

ENHANCING LEARNER PERFORMANCE IN DESIGN EDUCATION FOR DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS: THE CASE OF DIPLOMA PROGRAMMES IN ARCHITECTURE AND JEWELLERY DESIGN AND MANUFACTURE

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Abstract

Participation of students from disadvantaged backgrounds in South African higher education has been below acceptable levels and recent reports indicate that it is still in decline. Much has been discussed about the link of under-preparedness to poor performance of students. However not much has been discussed about under-preparedness of universities curricula for teaching an evolving student population in the design disciplines.

This paper explores the implications of an increasingly diverse student body for curricula of design disciplines in higher education institutions. The paper uses the University of Johannesburg's jewellery and architecture programmes to discuss curriculum change that has the capacity to enhance performance of students. The paper argues that student background can be used to develop responsive curriculum which contributes to effective learning for students in design disciplines- jewellery and architecture. The paper suggests a curriculum framework, based on students' spatial origins, to developed teaching and learning practices that would enhance student performance and chances for success in their studies.

Key Words: *diversity, under-preparedness curriculum, success-rate, graduation rate spatial background, student performance constructivist theory, jewellery and architecture*

The strength of... (education) is its ability to challenge its own truths by presenting alternative possibilities. That forces you to justify your own ideas, and that competition of ideas is what creates excellence. "(Friedman 2001 in Brown and Moreau 2004:7)

Introduction

One of South African government's main goals in its quest to establishing a democratic and open society is to increase access and participation in university education for the younger population, particularly for deserving students from poor backgrounds. Studies have shown that only 16% of South Africa's young have access to higher education (Yeld 2010:27). In addition government is concerned at the low graduation rates (44%) of higher education institutions given the low rate of participation (Scott and Hendry 2007 in Yeld 2011: 26). The success and graduate rates of students have been singled out as problematic.

Lack of preparedness for studying at higher education institutions of students has been cited as a major contributing factor to poor success rates. A further problem is that students from poorer backgrounds are not likely to complete their studies on time and if they complete their studies at all. A number of support measures have been suggested to address the problem. These include integrative curricular changes, extended curriculum and external academic support centres. The loudest call in this instance has been to increase the duration of the study period, typically from three year to four year diploma or degree studies. This is one approach to solving the problem that has its own merits and demerits. This is not the main discussion of this paper. This paper argues that in addition to other support measures for increasing participation in higher education, there is need for radical change in the way knowledge is constructed and delivered to students in higher education institutions. The paper uses the jewellery and architecture diploma programmes to illustrate how teaching and learning experience of students from diverse backgrounds can be enhanced in order to achieve higher success and graduation rates. The paper makes the assumption that success of students in higher education can be increased if the knowledge is constructed and delivered with reference to the context from which students originate.

The University of Johannesburg's(UJ) draft document for institutional transformation for the next decade, states that one of its objectives will be to promote an academic mind-set that is open to new ways of teaching for a diverse student body(UJ 2011a:5). This will be achieved by revising existing teaching methods and developing responsive curriculum appropriate to context. It is this transformation that will contribute towards attaining the status of a truly modern African City that UJ desires (UJ 2011b). This paper begins to explore how programmes can achieve curriculum change for the creation of deep learning experiences for students within a cosmopolitan context.

Considering the aforementioned, the current status quo at UJ's Faculty of Art, Design and Architecture (FADA) represents a different reality. In general the success rates of diploma students in the FADA building has been falling. Statistics for the years 2008 to 2010 suggests that performance of students of colour (African, coloured and Indian) is diminishing (see Table 1).

| Success rate | African | | | Coloured | | | Indian | | | White | | |
|---------------------|---------|------|------|----------|------|------|--------|------|------|-------|------|------|
| | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 |
| Course level | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| First Year diploma | 71% | 66% | 67% | 86% | 63% | 60% | 79% | 81% | 67% | 89% | 82% | 84% |
| Second year diploma | 88% | 88% | 85% | 85% | 90% | 91% | 91% | 87% | 93% | 92% | 89% | 96% |
| Third Year diploma | 86% | 75% | 83% | 88% | 94% | 95% | 91% | 90% | 84% | 93% | 88% | 93% |

Table 1 Source: Faculty of Art, Design and Architecture – Annual Report 2010

FADA has a 51% graduation rate which means that almost half of the students of colour who enter FADA drop out or do not finish their studies on time. In 2010, at first year level, both African and Indian students had a success rate of 67%, while coloured students were at 60%. Their white counterparts had a comparatively higher 84% success rate. This drop in success rate is significant it must be understood in terms of actual numbers of coloured students in the Faculty. In total students of colour make up 48% of all students in FADA but the problem is, as can be seen from the table, that they have considerably lower success rates.

This evidence suggests support for the theory of unpreparedness for university students from historically disadvantaged students. A recent survey (2011) conducted by the Academic Development & Support centre at UJ, shows that approximately 75% of students at UJ hail from low SES background. The proxy Indicators of the socio economic status (SES includes academic qualification of parents, financing of studies and whether learners are commuting. According to Letseka (2008:6), the majority of disadvantaged learners in South African institutions are black:

“...on average, 70% of the families of the higher education drop-outs surveyed were in the category “low economic status”. Black (African) families were particularly poor.....Yet many of the students coming from these families depended on their parents or guardians for financial support (Letseka, 2008: 6)

The following paragraphs further discuss the race/class relation in our current context.

Educational backlog and the nature of under preparedness

During the last century, South Africa has witnessed a number of major political changes which has had direct effects on the higher education (HE) landscape as it exists today. Apartheid, officially instituted in 1948 by the National Party, resulted in a South Africa that was one of the most unequal societies in the world (Morrow & King, 1998).

The implementation of new policies to address educational inequities by the new South African government ensured that institutional floodgates were opened to provide access to the previously marginalised. However contentious, this measure has radically changed the profile of the student body at universities: from mostly homogenous to highly diverse. Diversity here refers to complex relationship generated by the race, class and spatial origin dynamic; and its influence on educational outcomes.

Even though black student enrolment increased by 80% (from 191 000 to 343 000), throughput rates were dwindling (Jansen, 2004). High attrition of black students has generated much debate across the HE landscape about how to improve the through-put rates. Extended programmes, National Bench Marking Tests (NBT) have been adopted by various HE institutions in order to enhance the learning experience and of students. Thus much of the debate has been about integrating extended programmes into main disciplinary programmes. In many ways these support measures have been directed more towards improving students' skills prompted, more recently, by the Minister of Higher Education Dr Blade Nzimade's views that "...universities have to work with what(students) you've got!"

Less discussed in HE at programme level, has been the response of universities in exploring existing curricula responses to a changing context and increasingly diverse students body. Such a holistic, broader, response is necessary because it begins to address preparedness of academics to teaching in changing circumstances in the South African HE landscape. A holistic approach to unpreparedness in HE is the main argument of this paper, necessary to enhance learning and student throughput rates.

Lack of preparedness

Lange (2007: iv in Yeld: 2010) argues that lack of preparedness is characteristic of both students and staff- that the process and experience of teaching and learning is steeped in tradition and doesn't taking into account the diverse multicultural nature of its students. One way in which diversity of the students is reflected, is in the manner in which the school system has prepared students for higher education. Common references to this diversity is reflected in the manner in which students are referred to or classified i.e. those from Model C school, township schools, inner- city schools and rural school. Generally it is accepted that schools with resources expose their learners to a broad range of career prospects. Resource limited schools focus on the main subjects like languages, sciences and to a lesser extent on art subjects which demand huge resource investment.

Thus preparation for teaching and learning experience in the universities becomes critical as one may come to realise that a unitary education approach could favour better prepared groups and disadvantage the less well prepared students (Yeld 2010:12). Learners who hail from low SES are very likely to attend poorly resourced schools in their vicinity. The current C2005 OBE system is considered resource heavy and inappropriate for the many deprived schools inherited from our previous regime (Taylor & Yu, 2009). More often than not, the lack of resources and broader sociological situation (crime, hunger, unemployment) render these schools unable to instil the levels of knowledge required for success at academia. These learners gain access to HE but lack the skills levels of their better prepared peers, who gained essential but expensive practical experience in labs, workshops and studios.

On the other hand, under-prepared lecturers lack exposure and teaching experience with diverse student bodies. As previously mentioned, the curriculum, teaching content and very likely pedagogical approaches practiced by teaching staff are outdated (Scott, Yeld & Hendry, 2007). Teachers are not equipped to deal with a diverse, multilingual and 'variously exposed' student body.

Within the art and design fields, lack of preparedness is a result of students not being exposed to these fields at all levels of schooling. This dearth of art and design knowledge in the wider South African context is illustrated by Cadle (2009) that only 12 schools out of 337 schools in Nelson Mandela Municipality offered art as an option. Further evidence of this lack of exposure to art or design can be seen in the schools of Soweto in Gauteng, which have only one secondary school offering art at matric level (Phosha-Personal communication 2011).

Preparedness for studying disciplines like architecture and jewellery for students from poorer communities is severely limited and this has an impact on their chances for entering design disciplines and further chances of succeeding in such programmes. In such a scenario it becomes critical to understand the background of students with a view to make learning more meaningful and perhaps relevant. It is the gist of this paper to show how jewellery and architecture Technology programmes at UJ can be structured to heighten the experience and success rate of students.

Defining the Diverse Background students

As previously mentioned, diversity is attributed, in the first instance to varying levels of exposure and secondly to differential levels of academic readiness. Students in the two programmes mainly come from Gauteng Province (UJ Student Survey 2011) and can be classified mostly as urban dwellers. Typical students that come into the Jewellery and Architecture programmes can be described as coming from five spatial backgrounds. Firstly, there are the urban dwelling students who come from the formal townships establishments that normally are located in the periphery of cities. Such environments are well serviced in terms of high schools.

Secondly there are urban dwelling students that come from informal settlements located usually on the edges of townships, which are often high density settlements with little or no basic facilities and very distant from educational institutions.

A third type of the urban dwelling students are mostly local and international immigrant population- they typically come from the inner-city environment which in most cases have little in terms of government educational systems. Instead they rely on private educational systems set up in buildings that were not intended to be schools.

The fourth group of students come from the suburban settlements that are well served by good schools and its supporting infrastructure. They may have access to artistic environments and have basic knowledge for observing art, design and detailing the environment.

The last group of students come from rural areas with educational systems that are varied. Some students come from affluent farming communities who went to good schools. These may have had good exposure to career opportunities in art and design. The other rural group are poorer rural dwelling students with severely limited educational facilities. The experience of such students gives them little exposure to the wide selection of careers of choice especially in art and design. Typical schools in this category may be the "Farm Schools". Exposure to art and design is such is minimal due to limited resources.

Although this paper has outlined five categories of students, they are not exhaustive. The paper uses these categories as a point of departure from which the dialogue between background and curriculum can begin. These categories could also be used to explain the level of preparedness of various students for higher education learning. It is obvious that students from the suburbs are better prepared than those from the poorer rural and informal settlements in general. The township based students still lag behind the suburban students in terms of preparedness. It can therefore be argued that the type of curricula for jewellery and architecture programmes at UJ, with its diverse student body, needs to be one that responds to differently prepared students if it is not to advantage one set of students over the others (Yeld 2010:27).

The above categories of living environments define the contexts that, in a covert manner, socialise potential students into various careers. The chances of students from these contexts to enter design professions like jewellery and architecture varies. Depending on their background, students come into learning programmes with varied scope of what the profession entails and wide-ranging initial skill and knowledge with which to enter their studies. Chances of completing studies on time are also varied, favouring the better prepared students if students are at all able to complete them (Yeld 2010:12).

While some of these students' background contexts may be perceived as inhibiting, this paper argues that these environments can serve as critical informants to the design of curricula in design schools in universities in general. The paper argues that such curricula is dynamic and has to be informed by constructivist theory in order to respond to these contexts and to the needs of a diverse student body. The theory of constructivism, developed by Swiss psychologist Piaget, argues that learning is constructed on previous knowledge. It has often been utilized as an umbrella term for a number of approaches applied across disciplines. The underlying principles are based on the view that learning as an action of constructing (not receiving knowledge); while instruction is the process of facilitating (not transferring knowledge). Furthermore, learning is viewed as an activity of understanding information within a situation. In other words, a context or the background of the learner has been cited as an essential variable within the learning activity. Duffy and Cunningham (2008) quote Rorty (1991) who argues that 'knowledge is a construction by individuals and is relative to the current context (community)'.

This paper therefore calls for the alignment and implementation of constructivist theory within the relative disciplines -jewellery and architecture in order to support learning. Broadly speaking, it argues that this approach will simultaneously address the current homogeneity of many design curricula. A recommended constructivist methodology, deemed appropriate in this instance, is known as situated learning. This framework informs one of the central arguments of this paper: the integration of relevant content and stimulus obtained from the aforementioned learner backgrounds.

In this way the chances of success of students are enhanced, as students are empowered by using their contexts to create new designs, be it in jewellery or architecture because of the emotional connection to their problem of their context (Conrad 1978:34, Cuff: 1991). Further because the curricula builds on environments that students are familiar with and understand, it encourages students learning process than teaching (Sara 2000:4). Success in the design field can perhaps be drawn from the fashion design labels of young black designers from the Ghetto's in the USA (Bond in Saunders et al..(1996). Locally in South Africa we have seen the clothing brand Loxion Kultca, Ma gents, Smarteez, Kofifijean and Nubian Prep street fashion. These brands were started in the Soweto Township and were inspired by such environments.

Implications of background for curricula

There are possibly two ways in which to answer the question. Firstly, on a wider scale, the student's backgrounds provide the framework around which knowledge in architecture and jewellery can be constructed. Studying the environments evokes what is called the curriculum design through a "Social Problems" approach (Conrad 1978: 32). In this framework an attempt is made to package the discipline knowledge in terms of problems that are abound in particular contexts with a view to equip students with "tools" with which to solve social problems in their context. Such curricula are not static but are transitional in nature and as problems are solved so does the curricula evolve.

Secondly, at a personal scale student's background is important because it suggests the covert knowledge that the student may have about the discipline that they wish to study. In ideal cases, such as well-resourced school, the potential student could have had some informal contact with a relation or professional who is engaged in a similar profession. The benefit of that initial contact is an emotional connection and a powerful motivational force between the student and the profession that inspires more than just the interest (Conrad 1978:34). Such students will exhibit a heightened sense of confidence and awareness of the discipline they are studying as they are certain about the career opportunities of their area of study. These students will most likely succeed in completing their studies than other students who might be first generation participants in a discipline.

For the first generation students, studying the discipline is a like shooting in the dark, always searching to understand where their studies may take them. Frustration during studies is not uncommon and chances of failure are high. It is this failure that design departments must address, not through adhoc measures, but through designing curricula that responds to the needs of the students. The needs of such students are perhaps not only of discipline knowledge that reinforces traditional content, but rather of that which uses the context to create learning experiences that allow students to develop intrinsic values with which they can use to explore and critic their environment . Cuff's (1991) observation about architectural education is perhaps apt when she notes,

“...By de-emphasising context, much knowledge and training that would be useful in architectural practice is unattainable.”

In terms of jewellery and architecture the five contexts discussed above describe infrastructure and environmental problems and opportunities for students to engage with as they construct the future South African environment. All five categories have social and environmental problems and possibilities which students in this country will have to engage with as they move on to become professionals. It is our belief that once *all* students are able to engage with these contexts, they would develop not just creative skills but also critical thinking skills to use to evaluate their contexts and provide relevant responses to their context. The five contexts also create the basis for previously untapped niche markets. It provides all students with the opportunity to be exposed to, explore and engage in both familiar and less familiar but applicable environments. We believe that the 'widened' approach to curricula is important for the development national identity and citizenship. Furthermore, acknowledging and contextualising the relevant disciplines is a means of promoting our unique 'South Africaness' and establishing new design identities.

Curriculum in transition: Creating meaningful learning experiences for all students in Jewellery and Architecture programmes

This paper suggests the destabilisation of the unitary educational processes that are followed in the jewellery and architectural technology programmes so that their curricula begin to respond to the students' context. The proposed curricula are student-centred- i.e. Learning approach considers the context of all students. In the above sections we have analysed the context from which students in design discipline come from. In this section we will show how the context can begin to inform the curriculum of the design disciplines of both jewellery and architectural technology. The idea is that the change in curriculum, while enhancing learning through an emotive response to learning, the programme will be addressing the future demands of the professions

If questions and assignments in curricula are shaped around the contexts in which students originate and are familiar then students are more likely to succeed (Cuff: 1991, Sara, 2000). The architecture curriculum could be shaped around the environmental and spatial issues of these contexts. In this new curriculum students will enter a process of constructing reality in exchange with others by taking the real life experiences of other students to challenge their environment and learning (Wallertein 1987). Together students develop a set of values that are developed with other students in a particular context. This would foster critical and independent thought in the students. Learning that is student centred engenders effective learning, as students build upon their experience of their local environment by relating it to new information learnt in the university. Brown and Moreau (2004), (Sara 2000) argues that this results in a deeper understanding of the discipline of architecture and an enhanced learning process than simply teaching.

Proposed Changes to in Architectural technology curricula to enhance student performance

The core knowledge areas for architecture technology programme at UJ can be organised into five learning themes (FADA Handbook 2011:16). The table below explains how each of five students background environment can be interpreted into an architectural curriculum framework organised as follows: Design, History and Theory, Technology, Communication Skills and Management. Only three knowledge areas namely Design, History and Theory, Technology are discussed in this paper. This decision was informed by the fact that these are the three main themes that form the basis of curriculum assessment by the South African Council for the Architectural Professions (SACAP) which validates all architectural programmes in the country (Steyn 2010:22). This paper does not discuss the other two themes namely Communication Skills and Managements because they are fundamental knowledge areas that are generally applicable to any of the five background categories.

| | Townships (formal) | Informal settlements | Inner-city environment | Rural areas | Suburban settlements |
|-----------------------------|---|--|--|---|--|
| Design | Housing typology Density Layouts Contemporary Renewal programmes | Upgrading (de)Densification Basic infrastructure | Reuses of old buildings. Precinct Development Mixed use development | Cultural Architecture Farm Building typologies Densification | Housing Typologies Densification Mixed use development |
| History & Theory | Ancient History up to Modern movement. Apartheid laws Native(Black) Urban Access Act Group Areas ACT | Migration Immigration and the shape of the cities. Contemporary city problems Environmental awareness | Ancient cities Urban regeneration Urban decay and renewal | Traditional African settlements Forced removals and its farm landscape | New Urbanism Sustainability Contesting Modernism and constructing the future Expanded Public Works Programme |
| Technology | Conventional building materials | Re-use and recycling of materials | Complex multi- storey construction methods | Traditional/ Building materials | Sustainable materials |

Table 2: Knowledge Framework showing learning material to be covered under each student's background in the architecture curriculum.

From the above table it is evident that it is possible to organise an architectural technology curriculum using students' environmental background. This is a departure from the traditional architectural curricula which is organised in chronological manner based on, disciplinary knowledge, design paradigms and canonical architectural ideas. It is the argument of this paper that the proposed radical arrangement of curriculum based on student background, will enhance students learning as they are able to apply their knowledge to their context. Such testing will enable students to develop new values about architecture and their environment. We contend that it is only in such contexts that "real" learning can be enhanced.

| | Townships (formal) | Informal settlements | Inner-city environment | Rural areas | Suburban settlements |
|---|--|---|---|---|---|
| Themes and research questions to inform Design solutions (Related to Design Management) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Market research and profiling • Background/environment study (See design History below) • Unpacking and applying Theories on relevant 'Visual Culture', Genre, Trends, Style and Identity (eg. Kwaito, Diva, Ghetto chic, Street fashion, DIY fashion, Afro Vintage, Hip Hop, low end commercial, High end commercial, haute couture) • Relevant Design techniques and procedure • Costing and quotation | | | | |
| Design History & Contextual studies (foundation for research) | Ancient History up to Modern movement. Apartheid laws Native(Black) Urban Access Act Group Areas ACT | Migration Immigration and hybridization of design elements. Contemporary city Environmental awareness | Ancient cities Urban regeneration Urban decay and renewal | Traditional African settlements Forced removals and its farm landscape | New Urbanism Sustainability Contesting Modernism and constructing the future Expanded Public Works Programme |
| Technology-Material and techniques (for realisation as a product) | Fusion-generating new genre | Re-use and recycling of materials | Broader Northern African materials and methods | Traditional South African/ manufacture materials and methods | Sustainable materials |

Table 3: Knowledge Framework showing learning material to be covered under each student's background in the Jewellery curriculum.

Within Jewellery, the aforementioned contexts provide a framework which is constructed from common themes. These themes are informed by a range of contemporary and historical visual cultures. The themes provide broad but pertinent visual content, which can be researched and referenced as inspiration in the applied processes of design. Furthermore, the three-dimensional realisation of such designs (in the form of jewellery products) is also addressed by the framework. It encourages the use of indigenous technologies in its previous and current forms, as well as equivalent international technologies.

Conclusion

The paper has highlighted the problem of lack of preparedness for university learning as a key factor in ensuring student success at higher education institutions. It establishes that the problem affects mostly students from poorer backgrounds. The paper remarks on the influences and effects of this central issue on design careers.

An implicit and controversial issue underlying this research is that of covert racism that is perpetuated if curriculum programmes do not evolve and address the demands of an increasingly diverse student body. The paper suggests a role for practicing academics in the implementation of national and institutional policy which addresses 'equal access to education'. Educators who do not acknowledge

and embrace the need for diversity in teaching approaches may be knowingly or unknowingly be perpetuating existing inequalities in South African HE institutions.

The paper proposes that one of the ways of enhancing performance for students in general is through the change of curricula of both jewellery and architecture. The paper has examined this problem from a contextual point of view. It has identified five critical environments from which students originate and has used it to develop a framework for curricula that will enhance students learning.

The paper first and foremost urges critical engagement and review of the proposed frameworks within a range of settings. It secondly recommends further study of the application of constructivist approach in the diverse context of South African design faculties.

Finally it is important to note that while paper set out to address enhancing performance of students from poorer backgrounds, the proposed curricula addresses enhancing performance of students from all South African backgrounds.

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Short Biography

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