The effect of ‘cultural models’ on student learning in law

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Abstract
An understanding of student learning and of the reasons for differential student performance is crucial to improving teaching and learning practices in tertiary education. This article aims to contribute to that understanding by reporting on an empirical study which examined two sets of student texts on the topic ‘What is law?’, written at a six month interval during a semester of tertiary-level introductory legal study. Student development is examined through an exploration of the ‘cultural models’ (Gee 1990) attached to the concept by students at the outset of study and the extent to which changes evident in student writings are connected to these changes. The article suggests some implications for pedagogy that derive from this research.

This article reports the findings of a study which sought to examine the factors influencing student success and differential performance in the context of an introductory law course.¹ The study was longitudinal, and examined two pieces of student writing both on the topic ‘What is law?’, the first on entry into legal study, the second after a six-month introductory legal course. Through an examination of student understandings on entry to the course and changes evident in student texts at the end of the course, the study sought to trace the impact of prior knowledge, read broadly within a Discourse perspective as a ‘cultural model’ understanding, on student development. Although the empirical work reported is based in a legal education context, the pedagogical implications which this work suggests may relate to tertiary education more broadly.

CONTEXT
The critical challenge in South African higher education, of obtaining equity not only in access, but also in success, for students from a range of cultural and educational
backgrounds has been widely referred to in the literature (e.g. Coughlin 2006; Cele and Menon 2006; De Beer 2006). Although having undergone major changes in the past decade, the South African higher education system still faces an apartheid-era legacy: students entering the system come from very different backgrounds, some having had the advantages of a relatively well-resourced and effective schooling system, others from a system which is still largely dysfunctional in many respects. Although the divide is becoming increasingly less categorised by race, it remains true that the disadvantaged sector is predominately African, and that these students typically have poorer success rates at university.

Strategies to address differential success have been adopted at both the systemic (Cele and Menon 2006) and at institutional level (e.g. De Beer 2006). Although many of these strategies undoubtedly are of crucial importance in aiding students towards success, there is still an inadequate understanding of the reasons for non-achievement by certain students. Many of these students enter the tertiary education context, not only with an inadequate preparation due to the inequities of the schooling system, but also having come from a cultural background which is far-removed from the culture of academia. As Coughlin (2006, 210) points out, ‘(i)t is known that the greater the fit between the prior educational experience and culture of a person at school level and that of the higher education institution, the greater the likelihood of university success’. Theoretically, writers such as Halliday (1978) and Bernstein (1990) have spoken of how language, power and social structure act in context to position individuals differentially for success. However, there is little empirical work done which tries to try to directly link prior knowledge and cultural understanding to later student performance. This article reports on the findings of a study which sought to trace this link.

At the time that the data for this study was collected (2000), the fairly sharp cultural divide amongst students provided a unique context for research: the African / white group differentiation provided a crude but easy means of distinguishing between students on the basis of their cultural backgrounds, and thus of plotting the extent of influence of that background on concept development. Through a comparative examination of two essays written at six month intervals, this study sought to investigate what students bring to the task, and how this influences their subsequent performance in the task.

THEORETICAL ASSUMPTIONS

This research draws on the concept of Discourse and attempts to investigate differential student performance through the lens of ‘cultural models’ (Gee 1990). As Gee explains, language carries a range of cultural meanings, and the relationship
between language and meaning is not directly correlative. Rather, the meaning of a word or phrase linguistically is a feature of the context of its use, and the choices made with regard to that use will, to some extent, be determined by the broader context, by the cultural meanings assigned to specific usages by specific groups. Different cultures reflect particular communities of language use: these differing forms of language use are termed Discourses.

In order that communication may occur, underlying the language choices and assumptions about these choices made by the participants must be a common view of the world, a common set of beliefs and values, which Gee refers to as a ‘cultural model’. Multiple cultural models exist in society, and an individual may subscribe to any number of these. These cultural models are always ideological, in the sense that they are determined by social theories about the nature of the world and its relations, held, very often, at a tacit level. They define what is ‘normal and expected’ (Gee 1990, 89) within a particular situation. According to Gee,

the fact that we are usually unaware of using these cultural models, of their social variability, and of their full implications, means that the assumptions they embody about the distribution of social goods appear to us “natural”, “obvious”, “just the way things are”, “inevitable”, even “appropriate”, despite the fact that cultural models vary across both different cultures and different social groups in a single society, and change with time and with changes in the society. (1990, 88)

Thus, the everyday meanings that an individual connects to a concept are not individually determined, but rather are influenced by the cultural models to which the individual subscribes. These will themselves then be reflected in the situated meanings that the individual brings to the task. Meanings brought to the task may position students in ways that allow for differential success with regard to the task: according to Gee, ease of acquisition of a secondary Discourse is partly determined by the extent to which there is a correspondence between the cultural models espoused in the individual’s primary Discourse, and the secondary Discourse.

Although it is unlikely that an individual’s primary Discourse location would act entirely deterministically on future development (Zamel 1998), the question of the extent to which the cultural models to which the individual subscribes may shape the choices and responses they make in the learning context requires empirical investigation. This research thus sought to examine changes in student concept understandings over the six months of the study, and to relate these changes to ‘cultural models’ identified through an examination of texts written at the outset of study. The understanding of ‘cultural models’ adopted in this article is a broad one. It assumes that a cultural model understanding will include not only content knowledge (understandings of the task object), but also values regarding the task, and perceptions of the context.
The research is reported in two sections: in the first section, the findings of an analysis which attempted to identify ‘cultural model’ understandings from initial student responses to the topic ‘What is law?’ are reported. In the second section, the results of an analysis which compared individual texts over the six months of the study, and then examined the texts in the light of the initial ‘cultural models’ identified for each group, are described.

**A ‘CULTURAL MODEL’ ANALYSIS**

Cultural models are not directly accessible to empirical analysis; however one can examine the situated meanings brought by a participant to a task or activity for clues to the cultural model meanings that they may espouse (Gee 1990). Through an examination of essays completed prior to formal instruction in the course, this research sought to examine these situated meanings, and thus to construct for each of the two groups studied (African and white), a ‘cultural model’ account of the concept. The assignment analysed was completed in the first week of term, and was intended to provide the student’s intuitive response to the concept, rather than one informed by the course itself: the spontaneous, not the scientific concept (Vygotsky 1987). The research sought to identify, for each of the groups, the particular combination of form, content and values that students bring to the task. A random sample of ten scripts from each of the two groups was used in analysis.

In order to perform this analysis, an initial thematic analysis was performed on a larger, unsorted group of texts to construct a theme table on the basis of which further analysis could be performed. An initial set of thematic categories was created on the basis of four scripts, and was modified incrementally through examination of additional texts until it was felt that a point of sufficient saturation had been reached, with little or no further modifications being made from further examination of texts.

In analysis, the responses of each of the students in the two ten-script sample were examined for the frequency of their responses to the themes identified in the table. The thematic organisational structure, and the relations used between themes, evident in the propositions used to connect theme structures (either additive, signalled by ‘and’ or ‘with’, or hierarchical, signalled by, for example, ‘through’ or ‘in order to’) were also examined. Contrasts used in meaning construction (Gee 1990, 109) were identified and analysed. In addition, evidence was sought of explicit student positioning with regard to the object of the task (law) and explicit student location with regard to the context (i.e. whether they position themselves explicitly as an ‘insider’ or ‘outsider’ to the domain). The tone and style of writing, which indicate familiarity with the discourse structure of the context, were also analysed. Finally, in
order to compile a comparative account, patterns were sought in responses within the
groups, and an attempt was made to plot a tentative reading of the cultural models
evidenced by the two groups.

The full findings of the individual and comparative analyses performed are
not reported here (see Watson 2006), but the section below provides a broad
generalization of the findings from each of the groups studied. These findings are
based on a ‘majority position’ in a collation of the individual analyses: the description
is thus an idealized version, rather than a true account, of the differences between
the groups. It is possible that no individual student essay within either of the two
groups fits entirely within the description provided below.

• For the African group

The context is interpreted in terms of its formal Discourse requirements, but, for the
most part, although there is recognition of these requirements, the ability to work
within these is inconsistently achieved. Significantly, there is an attributing to the
context of authority, seen not only in terms of its power/expertise dimensions, but
also in a validity/accuracy sense. There is a ‘right answer’ that must be sought,
regardless of the explicit instruction to provide ‘own ideas’. The task is thus
interpreted as a very explicit situating of self-as-student in the context and as an
alignment of self with that context, in the context’s terms. At another level of
identity, this leads to a distancing of self from the context, due not only to lack
of familiarity with the context, but also to the nature of the concept (related to
negative perceptions of self as an object of law).

The concept itself is defined fairly simply (two-level structure), predominately
through function, with complexity created through the assimilation of additional
themes, rather than through analysis of themes. At a content level, the concept is
seen primarily in terms of its social functions to maintain and regulate, with the
functions at the individual level of protection, guidance and control. The origin
of law is seen to be an important construct, with an exploration of its imposed
or developed nature. Also important is an exploration of the authoritative nature
of law: the level of determination by law, or individual choice with respect to
compliance with law. The model of law adopted tends to be that of a process, seen
in terms of an implementation account. The predominant contrast outlined is in
terms of an opposition between the social power effects of law, and its individual
shielding effects.
For the white group

There is strong Discourse familiarity evident, both in recognition of the formal Discourse context requirements, and in the ability to operate easily within this context. Although the task is interpreted as being to provide opinion, the situation of this opinion within the formal Discourse style, as well as the provision of justification or reflection with regard to that opinion, provide further evidence of Discourse familiarity. Location of self within this context tends to be implicit rather than explicit, and there is no obvious distancing or disconnection of identity from the context.

Although the concept is defined primarily in terms of function, the concept structure relies as much on integration as it does on assimilation (three-level structure). With regard to content, the social function of the concept is seen in terms of regulation and creation, and the function at the individual level as guidance and protection. Variation is seen as an important aspect of the nature of law: this is explored in terms of diversity, evolution or differentiated form. A further important construct of law is its basis, which is explored in terms of understandings of ethics and justice. The model of law which is adopted is that of a practice, at either an applied or a theoretical level. The predominant contrast evident is between the social power effects of law and its relational nature: this contrast is not resolved, but is rather accepted.

As an illustration of student writing on the topic, a short extract from the first essay of one student from each group is presented below. The two extracts were chosen for the similarity of their content coverage, rather than as exemplars of their groups. However, even within these very short extracts, some of the features identified as having relevance to the ‘cultural model’ understanding outlined above are evident.

Student 3 (black male):

... 3 I think when things or people started interacting in the early days of man, problems began to arise.
A set of regulations or rules therefore had to be made to keep everybody happy or satisfied.

4Law would therefore be the study of these “rules” which everybody would be familiar with, in order not to disobey them . . ..

7//This is basically the reason why I am a law student and I think there is a great future because these rules change and increase
as a result of more people being in contact with each other.

Noticeable in this extract are some of the features typical of the writings of the African group. There is clear recognition of the formal Discourse context (evident, for example, in the repeated use of the word ‘therefore’), but there is slippage within the text into informal style (evident in stanza 7). The student explicitly locates himself as a ‘student’ in the context. The text has a surface fluency, which suggests that basic English competence is not a problem for this student. With regard to the content, there is a focus in the text on ‘rules’, concrete things which can be learnt (stanza 4). There is also a sense in which these ‘rules’ are seen as authoritative, evident in this extract in the word ‘disobey’. The first stanza (stanza 3) focuses on the origin of law, an important construct for this group. In a manner atypical of his group, however, the student raises the ‘variation of law’ theme in stanza 7.

Student 17 (white male):

1
I believe that law is the fundamental basis
on which civilization was created.
To me law is what prevents us
from succumbing to our basic instincts and desires . . . .

2
Law is a dynamic system,
as society’s values and morals are consistently changing through time
and therefore making room for improvement and modification
of our legal structure.

3
This is one of the reasons why I have chosen to study law.
The constant developments in law
and the ever changing nature of law appeal to me
as I believe this will interest and motivate me in my career . . . .

This student’s text reveals the fluency and complexity of grammar typical of the writings of the white group (first language English speakers). The text is couched in a formal style; within this, the tone is one of opinion. The student raises the ‘variation of law’ theme typical of this group through his description of the ‘changing system’ (stanza 4). Rather than a focus on the ‘origin of law’, as is typical for the African group, the theme of the ‘basis of law’, typical of the white group, is raised in the ‘morality’ theme in stanza 3. This text is atypical of the white group in the explicit location of the student-as-a-student in the context.

Although the finding of distinguishable cultural models held by the two groups of students at the outset of study is tentative, some confirmation of these findings is provided through an examination of the literature relating to the ‘Africanisation’ of law, or an ‘African Jurisprudence’ (see, for example, Van Niekerk 1998; Johnson et al.)
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Drawing from this literature, student conceptions of law based on African conception of jurisprudence could be expected to incorporate themes of protection (over sanction), social maintenance and guidance (over individual punishment), communal values (rather than individual rights), could be expected to incorporate contrasting notions in a non-conflicting manner, and could be expected to promote themes of consensus and reconciliation.

These findings do accord with the meanings found to be attached to the concept by the African group of students. Maintenance and protection are seen to be the dominant functions of law; ‘rights’, which tend to be associated with a Western notion of justice, do not feature as a predominant theme, much less as a basis of law; and themes of consensus and reconciliation are evident through explorations of the ‘developed’ origin of law. The evidence thus seems to suggest some confirmation of the existence of a cultural model distinct from that held by ‘insiders’ in legal education (or to the Western model of law more broadly).

CONCEPT DEVELOPMENT

In the second phase of analysis, both the initial student texts and the texts produced at the end of a semester-long introductory course in law were analysed on two dimensions. Firstly, the two essays provided by each student were explicitly compared and evidence of change on a number of dimensions was sought. The analysis was primarily descriptive, and aimed to examine form, value and content in student texts. Levels for examination were thus selected to provide a full account of the textual, relational, and ideational functions of the text (drawn from Halliday 1978). Within these three levels of analysis, parameters within which change was sought were as follows: at the textual level, parameters examined included presentation, surface structure, style, word usage, and academic grammatical features. At the relational level, explicit student location and authorial presence in writing were examined. At the ideational level, logical structure, concept elucidation (compared against course mediation), and themes used were analyzed. Eight students formed the sample for this analysis: this small sample was selected in order to allow for depth, rather than breadth, in analysis. Individual students were selected on a stratified random basis, and four sets of student scripts from each of the African and white groups were selected for the analysis. Given the specific legal content of the task, the complete findings of the analysis at each of the three levels studied are not reported here (for full data and analysis see Watson 2006).

Secondly, the analysis of the scripts was compared with the ‘cultural model’ understandings identified from analysis of the initial essays. The findings from this comparative study are reported below. Specifically, this section examines the
extent to which elements identified in that analysis remain evident in the second essay writings of each group. Some other notable aspects of the findings from the comparative analysis of the initial and final essays are also reported.

For African students, student responses to the second essay showed recurrence of some of the dimensions identified in the ‘cultural model’ analysis of the first essay. In particular, although there was a clear increase in the extent to which grammatical structures typical of legal academic Discourse were used in the scripts examined, this remained an area where inconsistent achievement was found. Competence on this dimension was not fully established in any instance. Of significance for this group, surface grammatical errors in writing were found to increase substantially for the majority of the students in the sample, perhaps indicating a struggle with concept complexity (Bock 1988).

As with the first essay, the second essay again showed a strong attribution of ‘authority’ to the context. This was manifest both in a continued ‘right answer’ orientation and in the use of what appeared to be an appropriated ‘authoritative’ style, both of which appear to hamper success. If this interpretation is correct, it would suggest that a particular perception of context brought into the situation by students might be affecting their ability to participate meaningfully in that situation: reproductive modes of learning adopted by students may not only be an indicator of bad learning habits, but may also, and more fundamentally, indicate a particular subservience to a perceived dominant context.

Perhaps not unrelated to the authority dimension, for a majority of these students the explicit adoption of a position in context as ‘student’ continued in the second essay. There was evidence also of some continued explicit distancing of self from context, in a strong leaning towards a ‘broader community’ orientation.

At a content level, the ‘functional’ orientation of the first essay was not strong in the second. Within this theme, the sub-themes of protection, guidance and control were not raised at all in the second essay. The theme of the authoritative nature of law continued indirectly, as discussed above. The ‘origin of law’ theme that was frequently alluded to in the first essays was not used in the same manner in the second essay, and no reference was made to the imposed or developed nature of this origin. However, there was a confusion evident in the second essay between the content terms ‘origin’ (where law comes from initially) and ‘source’ (used in a legal sense to mean authority), and the Western notion of religion-as-origin of law (rather than authoritative source) was not established. The ‘justice’ topic, which also relates to Western values, was not well covered by this group. In instances where there were contradictions evident between different mediatory means used in the course in the values placed on content, these contradictions tended to be picked up and expressed as confusion in student texts. There was no evidence that the thematic ‘social power’
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‘shield’ contrast identified as important for African students in the analysis of the first essay was repeated in the second essay. Content framing was more likely to be inappropriate (in the sense of going beyond the scope of the essay topic at the cost of relevance) for this group than for the white students.

For white students, analysis of the second essays confirmed the initial finding of Discourse context recognition for this group: the grammatical structures of academic Discourse were displayed in all essays; the tone of the essays typically showed little informal slippage; and text and argument structuring were fairly competently achieved (measured by the Discourse’s standards). Evidence was found, for this group, of the development of appropriate authorial authority (for example, in the ability to use external authority to establish credibility, within a relativistic frame). Although no direct evidence of conflict in the process of enculturation to this form was identified, it appeared that some students in this group had not explicitly adopted legal academic ‘insider’ positions in their second essays: this appeared to result from personal choice (for example, in the adoption of a different academic genre) rather than Discourse or conceptual limitation.

As with the African group, functional definitions of law were, for the most part, not repeated in the second essay. Variation remained a key theme for this group, with all students mentioning aspects of this theme: multiple interpretations of law, the substance-imperfect nature of law, form differentiation, and evolution were all themes repeated in the second essay. The relational understanding which was felt to underlie this theme thus appeared to be continued in the second essay. There was no further evidence that the thematic contrast between ‘social power’ and ‘relative value’ identified in the first essay was continued in the second essay.

Themes that were raised by these students in the first essay and that had some relevance for the second included ‘justice’, ‘morality’, ‘form differentiation’ and ‘diversity’. It appeared that where themes overlap with content, this content tended to replace the thematic (naïve) understanding. Thus, for example, ‘justice’ was, in the second essay, discussed as an ideal, and not a basis, of law, by all students in this group. The ‘basis’ theme used in the first essay, whilst not used in a thematic sense in the second essay, had strong overlaps with the ‘related topics’ section of the course: all students in this group raised this theme in the first essay and explored the topic at some depth in the second. The fact that some of these themes provided a precursor to the content covered in the course itself undoubtedly aided students in the acquisition of that content: where topics to be covered in the course were foregrounded in the themes used in the first essay, content coverage in the second essay was invariably at a greater level of depth than that of other topics.

To give a flavour of the student texts, an extract from the second essay from each of the two students examined above is provided below.
Student 3’s final essay extract:

"In my mind, I have this picture of myself seating at the highest point of some mountain. This very same point that I am seating on, is at the core of El Nino. This is actually the first time that I have come to realise all the aspects of the whole process of this great natural phenomenon called El Nino. This depicts exactly what I have went through at Law School in my Introduction to Law class ... ."

"I therefore conclude by saying that there seems to be interlinks and parallels amongst all these theories. Even though John Austin’s theories has its own drawbacks it is closest to being correct. I found it very difficult and confusing to mention all the departments especially civil law, public law, delict etc. These laws could all be explained using the positivist approach.

There is a huge sense of confidence loss in this student’s second essay, revealed both through his choice of metaphor (in stanza 1), and explicitly in his acknowledgement that he has not understood the course content (stanza 15). The increase in surface grammatical error from the first essay produced by this student is marked, and is probably linked to his confusion with the course content. His retained focus on the search for ‘correctness’ has undoubtedly contributed to this confusion. This student received a mark of 50 per cent for each essay, but only received a mark 41 per cent (failed) for the course overall. He simultaneously failed all other law courses in this year, and on second attempt the following year received a mark of 16 per cent for this course. He dropped out of university study at this stage.

Student 17’s final essay extract:

"The meaning of law is debatable, there is no globally accepted definition of law. This is generally due to the vast differences between the governments and legal systems of the world’s countries. Law may come in written form, such as statutes, or law can be prevalent in society through non-material means such as custom. The Oxford dictionary defines law as a “body of enacted or customary rules recognised by a community as binding”. This definition tends to be limiting, as law is a subject that is too extensive and complicated to be confined to one sentence. However it has been discerned that law is prescriptive (opposed to descriptive), and that it is a genuine normative system ...

"My personal approach to the law is one which combines both positivist theories and natural law theories. I believe that the strict application of the law is of monumental importance but that legal rules should consist of basic human rights and should support the majoritarian view of the society without infringing on the basic rights of the minority.

Even in comparison with the fluency of grammar in the first text produced by this student, the complexity of word choice and grammar in this essay is notable. This
complexity is not always well sustained, and there are some instances of clumsy formulation (perhaps mirroring the increase in surface error found for the African students). There is strong development of authorial authority evident in the strong and confident tone, the use of external authority to support statements and thus to establish the author’s authority (rather than as knowledge or authority sources in their own right), and the use (not evident in this particular extract) of an authorial ‘we’ which appears to signify a shift to an ‘insider’ legal academic positioning. The ‘variation’ theme from the first essay has built, in this essay, into a relativistic understanding of the nature of law, both at the definitional level, and at the level of the adoption of a personal position with regard to legal understandings. Although the coverage of the concept provided by this student in this essay was not comprehensive, this student received the highest mark in his group for this essay (80%). He received 60 per cent for the first essay, and 75 per cent for the course as a whole.

Given the specific race/power configuration of the society within which this research is based, it is to be expected that the cultural model of law held by the white group of students would be closer to that held by the ‘insider’ (legal academic) Discourse community than that held by the African students. This appears to be confirmed in this study: familiarity with textual forms, appropriate content associations, and lack of conflict at a personal level are all features of the situated meanings brought to the task by the white students and not by the African students. Given the differential in performance (marks received) on the task by the two groups of students (with the highest mark received by an African student being identical to the lowest mark received by a white student), the study does seem to provide some empirical support for Gee’s suggestion that differing cultural model perspectives can explain differential student performance. On the basis of the very brief analysis in this section, however, it appears that content may play a smaller role in Discourse acquisition than other identified dimensions of cultural models: on the whole, themes identified as significant in cultural model understandings, either through the frequency with which they were addressed or through their use in the contrasts identified in essay one, except in instances where that theme served a purpose in content foregrounding, do not appear to have played a strong role in second essay understandings. However, familiarity or lack of familiarity with Discourse form speaks strongly to ease of access to this form. Personal location as an insider or an outsider to the Discourse similarly leads to conflict or ease in acquisition.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR PEDAGOGY**

A caution must be sounded regarding the analysis above: given the small sample size used in this instance, the data cannot be read quantitatively and cannot be used
to derive generalizations. However, and although the account offered above is brief, it does provide an indication of possible interpretations that can be drawn from the data. These interpretations allow for certain propositions to be set up regarding student uptake of the mediation in this context, and suggest directions for further research.

Firstly, there is some support in this research for the suggestion that the ease with which a student develops context-appropriate content knowledge is linked to prior knowledge structures. Although this dimension appears less critical to subsequent success than might have been imagined, familiarity with the types of understandings brought by different students to the context would be an advantage for teachers and may enable greater linkage to be drawn between new knowledge and old knowledge structures.

Second, in this research it appears that students from both groups correctly read the values transmitted in the mediation. However, where contradictions were evident in the mediation, or where the mediation was not clear, it was the African students that tended to most pick up on this, with resulting confusion in their texts. Greater precision in mediation may be necessary to prevent this type of confusion for students from Discourse models not closely related to the academic.

Third, it seems that explicit Western values in the content may be problematic for students from other backgrounds. This is compounded where terms used in the mediation are not clearly defined. Greater awareness in the mediation of possible sources of term confusion (‘origin’ versus ‘source’), as well as awareness of different cultural value systems (‘justice’ versus ‘social maintenance’, for example) may aid in preventing misunderstandings in this regard.

Fourth, there appears to be some link between success in this context and a relational or relativistic understanding of context and content. This finding is tentative and could be an over-reading of the variation and subjectivity themes in the texts. However, it appears that students who fail to recognise this relativity have a greater focus in their texts on ‘rules’ and context authority, which appears to obstruct success. Whilst it has been suggested that the development of relativistic thought is on a trajectory (Perry 1970), conscious efforts to reduce perceptions of context authority may aid in this regard.

Fifth, the analysis suggests that there is much still to be understood regarding the role of authority in student writing in this context. How context authority positions students, and differentially enables them to appropriate or develop authorial authority, is an area that appears critical to understanding student success.

Sixth, although all students showed recognition and some realization of Discourse-appropriate form, it appears that the form of the Discourse is more successfully appropriated where rudiments of this form exist already. Whilst this provides some
support for Gee’s suggestion that the extent of Discourse overlap influences success of acquisition, the fact that students whose primary Discourses are less closely related to academia were able, to some extent, to appropriate this form, suggests that this is not a severe limitation: time may be the critical element here.

Finally, the manner in which students position themselves in context, and the extent to which they identify with that context may have implications for student success. Although initial conflict in identity position does not preclude subsequent success, a level of personal commitment to the context is necessary. Choices on the affective domain in this regard, however, do not preclude the need for cognitive achievement on other domains.

NOTES
1. This article is based on research performed towards a PhD degree, completed at the University of the Witwatersrand, 2006.
2. Note that the term ‘African’ is used to denote indigenous black persons.

REFERENCES


