to read critically because reading is obviously one of our language skills. We’re not gonna be able to question because we wont understand er we certainly wont grasp the concepts because we wont have the language to think and understand them and then to develop one’s own ideas one needs breadth and depth of reading and confidence otherwise we just become little parrots and we repeat. Er that’s sort of on a personal level.
I mean I think there’s a lot around what you’re asking here which relates to pedagogy which relates to how information is transferred and whether it is transferred as straight fact or whether learners are invited to think about it, then bearing in mind that they need language in order to think about it.

Researcher: And you feel that if they don’t have that language they cannot communicate properly; they can’t think about it. They can’t be critical; they can’t analyse.

Even if they are critically analyzing in their home language, they would still have to do the translation thing, so it slows down the process enormously and as soon as you then put those kinds of barriers in a mixed environment, er you will find and I mean you experience this anywhere, the people in whose language an event is taking place are the people who are articulate. Er and so one’s judgment is that they are thinking, they are reading, they are understanding.

Researcher: That isn’t necessarily the case?

That your ways of measuring are I mean for example I’ve watched an assessment video on Mathematics and learners were asked to solve a quite complicated issue and they had to discuss it amongst themselves. Well, the English speaking children discussed it. The others were silent. The assessment then rated the English speaking children as having understanding etc the other children had no opportunity to be tested and yet they were evaluated. So our system of evaluation now is it it aims to take into account different language levels, but in fact, it doesn’t. As soon as you start using language which you do other than in a few cases as your tool of assessment then anybody who isn’t absolutely fluent in that language ...

Now to take your point that we’re not just looking at people who are learning through a second language, we’re also looking at the broader environment, I
mean then we go back to Bernstein who er spoke about Education as a middle class enterprise. So education as it is presented in our schools, is very definitely a middle class enterprise.

Researcher: Can you elaborate on that?

Er well if you just look at what's expected of a little child arriving at school. They must know colours; they must know shapes; er they must be able to hold a pencil; they must have the rudimentary ability to colour in etc etc. Those are all things that middle class families emphasize. Er even in discussions, even in thinking er the children who are being read to from the time they can't even sit still and listen sufficiently are having the patterns of the language embedded. They're having attention span developed; they are sharing in a very meaningful, loving experience, which engages them in activities which the school then reinforces. Whereas if you take any child growing up in a very different environment where there’s no television, there are no books, there are no crayons, there are no pencils, there’s no paper. There’s no time, maybe, er and there is perhaps just a very strong oral tradition. Then that child arrives at any school with massive disadvantages in terms of what they are expected immediately to be able to do in the Reception classes. Er there again, you work with self-image; you work with what do they experience? Do they experience success? No, they experience failure. Does that encourage them to want to learn to think, to read? No … do they have any stuff to reinforce at home er so I think Bernstein’s whole look at how the class system functions er as marginalizing learners from the way our education system runs is, is a very real one.

Researcher: So you feel, this critical thinking ability which we expect from them when they get to varsity, that is really cemented in the home. You start off with, like you said now, if they don't have crayons and so on and so on, then obviously they are ignorant, ‘ignorant’ in that those things exist because
they only then encounter these things for the first time when they get to school.

And very often they don’t encounter them when they get to school. I mean, you know, very often …
Researcher: Certain schools.
Well yes, I have seen where they had to borrow pencils from the sub A’s in order to do something in grade 7 because the grade 7’s don’t have pencils. So er ya, I think the home plays an enormous role in that er I don’t think it’s exclusive.
Researcher: I think it’s economics again… the socio-economic construct, embeddedness.
Well, yes and then it becomes a er it’s more than just economics; it’s social as well.
Researcher: Like I said, it’s socio-economic.
But er I think that also you know that the school environment has en enormous role to play, like I’m saying you know you’re reinforcing failure because you’re expecting things the learners can’t do. Er you, you know you’re not creating an environment where children are comfortable and this can happen in any school. We know that.

Researcher: So you feel this creation of an environment is important?

Oh, absolutely. I mean nobody is going to critically question things if er they are put down or silenced by a teacher and if they are in a teacher-centred classroom then their critical thinking is not going to be encouraged. But we mustn’t be fooled by believing that so-called group work is going to develop that critical thinking.
Researcher: ‘Lyn’ can we just go to how you perceive the academic literacy, at what degree, what level … (at university?) would you place it? Do you feel that they are ready to cope? That there is a gap which needs to be filled somewhere between the coming from school and varsity?
Er you know I can’t really speak, as I said, for pre-service so I have no experience of learners coming, well I mean, very peripherally coming from school into a university environment. I have a lot of experience working with teachers.

Researcher: Yes if you can elaborate on that.

Yes, if you are training and there is a huge combination of factors. Again, I work primarily with teachers who are working through a second language. Er where teachers are learning through a first language I find that the disparity between the way they answer questions, the way they deal with issues, the way they interrogate and interact with a module is completely different from the teacher who has very, very limited language skills. Er but I myself speak Xhosa quite fluently, so when I have group discussions in my sessions, I am able, you know, within a Xhosa environment, I am able to grasp sufficient of the discussion to feel very confident that my teachers understand the issues; that they tangle with the issues, that the issues are alive and real for them.

Researcher: And do you feel that they do have that critical ability?

I don’t for one minute doubt they have the critical ability but we were speaking about how you need a classroom environment that allows that critical ability to flourish. You also have a social and institutional environment which you require for that to be heard. My sense is er that however our education system has operated or our society has operated, and our political environment has operated, my experience of in-service teachers is that they are hugely disempowered. My experience of their continual barrage of in-service training, of workshops, of change of curricula etc has actually brought them into a state of paralysis. And that when you get them in a free-flowing environment, there is excitement, discussion, recognition that aha but that’s where it stops, because when it comes to answering exams or anything like that, then there is that search to give what they believe is the right answer. So they’re functioning in two spaces. The one is the ability to question, to understand, to recognize issues, to do what is … and the other is to do what is ‘right’.
Interview 7 Remedial Lecturer 27 June 2007

Introduction

I’m a part-time lecturer at a university and I have been there now for 12 years on a part-time basis, lecturing in post-grad qualifications, in other words, people that have already received their first qualification and are going on and are getting a second or third. Also, I present workshops as part of in-service training to qualified teachers and other professional, and I have also been doing that for a good couple of years. So I feel I have got quite an extensive interaction with students and with qualified people in general.

Researcher: And what, I don’t want to talk about what standard they have. What level of critical literacy do you perceive them to have? Can they think
independently? If you give them an assignment to do will they take it a little further or what?

In my experiences with all these individuals, I found that is one of the areas that is lacking. Some tend to have slightly more obviously, critical skills than others but the majority of the students and qualified teachers that I have worked with lack that ability, that metacognition skill that they need and I find, especially when it comes to trying to get them to think about what you are trying to teach them or to think about what they are reading, you have to go sometimes to the point of spoon feeding them. And you have to give them clear guidelines as to what to look for, how to present certain stuff. And fortunately enough the majority of them, once they have, once you’ve done it with them, then the little light goes on. But some of them obviously need a little bit more assistance than others. So definitely lacking. I think it’s a skill that needs to be taught already at school level, to our learners in you FET stages, but unfortunately at this precise moment in time er I don’t think it’s covered in our curriculum development to the extent that it should be.

Researcher: And er how do you feel, do you find it when they come to higher education level and then is it an eye-opener to you, that you now have to take them by the hand, like you say, you have to spoon feed these people?

In a way, you know, because I work predominantly with post-grads, yes, it’s quite astounding to find that although these students have finished, in the majority of cases a four-year degree that they still lack the necessary skills to do academic thinking as one would like them to do. Er so maybe even from the tertiary institution point of view they should within their degrees, their first degrees r diplomas, or certificate courses, they should incorporate aspects like that. We do it. Er in one of the components in the course that I offer, we do cover an aspect called metacognition. And so our students are exposed, in a little bit, you know, as part of their course requirement to do that, but I feel
it's still lacking a lot especially when it comes to the students and they have to think for themselves.

Researcher: So would you say then, metacognition, or thinking independently, or critical thinking it's a way of life, it should be part of you?

Yes, in all aspects of life, I would imagine that one must be able to view the pros and cons of something and to think before you speak, you know all aspects. It's basically analyzing, thinking about what you're thinking, giving depth and meaning to what you're feeling, and obviously if one has the correct skills, then I think they'll be better equipped to cope with life in general. It would give them that basis, you know, to be able to think critically about something before actually going on and focus on some aspect of their life.

Researcher: And do you feel that look, these are already in-service teachers. So what is the conclusion one can draw from there? If, if they themselves can't think critically, what do they do in the classrooms?

Shoo! I'd hate to think that. I think the majority of them obviously are aware of the importance of the aspect but they also don't quite know how to implement it possibly, or how to relay the information to the students. That is why maybe in-service training workshops on metacognition, critical thinking could be held, you know, from the Department aspect, or teaching these teachers the necessary skills that they need to relay again and to transfer that information onto their learners.

Researcher: Because obviously, like some of them tell us, 'Well this is how we've been taught'.

Uhm, the things changed a lot I've noticed over the years, and obviously the way that we thought ten years ago, we need to adapt, especially with the new educational system approach like your OBE, and your inclusive education.
Teachers are forced to adapt and change to the way of society and as the regulations that are stipulated by the department and it does take, I mean in my studies last year, with the implementation of inclusive education as one of my questions that I put to a lot of teachers here in the area, they felt that it was going to very difficult for them to adapt as far as attitude, perceptions, skills, knowledge, to the new approach, so any new aspect does take a lot of work to convince the people to apply it, within the classroom.

I think the reason why people are skeptical to apply something is because of a lack of knowledge. So if we can provide in-service training for teachers, get and give them that self-confidence to be able to know what it’s about, know how to do it, know the benefits of it then I can see them applying it more and more in the classroom. If somebody is comfortable with something then they will be more likely to implement it. If we don’t know how to do something, we’re gonna avoid it ourselves.

Researcher: Yes, I’m glad you used that term ‘self-confidence’. Do you think this lack of the ability to think independently, is it related, is it linked to self-confidence?

Every decision that we make in our lives, is based on our self-confidence ability. You know, we select our pathways, our career pathways based on our self-image and our self-concept. So yes, if we don’t have a positive self-confidence, it would definitely determine how we look at things critically, our ability will definitely be limited.

Researcher: Now er self-confidence, creating our own pathways and so on, would you say this has anything in turn to do with our cultural background?

I think perhaps over the years, possibly, yes. You know we’ve had our disadvantaged people who have never really been given the opportunity to come to the fore. They were suppressed as we now obviously know too well and I think it’s only now over the last 10-11 years since we become a
democratic country that the majority of the South African population are now having the ability to speak for themselves and to experience things for themselves; to decide career paths for themselves, to go to shops and beaches and universities of their choice. So yes, I think it could also ... you know not only because of the political history that we've got, but there are still some cultural ... cultures ... who believe in particular women play an inferior role to men and then their you know ability to think critically is denied. It's a case of you do as I say ... you know the man is the main authority figure. Er how one would go about changing, you know, those come from years ... it's very difficult to adapt and to change but I see if you look at Iraq and Iran, you know, the women there are now becoming more liberated and they're not as suppressed as what they were in the previous regime. So, things, whether they're changing for the better or not we shall see, but definitely gender suppression is er now becoming a bit more limited than what it was in the past, allowing for more individuality, boosting of self-confidence, critical thinking, etc etc.

Researcher: So do you think if we do implement some form of module or course or even a few workshops, a series of workshops, that er that will enable them to reach this critical thinking stage that we are striving for? This academic literacy that we are striving to achieve?

If the quality of the workshop is good, you know, and if you make it all ... I always find that things have to be practically orientated, so if wherever possible a workshop is presented and it is related to the practical life of that person then I cannot see why they will not implement it. If it's just theory, it's not gonna work. It must be related and how they will be able to apply whatever they obtain in a workshop within a practical situation, then yes, it will definitely work.

Researcher: So you feel that they are definitely not higher education material, when they get to higher education institutions? Your experience ...
The leavers at the moment, I haven’t had any experience with the school leavers, who have just come to varsity for the first year, but I have spoken to my fellow colleagues at the tertiary institution and yes, that seems to be a big problem, they expect still to be very much spoon fed. They’re very much still in the baby form as far as student life is concerned.

Researcher: So in other words they don’t really have a concept of what is expected of them?

A lot of them don’t. There are some that have obviously had brothers and sisters or maybe aunts or uncles that are at a tertiary institution that have exposed them to that, but the majority of your first year students, yes, that does seem to be a big problem. Getting into varsity life is obviously completely different to going from primary school to high school for instance. It’s a whole way of independence and fending for yourself and thinking I’ve got to attend the courses now if it’s gonna be for my benefit. And I think that’s why most of the varsities have such a high drop-out rate, within the first year, because the students are not always prepared for this.

Researcher: And the volume of work, that they suddenly encounter now, would you say that has anything to do with it?

I don’t think so, my eldest son is in grade 11 and that volume isn’t that much greater. So I wouldn’t say …

Researcher: Thank you very much.
I work at a tertiary institution; it’s my 12th year now, and before that 2 years’ experience as well at a tertiary institution. I lecture in the department of Biochemistry, Micro-biology, and I also supervise post-graduate students.

As I was saying earlier on, my interaction is with 1st and 2nd years and I must really say I’m amazed at the quality of writing that comes from them in terms of answering questions; structure of sentences, the use of language, the actual language is really pathetic and the spelling as well. I don’t know where that emanates from but I just drew an example with my son, where, he’s in grade 4 now, at Summerwood, where the amount of spelling that comes from his writings. It is not corrected; it’s basically just glossed over as opposed to be corrected and perhaps alluded to that perhaps this needs to be corrected in terms of spelling. Nothing like that. You sort of have to determine what it actually means, you know, irrespective of the spelling – sort of sound it out and listen to what the sound is and then he gets it correct. And that is what I’m picking up. It’s like that at university level as well; they write it the way it sounds and the spelling is totally incorrect. I don’t know if that is part of Outcomes-based, or what. I’m not familiar with what that actually entails, but it’s something that seriously needs to be looked at because part of your work environment and what’s expected would be possibly report writing or just literacy. I mean to have people not being able to spell properly, or write sentences, accurately, you know structure their sentences, then where are we going to be? You know, in terms of efficiency for that matter, or effectiveness.

Researcher: And their er cognitive ability?

Er, that is again … that varies. I think what I’ve found, what I’ve picked up, your Zimbabwean students, they fare extremely well … best in the class, and then you have er your White students and I think that is part of the previous dispensation that we are still dealing with. Thee is something about the Zim students where their critical thinking has been honed. Most of the questions I get, would be from Zim students. The type of detail that they’ve been
exposed to at school is amazing. They would question me on an aspect that I would not have necessarily dealt with in class but that they are linking, they themselves are linking to subject matter that they had been taught before and now they’re integrating.

Researcher: They’re forming that association.

Yes! They have the ability to integrate whereas our students would compartmentalize and not look at it as a whole, but as this is Physiology; this is chemistry; this is Physics; and so on, and not try and relate and integrate, whereas they do. It would be great if we could adopt a model that they are using because the quality of their teaching and I don’t know if it is er the model that they are using or if it is the quality of their teachers that one is dealing with as well. It could be a combination.

Researcher: But they say er Mugabe can be whatever he wants to and whatever he’s called, but he did not stint on Education. He got the best from everywhere.

Maybe that’s where we need to go as well. I mean, like now, with the striking that went on, I was speaking to the principal of Beechwood and she was saying in Israel when they underwent their liberation, they invested in health (public health), education and housing; those are the three things that they invested in.

And they took everyone, starting at the bottom and they sort of built up the teachers, you know, at pre-primary then they went to grade 1 and so on, until everyone was at the level that they should be, not below, but where they should be. So lots of time and energy and financial resources was put into the system to build up so that you had one that was more solid. Not try and do everything, you know try and remedy everything and nothing gets done. You
know it gets done in a half-hearted manner and in an ineffective manner, so, get it done by starting from your basics and building on …

Researcher: Sort of, in stages…

In stages! Yes! You do your r-grades first, all r-grade teachers get taken up to the specific level where they are required to be. Your under-qualified people, you get all their qualifications up and what they need to put into that … the teaching, that is needed for them to build onto for grade 1. Then you take all your grade 1 teachers, across the board, wherever they might be and so you go up, until grade 10. So everybody gets the same quality of teaching as opposed to what you’re having now. You’re not having equality in teaching at all. If you look at, say, your northern suburbs school, you have very poor children and then you look at your model C schools. The type, or the quality of teaching, is not the same. And you will always have that disparity because of that.

Researcher: So do you feel that this is still a legacy of the past?

Yah. Most definitely. I mean, there’s no way that you can in 13 years, catch up on something that had been entrenched, you know. Even if you look at, economically, your people in the northern suburbs, some of them, it has become worse for them, you know, so how are you expecting children to concentrate if their parents are either unemployed or there’s financial difficulties. They come to school, or there’s even domestic violence that’s been brought on by financial problems. Then you come to school, and you are expected to concentrate in a class of 60, whereas in model C schools … my children are at a Model C school and max 30. I mean they’re currently having 26. You get that individual attention and the teacher’s able to focus. If you are lagging behind you get put in a group where there are mixtures. It’s not like your excelling groups and the medium and the ones that are very
slow. They are shuffled around in class so that they are put with people who can boost them.

Researcher: Peer group boosting …

Exactly. Yes, that helps them a lot. I think it’s twice a term – they are shuffled, you know, and they will not sit with one group the whole year. They will sit with various people, within, their class throughout the year.

Researcher: And at varsity, is there anything that you do to sort of you can’t obviate it, so I don’t want to use that word, to circumvent this lack of critical thinking, this backlog that they come up with?

No, there’s no way … Look for me, that is something that should’ve been picked up and quantified to an extent when they are admitted. Because if that is an aspect that is needed within tertiary education, then it should be assessed for and people who are lacking in that should then somehow be assisted in developing that. I believe it’s part of … Well. Student counseling can do that and it’s also part of academic development.

Researcher: Placement?

Placement. That would be part of the assessment but then subsequent to that, those who have been identified to lack that capacity should then be directed … it cannot form part of the mainstream, but then as part of their curriculum, they should have that additional assistance, in honing that capability.

Researcher: So, what you’re saying then is that when they come to varsity, that should already have been picked up? Should something be done …
It should be part of the admission, like they already have placement testing, now that should be part of that placement testing, that battery of questions that’s developed, I think, by Prof Foxcroft?

Researcher: Yah … Cheryl.

Yes, now she… that’s part of her speciality, she says, so part of that battery should be specifically directed at critical thinking and I would not steer away from it. I think as part of my lecturing, what I do is usually have case scenarios where I would expect students then to integrate what I’ve lectured and then apply that in terms of the case study. I wouldn’t move away from it. I would rather zone in and give them experience or give them examples where they can exercise that.

Research: And, do you think that this academic literacy, I said when you mention literacy, it doesn’t matter in what field or in what context, people feel you’re talking about reading and writing. But academic literacy as I explained, and you know what it is. Do you think that’s a problem that everybody … all the lecturers should literally, you know, pull up, roll up their sleeves … should they get involved here? Or is it a language problem?

No, it’s not a language problem. An aspect of it is language, they can be focused in. You have different subject matter that deals with, that can draw on different aspects of academic literacy so, I do believe that it is everybody’s responsibility. Maybe the student counseling or the academic development centre, they can perhaps develop programmes that would assist people and enhance that capability but, I do believe that everybody should work towards developing that critical thinking aspect, that is needed. So, and that would be through their material and how they present it, so that the way that they direct their questions would also be to enhance that, but built into their programme has to be aspects that show students how to go about addressing a question that is set up like that, so it’s not just throwing them in at the deep end, but
also nurturing them and basically showing them what can be expected. If you get a question like this, how do you tackle it? You know there are different aspects to the question, and linking that to the theory that they have been given. I think in post-grad, it becomes even more essential where we would introduce them to critically evaluating journal articles and I mean where does this journal article come from? You have your ratings of the journals, so if it comes from a high impact factor you’d expect it to be quality work, but if it comes from a low impact factor, then it’s not so great and then using that as a primary criterion, when you get an article, read, re-read it and question the methodology that is used. The type of conclusions that are made, or assumptions that are made, for that matter. And, like er, see where the holes are, you know in terms of evaluating it and that also helps the individual when they have to write an article eventually, addressing those aspects as well.

Researcher: And how do you find them when they have to do things like assignments, tasks and so on?

You know what, the 2nd year HMS classes, inasmuch as HMS has lots of assignments associated with their subject matter, I found that many of them go to web and cut and paste and not know. And how I circumvented that was they have to hand in the assignment, I will evaluate it, I give them a grid as to what it will be evaluated on and there’s also a section on oral presentation. So I use an oral presentation to determine whether they know what they’ve written on, and I can question them and the rest of their peers can also question them and I found that they don’t necessarily know the content of what they’ve written.

I used to first have just the assignment handed in, but because I could see that it was copying and pasting you know, and words that they were using, that was way beyond them, I decided that I was going to introduce an oral presentation and that’s what I did. And that somehow, even with an oral
presentation, some of them just don’t make an effort. You know and they would be reading off …

Researcher: So in other words, that didn’t deter them?

No, but I think it makes them more cautious, you know.

Researcher: Yes.

Because I said whatever you write in your assignment, I can question you on, so you see, it does deter them to some extent, but, it does not necessarily improve their understanding of what they’ve put down.

Researcher: How do you find them? Are they academically mature? Are they motivated? Do they have an intrinsic knowledge of their subject, or …

Well, I think your. Look, the Pharmacy students are cream of the crop in Health Sciences, so you find that those students are highly motivated, but HMS students, not necessarily. Their subject matter is more linked to Human Movement Science. This is very much a secondary aspect to them. The workload is very intense so for them it’s like the worst that they could do.

Researcher: Can you talk to me about the Pharmacy students?

The Pharmacy students, there, I think they realize this sort of sets the basis for them in terms of Pharmacology and Pharmacology is really what their profession is about – Pharmacology and Pharmaceutics. So they need to know how the body works, the receptors that are within the body, so that when they give medication they know the effect it will have and the side-effects, so in that way they know that they need to get through the subject matter and there I mean are many of them who keep their text books because they know that they’ve got to refer back to it, you know, if they need to.
Researcher: Anything else that you want to throw in, that you think is worthwhile mentioning?

I think – well, the Education System, the way it is now, I worry about my sons and the level at which they are allowed to make errors. I mean I had an English teacher at school, where language structure was paramount. You didn’t even dare to spell incorrectly, you know …

Researcher: And here they have the Thesaurus on line and …

Yeah! And now it’s acceptable, and I’m seeing it coming through, like this one girl, she can’t spell. She is one of the top students. She always comes either 1st or 2nd. But she can’t spell! Oh, it’s her 2nd language, but still, she can’t spell! And she said, I said you know Science is a precise subject, so I can’t give you, if you spell your medication wrong, there might be some other medication that has a similar spelling. I can not let you spell wrong! You have to work on it. But it’s like you know, that’s fine, it’s like, this is acceptable and it’s not on. There has to be a focus on that. There has to be a focus on language, and language structure, and spelling! You can’t just allow people to go through from grade to grade, with the same type of errors recurring … recurring.

Researcher: No! Do you think they do something about it? Because if I know I can’t spell I’m gonna be extra careful and I’ll even give myself some extra time.

No, that’s just it, that’s why I said! Her thing – when she came to me, she said ‘I can’t spell’. But you see, if it was highlighted earlier on, and it was focused on and corrected by the teacher, and not deemed to be acceptable, then there would probably have been a concerted effort for her to improve her language.
Research: So you feel what we are reaping at varsity level, had that been detected earlier or we wouldn’t sit with this problem to the extent that it is. So you feel it’s now something that we have also inherited.

I do believe it’s something that we are inheriting because of it not being addressed at an early stage. It is somehow being made to be acceptable and because of that, there’s no effort being made on the student’s part to change it.

Researcher: Is there something that can be done at a lower level? say, at school level?

English teachers do … they should teach English the way they used to. You know, referring to structure, referring to spelling, you know and focus on that as opposed to just – I don’t know – accepting poor work! Because for me to have spelling, or words spelt incorrectly, that sentence must be marked wrong! Underline – or something must be done to alert the child.

Researcher: Do you feel there’s a thin line between not wanting the child to feel bad about correcting all the time or …

No, but you are, I think that’s the gist of it, to allow creative thinking but if creative thinking is allowed to the detriment of accuracy and structure then I’m sorry, I don’t think that there should be a toss-up. First focus in on accuracy and structure and proper language basics and then you can do story telling and so on, you know, where the creative juices can flow, but not at the expense of language and structure.

Researcher: thank you, very much, hey!

Okay.
Introduction

I'm in the Department of applied Language Studies for 20 years and concentrated on English Second Language and it is within that field that I've done most of my qualifications. My specific qualification, field within that field of 2nd language acquisition is Psycholinguistics. That is basically how people pick up a language, whether it’s 1st or 2nd language. Of course, my interest is in how people pick up a 2nd, rd or 4th language.

Well, I think my perception of academic literacy is sort of a multi-faceted one. I don’t think of academic literacy as just student writing or reading of academic texts, I think it goes much further. I almost would like to talk about academic
literacies, because I think that people, when they come to a tertiary institution, have, many of them have to learn a lot of things.

Researcher: It’s what they call multi-literacies nowadays, like they say, forget about literacy now; it’s multi-literacies.

I think you’re right, Loretta, it’s the same idea. People need to learn – it’s like one of those mirror balls. It’s multi-faceted and there are so many different things one’s got to learn. I have a nice little incident that happened this year. I have a very small tutorial group and I got to know the students very well and one of them is a student who is a Xhosa-speaking girl. She comes from the East London area, and she went to an ex-model C school. And I was questioning her about how she felt about her schooling. Didn’t you feel a bit out of place because you were one of so few Xhosa and er Black in this very White school she went to. But she absolutely denied it and she kept using the word ‘exposure’ and she gave me a little scenario. She said that as a schoolgirl, she went to be a waitress at Steers for pocket-money. And she said they train you when you get there and at the exact same time that she was trained, there was a young man being trained with her, a schoolboy, same age, also Xhosa-speaking. Everything was identical about them, except that he was at a township school. And this is where her interest in exposure came in. She said to me, ‘you know, he didn’t even know what prawns were! He didn’t know what sautéed potatoes were, or what chips were!’ He couldn’t tell the difference. And she summed it up. She used this word ‘exposure’.

This illustrates quite well, how important background is, background study; where they come from. And I think we’ve got to build all that in. Er to develop people that come from a disadvantaged background. It’s not just literacy or reading, how do we read academic texts. There’s so much else, I think, that comes in. Er I think, of course people come in at many different levels. It depends on the platform from which they are going to spring into university, that we obviously have to take into account. Then of course there are plenty
of students who do come from a background where they are more than competent. But on the other hand their incompetence, to use a horrid word, goes right down with the ladder. And I think people come to university under-performing in the key indicators particularly in written English, or it could also be dependent on the medium of instruction, but on the whole in this institution, it’s certainly English. Another key indicator I think is numeracy. People, they can’t even work out a percentage, of what they’re getting for a course. We have to tell them how to work out a percentage and I think those sorts of things are indicators, are more important and yes, at this institution we do test them when they come in, but of course, people are allowed to come to university with very own Norwegian points. I don’t think that’s a bad thing because we have to somehow accommodate people who come from a disadvantaged background. We just find ourselves in a post-apartheid situation where that’s something that’s happened.

Researcher: So would you say we are still haunted by our past inequalities?

We are. I think so yah and I think that will go on for a generation. It’s not something that gonna quickly improve. And I think we’ve ade great strides. Where we’ve come from. Well, you know, 30 to 40 years of apartheid.

Researcher: Fifty! Five decades!

But even before that … er … you were disadvantaged if you weren’t of the right colour or whatever. So its, I think this government has actually done a lot in opening things up. I think the position of women has improved a lot and when I think twenty years ago, this university did not have one single development project. People were just thrown in. I remember early on in my career, as I saw more and more people of colour coming into my classes, I actually traced their results. They were doing much worse than the Whites. And it was at that stage that I decided to bring in the first little development course that this university had.
Researcher: Tell me about your development course just sort of very briefly.

Okay, it was attached to what we then called, English Special, which was a kind of lower grade English I. We didn’t do as many texts, literary texts.

Researcher: It was more language orientated because I think Unisa had something like that.

You know it wasn’t, at the beginning, when I took over it was purely literature. But then I realized that we needed more language and slowly I started bringing in language.

Researcher: English I was the literature component and they sort of expected you to do all these things that they were orientating people to in English Special.

And then I brought in more and more language study because I realized that’s where the need lay and then attached to that was the first little … we called it English Development Project … EDP. And essentially what we did, we took people in small groups, tutorials, and we gave them an extra tutorial a week, which was very little, but, it was a beginning. Out of that grew things like the old UPC and er what Maritz Snyders is doing now, UPEAP.

Researcher: UPEAP – the foundation programme.

And so in effect, it’s gone from my hands. But we in English studies here, we do still run several courses trying to cater for the different levels of academic literacy where people come in.

Researcher: So they are under-prepared when they get here!
Yes. Not everybody, but a lot of people are very under-prepared and now I’m going to get onto my hobby horse (laughs). I think that people, the swing in teaching, has gone too far towards communicative competence. I believe that Brumford and Widdowson and all those guys who were writing during the 1960’s had a lot of good things to say but the way it’s been interpreted by the teacher on the ground, I think has led to many of the problems that we have in our first year students.

Researchers: I spoke to a few people … and this one lady is horrified that her son’s ‘results’, at the way he writes and so on and she feels it’s just not on. The child writes as he speaks. The teacher sort of feels that’s okay and she feels they talk about creativity and so on and she feels they can do oral, tell stories and so on. Now they come to university and we sit with the problem.

That’s right. They sound okay but my goodness me … or to interpret a text. My feeling is, do you know what I’m doing? I’m focusing on theory and I think we need to focus more on form and not meaning. And I think that’s the problem. And because they focus only on meaning.

Researcher: The means and then the meaning.

Form means the structure of the language.

Researcher: Yes, the structure –

The phormology, the phonetics, the phonology, all those things. Although I’, not teaching those specific disciplines, like one would do it if one were doing linguistics, that is the foundation … to get them to focus on form. And I think it’s a matter of raising awareness er helping 1st year students, just to show them that they can’t just write down anything as they were to or they can’t write as they speak. They’ve got to make sure that their sentences are correctly formed and I give them the basics. If they don’t know what a verb is,
for instance, you can’t tell them your sentence hasn’t got a verb. You’ve got
to teach them what a verb is.

Researcher: You see I also think that not too far back, because I remember
when communicative teaching came out, it was fine. I said to this lady on
Monday, ‘Look what it actually meant was if a child said to you ‘I aren’t well’,
you didn’t embarrass the child, but you sort of unobtrusively corrected him,
maybe by saying, ‘I’m not well either’. Of course it suited the teachers and it
still suits them not to have to teach grammar. So now they say they’re
teaching communicatively. I’m an advocate of the communicative approach,
but I know I’m also a stickler for structure, for semantics, for all that type of
thing.

I think the younger the child at school level, the greater one should use
communicative teaching methodology, but I think when the child is at an age
where he or she can conceptualize, the focus on form, and that’s only at age
15-16, only then should we start saying to people, ‘Look, this particular, you
can’t call this incorrect’ using your result, or ‘I aren’t well, today’, whatever. So
and I think we’ve got to be careful about it … very carefully, but we cannot. I
think we have neglected what I call the form. We’ve really done a disservice
to a whole generation of …

Researcher: We have. Because once, I think we were in Hilda Thomas’ class,
then certain people also went about er John R and them … Hey, don’t correct,
like you said earlier on, if the student doesn’t know what a verb is, then you
can’t say the sentence has no verb. And then she also agreed. She said that
then you would have to have a very good memory, because if you’re not
gonna teach them syntax, how are you gonna justify, that’s not correct. They
will have to then memorize all that.

There you’re getting right back to how people learn a language. Chomsky
said we generate sentences, new novel sentences. We don’t memorize them.
That was the big breakthrough, when he challenged Skinner, who was a behaviourist. Yah, I think at university another problem is, I think that some of the university 1st year courses, are too narrow. They’re pseudo-professional training, that’s being dished up as university education. It’s too narrow and too focused. There’s a lot of basic language that we can teach.

Researcher: I even found it at my level.

Yeah, there’s a lot of generic stuff that we can teach. I mean, just now we gonna have English for plumbers. We already have English for engineers, genuinely, at this university we do. Now I think that we can put them together and teach them some basic stuff and then they can apply it to whatever narrow field they might be going to. The problem is that if they only know that little vocabulary for their field, when they move out of that field, they’ve got problems.

Researcher: Like the mining towns in England? Where people just know the mining language and the father brings his son, he’s also into that and all they talk about at home is mines and so on. Can we move over to critical thinking? Do you find that a challenge? Question? Or is it too much trouble for them to question or do they accept. Yes, we understand … when it comes to an assignment or test or … you find that they don’t really understand.

I think when you’ve built up a good relationship with your class, they do start to question and they feel relaxed enough to start questioning and perhaps challenging but it does take some time to get to that point. It depends on lecturer-student relations, how big the class is. I mean there are many factors.

Res: So that brings us then … It links up with the environment. Do you feel that it’s important to create a class environment, a lecturer-student environment if you want to promote critical thinking and so on?
Certainly. At a first year level I think that’s vitally important, because they come in nervous and the ESL students are well. Having to speak in a second language, they feel very insecure, so I think at first year level it’s very, very important that we build up a relationship with the students and in big classes it’s not easy, but one can then supplement big classes with perhaps tutorials where they do feel a little bit more relaxed. I do find, even with my Practical English, which is probably the weakest group, when I take them for the first semester, at the end of the 1st semester they do start asking me questions and feeling relaxed enough to challenge me even, you know.

Res: Would you say the socio-cultural backgrounds also impacts on …

Oh absolutely! I’m not a sociologist, but I would certainly agree it must have a massive impact, especially the kind of learning situations that they come from, must impact as well. I mean, if you’ve never been asked to challenge, if you’ve never been put in a situation where you’re expected to disagree, then it’s going to be difficult at varsity to do that. And strangely enough, at school, I think very often they’re expected to agree and to acquiesce.

Res: It’s what they call now the challenge approach and the reformulation approach. Before we called it the expository approach and self-discovery approach, whatever. Teachers sort of somehow, they welcome the reformulation approach. They’ve prepared a thing, they’ve given it to the students and they draw up a test. They’ve got their answers and their memo, so it doesn’t require very much of them either. Actually, I’ve been in classes. I go around where they actually discourage simple questioning and to me that’s the beginning, that’s the bottom rung of the ladder to critically question but they sort of don’t like the challenge approach.
Int: Well, I mean, you take them out of their comfort zone. What happens if a student asks a question that they can't answer, I mean if that does happen, then they've just got to be honest and say, I'll look it up.

Res: Or let them look it up.

Exactly! Yah, I agree absolutely. There's a radical shift that we gonna have to make. The problem is that a lot of them say, Oh you're just going back to the old grammar approach, and I'm not saying that. What I'm saying is the pendulum has swung too far and we need to go back to some focusing on form. Yah ... I scribbled something down. Let me have a look. I think, in some way academics exacerbate the problem because I found that especially in some disciplines where they have very big first year classes they use Multiple Choice and I think Multiple Choice is the kiss of death. Mainly because it means the students are not writing and they don't learn.

Res: You just need to be a very good guesser, that's all.

Exactly ... and I know they can build in mathematically round it, but in each question if there's on average four answers, you gonna get 25%.

Res: I found and this is my own personal experience: first of all I hate it, because they don't have to think and secondly I found that students who never attended classes but were very good guessers, they were street-wise and they somehow ended up with a 60%. And I found that my poor students who attended lectures, they would sit there and they'd be confused and then they would maybe be the ones to fail. As far as I'm concerned, what are you testing?

Yah ... we've got to go back to getting the students to write, even if it's not full essays ... When I was at varsity, first year level, we just had to write full
essays. But I realize that under the present circumstances, we can’t do that, but we have to get them writing paragraphs and slightly longer exercises.

Res: You know, when I think back, my best teacher, but we didn’t realize it at the time, we couldn’t understand, why was this woman, every single day, it was sentences. She’s put down words, they sounded the same, homophones, eg hear and here, you know, and we thought, we are matriculants, what is she coming with er and we’d spend one period at least doing sentences and tomorrow we’d do reading and then it would be sentences … it went on like that for the whole year. It was only when I matriculated that I realized that was the best teacher we had because she taught us form, semantics, whatever. And she taught us to think logically, because look if you write a sentence, you have to turn that same sentence into a question or the negative .. to me, the basics, you can’t get away from

I couldn’t agree with you more. I was appalled, a couple of weeks ago, here, one of my colleagues teaches English. He came to me and he said he set them a very short one-page essay on a topic, and he’s helped them prepare everything but time and again, a certain group of students, all they were doing was sort of point form. It was sort of a sentence and then they’d put three bullets under it, like they’ve seen on computer. Then they’d go to the next sentence … it was what they called a paragraph. And he found that they all came from one particular discipline. That’s how they’ve been taught, in this discipline, at this university. So he pulled them all in, one by one, and had them change those bullets, into properly formulated sentences. They believed That was what one did at university.

Res: When I was in Education, we complained about the lot of marking we had to do, especially in languages, and the dean said ‘you know you’ve got yourself to blame’ .. And now? He said, ‘well, give true/false questions, give multiple choice questions and then we had an argument, because I said then what are we testing? So it’s also these vast numbers, I think.
And of course at universities it goes back to FTE's, full time equivalents. The university is subsidized according to the number of students that pass through and so on. And certainly another problem is that there are four bands of funding. The languages come second from the bottom. So the top ones, of course are Maths and Science / Technologies. Strangely enough, what’s also there is performance, Music and Fine Art, things like dress designing. Strangely enough, they’ve got those up there. I think they recognize that they have to teach very intensively in one-on-one situations, if you’re doing piano or something. Obviously you can only do your theory classes in big classes.

Getting back to my point is that we are second from the bottom and all communication type courses, I think, are poorly funded. And you were talking about when you were in Education … numbers make a big difference to your marking load and if we were better funded, you know, smaller classes.

Res: So, it's Economics determining Methodologies, you know, that type of thing.

And of course that comes right down form the very top. It comes from the politicians who decided on the bands. Who is going to et well-funded and who isn't. Yeah … I really don’t think that they realize the importance of literacy. It affects everything.

Res: If you look at people for instance. Maybe I shouldn’t say this, but look at our MEC, for instance, by his own admission, he is not an educator. He is a finance guy, then they ask us what is wrong with education.

Yeah…yeah…

Res: Well, is there anything else?
I’m just looking at my notes; I’m not doing this in any order. After getting students to write sentences, the next would be synthesizing. And I think that that’s one big problem. Asking people to read various academic texts and then to bring those together to synthesize then you know in a way that is pertinent to the question that they’ve been asked.

Res: So that’s part of the critical thinking process? Which they can’t do.

Yes.

Res: I wont say they can’t do it, but they’ve never done it before. So it’s new.

Look, I think that’s part of what lecturers are supposed to be doing. We’re supposed to be empowering people, to do exactly that, to synthesize. Language skills. It may just work. There’s a huge chasm between empowering and disempowered. But we’ve got to get those disempowered up somehow. All these things like development courses, foundation courses, smaller classes too. I think giving people confidence too and making people aware of how important they are and how important they’re gonna be in the future because they are the future leaders.

Res: That’s very interesting – go on! I haven’t thought of that – the confidence part. Interesting.

I think just in everyday, rubbing shoulders with students; getting students to relax in class. Of course it’s a self-fulfilling prophecy too, because when they start doing well, they start getting praised, then they feel better.

Res: D you actually look forward to er like I even found now that when it came to the interview stage, you actually start getting excited, talking to different people and getting different input, about what you are doing.
Yes, I think, we’ve come a long way, and I think people tend to forget that, what a long way we’ve come and we can’t.

Res: I’m only too aware of that. Maybe it’s because I still go out to the townships. We go out regularly. I still see what goes on there. And I think of what we’ve been doing here and people like you, and so on. With Bev … We’ve come a long way.

Bev left.

Res: People used to ask and I’m sure you got it too, but why must we learn this? Why must we read that? It has nothing to do with … Where does it fit? That type of thing.

And despite what I said earlier about a certain discipline that was really disempowering their students, by getting them to do that point form so-called paragraphs, I was sitting on the review panel of Social Work about 2 – 3 years ago, and they are very aware of the importance of getting their students to write properly and doing it through the medium of English mainly, although they do some of it in Afrikaans as well. So there are success stories as well. People, I think we have got through to certain lecturers – Social Work. I was impressed by their awareness.

I think I’ve said more or less everything.

Res: Thank you very, very much.
Res: Good afternoon. First of all I want to say thank you very much for agreeing to be interviewed, because the theoretical side is finished now and if we don’t have people like you who are prepared to accommodate us then we won’t get any further. So I must say that I appreciate it.

This is Interview no 12, so by now I should have quite a substantive, diverse number of people who have given input. The question is: When you get your students at higher education level, at university level, where do you perceive or how do you perceive their academic literacy? Now by academic literacy we mean that the literacy is divided into three different levels. When we start off, we have our operational level, where it’s the absolute minimum requirements to be regarded as literate; people can fill in a bank form or they can sign their name when they open up an account. Then we get the next level, is cultural literacy, because we are never just literate. We’re always literate in relation to something – computer literate, culturally literate, and so on. We know what those people’s cultures are and so on. And then we get the critical literacy which we expect students to have when they come to university. And these three literacies are all constituted in academic literacy. Now I just want to know, how do you perceive, as an academic at a university, how do you perceive the academic literacy of your students?

Int: You’re saying that these three levels constitute academic literacy? So …

Res: So when we talk about academic literacy, we don’t just mean can they fill in a form or so.

Int: Which is operational.
Res. We want to know, for instance, when you stand in front of a class, how do you perceive their level of academic literacy. Do they challenge or do they just accept and so on. Just in general. You can just talk off the cuff.

Int: When most of the students come to university sometimes they have problems about socializing and acclimatizing themselves to the university climate and one can understand that because the university is completely different from a high school where students have to be guided by teachers, told, and the bell rings for them to go class, the bell rings for them to go out and all that stuff. But when it comes to university it’s a completely different kind of culture. In many cases, at the beginning of the year one finds that learners tend to accept whatever is said by the lecturers and so on. And it’s strange because er if one were to look at the second level of literacy that you mentioned, that is the cultural one, I think this is the area where they have to battle first, because they are meeting different kinds of people from different kinds of backgrounds and which might not be the same as the background that they are coming from. That too inhibits them from probably performing in a more quality academic kind of standard until they after some time they blend together, especially at the re and when they met around they begin to see that there is a different culture that is absolutely going on at the university.

And er when it comes to the third level you mentioned the critical literacy, that too is problematic because lecturers at the university always expect to see learners with all those critical thinking skills and yet there is no way that the critical thinking skills are taught at high school. In many high schools that is not actually taught and I think, my conviction is that people always think that when you get to university, you should have been trained how to think critically and yet that is not the case. I think it is our role as lecturers, as educators at tertiary institutions to ensure that our learners or students do get those skills and er fortunately I’ve been involved in conducting lectures on critical thinking skills.
I’ve always been telling my students that critical thinking skills are quite simple and very easy, but it’s only when you are told exactly what to do, for example, if one were to talk about one skill like using key words, if you are given a script, the first thing that you look at, are the sub-headings, the main concepts that are raised there, the topics, the names of people that appear on that piece of paper, and immediately you can understand what piece of information is being talked about. To give you just a very lousy example, if I say, ‘here are the key words’. One is a man, a naked man, another one is an apple, another one is a snake, another one is a naked woman – immediately you can go back to the bible and say, ‘this is Adam’.

Res: Form the association.

Int: Because I’ve given you the key words. So, critical thinking skills start from there – understanding key words and also when you’re listening to the lecturer, you’re actually looking for the key words. You are looking for some of the features that will keep you … to understand what is being said. And some people also think that the word analysis is actually kept for researchers, post-grad students, and I always say ‘no’ this is not the case. Analysis is a very simple word. When someone comes to you with a big problem, you cannot immediately understand that problem. You break it down into small chunks that you can actually start solving. So analysis is actually looking at a big problem and breaking it into small components. And I actually told the Foundation learners that they can actually do that kind of exercise even at primary school, looking at a bicycle; you find if there’s a problem with your bicycle, you put it into pieces, then you sort out what exactly is problematic with the bicycle and then you put all the components back together and that is synthesis.

And it’s so simple, and analysis, you break down the big picture, the big problem, and solve small parts. Once you have solved the various components, you put them back together. And that is synthesis. Once they
actually engage in a number of activities such as analysis and synthesis, they begin to think aha I can always do that. I always say, it’s so simple; it’s not actually meant for professors and all that. To be able to analyse is a very simple exercise; it’s a very simple thing. It’s only that we need to tell our learners, this is what is taking place to become a critical thinker. And then again, one can actually talk about putting yourself in someone else’s shoes.

Now you ask them for example, there was a long debate that was going on after Nelson Mandela left his position and then people started to speculate. Who is going to be able to fit into Nelson Mandela’s shoes? And then, once you teach your learners to be able to for example, understand how you actually or give some examples of how you can actually put yourself in somebody else’s situation, it also means that when someone comes to you and is saying something you first of all try to put yourself in his / her position and try to understand what the other person is saying and instead of just brushing everything that is being said by your colleagues or by your peers and so, and that again, is another skill of listening and also being able to understand where the other person is coming from and you put yourself in that kind of situation. You empathize with the person in order for you to understand. You put yourself in the position of the writer. You put yourself in the situation where, in the context in which the writer was writing that piece of information.

For example, I was saying to them, how would you feel if you were a student in Iraq whilst there’s a lot of war taking pace there. You know, immediately students actually being to put themselves in someone’s shoes and you’re trying to interpret what would be happening, what could actually happen in that kind of situation. So what I’m trying to say is that critical thinking skills is something that can actually be taught to students.

Res: I was going to ask you that, do you feel that it can be taught?
Int: Yes, it can be taught and it should in fact be taught especially when the students get into the university because most of the work that they are going to do at the university needs all those skills. The skills that students have to get those skills of critical thinking, asking questions, trying to find out and er coming up with their alternative views, allowing other people’s point of views, being able to reflect on what has been said and trying to find out “how could I change this, how could I see it in a different perspective”. And all those to me are contributing towards critical thinking and helping our learners to become critical at the university.

Res: And the crop of students that we are getting now. Are they any weaker than the ones that we got before? How do you feel about that? Are they any different? Are they stronger than the ones that we got before?

Int: I wouldn’t like to make a blanket statement to say that other students were weaker and others are better. Every time, every year, you get a new group of students with different kinds of skills, with different kinds of interests and all that but er now, I don’t think they are weaker or stronger, whatever. It’s only that people need to be aware that students do not have critical thinking skills from high school level and that they should actually be taught. That’s all.

Res: Good! Now I want to ask you just one more question, because what you are saying is very valuable. You are saying that people need to be reminded or they need to be aware that students come here, not having those critical thinking skills. So, when you say people I assume, I’m making the assumption that it’s your colleagues and you feel then that er we should start looking at our teaching, not just at trying to apportion blame or looking for a deficit within the student. Can you elaborate on that?

Int: As I said earlier on, I think we don’t have to immediately blame the students for being weak or not weak, as, understandably, as I said earlier on, these critical skills are not taught at high school. So how can we expect them to have them when they get to university?
Res: So we are actually unfair?

Int. Yes. We are unfair! Actually we are unfair. We need to teach those skills to the students, and once, for me if one were to tech those critical thinking skills right at the beginning of the academic year, I mean of their stay at university, you are actually equipping them to become more critical and more aware of the various academic skills which are required. And of course critical thinking skills are some of the resources that they need to have for their career development, for their studies up to further education, further I mean post-grad and so on, because most of the … if students don’t have the skills how does one expect them to really manage to …

Res: Does it mean that they haven’t really been exposed to this type of thing? They haven’t been exposed to critical thinking and …

Int. Not all. Not really. I think they could be exposed to some form of critical thinking but there has not been a deliberate effort to say, ‘Now I am teaching them critical thinking skills’. So that each time you teach them critical thinking skills you actually ask them to apply the skills immediately, so that those skills become embedded in their everyday study skills and become part of their life skills. Sometimes I even say that if your car has a punctured wheel, and you do not have a spare wheel, you do not have a spanner, you do not have a jack, you do not have the resources, it’s going to be difficult for you to solve that problem. All you need to have is to have the resources and also to know how to use each of those tools, for example, analysis, organizing your work, prioritizing, analyzing, synthesis, and so on. If you do not have those skills with you, you are stuck with that kind of problem, but you need to know which skills to use for which different problems. We can’t use the same hammer for every problem that you meet. You actually need to know which instrument to use at this particular stage or which combination of resources or critical thinking skills I can use to solve this particular problem.
Res: And tell me, last question now, the language. How do you find the language use of the students?

Int: Well, language has always been problematic and especially when one has to learn through the medium of a different language other than.

Res: Through the medium of Afrikaans, but you’re taught in English, yes.

Int: Or Xhosa, English, Afrikaans and so on. Sometimes it’s so interesting when you talk about critical thinking skills. It’s a skill that you can understand in any different language, but once you understand that skill, it’s actually useful for you in any kind of situation. You can teach it to everyone, and people can actually use the skill in different situations. Not only within the university. I mean they can actually use the skill throughout their lives, out in the community, in the meeting situation, and so on, because people can use these skills in various situations. It’s not only for academic work, only.

Res: Thank you very much. Is there anything else that you’d like to add?

Int: Er, no, not exactly, not exactly. It’s only that it’s interesting that people are coming to the university from, as I said, from different backgrounds. Others from schools that did not have enough resources and others were exposed to quite a number of resources. People tend to think that if students come from schools that have a lot of resources, they will be able to think critically. I’m saying, that is not the case. That is not the case.

Res: I was just talking now, having a conversation with somebody, not an interviewee, and I said you’ll be surprised at the lovely schools … okay there are a lot of schools that are in a state of disrepair, but there are also beautiful schools and nothing goes on there.
Int: Yah. I was surprised at some stage to meet er with students coming right from the bundus, in the rural areas, where they will have no resources and so on, but these students, when they get to university, they excel in scientific subjects and so on, engineering and Mathematics and you begin to think how did these kids manage to do this from schools that did not even have equipment, you know. So what I'm saying is this that it doesn't mean that if you're coming from a school that had all the equipment you will be able to think critically. Critical thinking is something else that needs to be taught to students and monitored and made sure that students are able to use that in their everyday life.

Res: Thank you very much. You've been most helpful.

Int: Thank you.
Dear Colleague

RE: INTERVIEW FOR M ED DISSERTATION

At present I am working towards a research Masters degree. My field of interest is academic literacy. This is one of the competencies required of students at higher education institutions.

In our context it means the ability to read critically, to question the text, to challenge the concepts, and to develop one’s own ideas. I am at the data collection stage of the research project and would like to interview you in this regard. The primary research question is,

What degree of academic literacy do academics perceive students to have at higher education level?

The secondary research question flowing from this is,

How can academic literacy best be developed at higher education level?

Should you agree to the interview, it will be expected of you to talk for approximately 30 minutes, drawing on your experience(s) with these students. The interview will be taped so that it can be transcribed by an independent transcriber.

You are assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Thank you very much for your cooperation.

Yours sincerely

Loretta Free (Ms)
Senior Education Specialist

Signature of participant

Rank

Institution