An Activity Theory analysis: Reasons for undergraduate students’ absenteeism at a South African university

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Abstract
The study reported on in this article sought to ascertain the extent of undergraduate student absenteeism; the reasons for its occurrence; and the actions performed afterwards. Activity Theory is the theoretical framework against which reasons for absenteeism of students enrolled in three- or four-year degree programmes across degree levels in four faculties at a higher education institution (HEI) in the Eastern Cape, South Africa, were surveyed. A research sampling method was used whereby 696 of a potential 1 428 students responded to a structured and semi-structured questionnaire requiring qualitative and quantitative responses. An interpretive paradigm was used for the analysis. The activity system’s mediating elements comprising subjects, rules, community, division of labour, tools and objects, capture the range of cumulative influences and their interdependency. As substantive theory, Allardt’s (1989) Sociological Theory of Welfare assesses well-being. The study found that students’ absenteeism reflects challenges regarding existence needs, compromised learning quality and a risk to throughput. Consequently, some ‘objects’ might need to be redefined. Departmental and institutional strategies are recommended.

Keywords: absenteeism, student experience activity system, Activity Theory, Engeström, mediating element, contradiction/s, Allardt, well-being

BACKGROUND
At higher education institutions (HEIs), especially the historically black universities in South Africa, like the one in the Eastern Cape, South Africa, where this research was based, there is a need for ethical, social and political redress. Past imbalances, for example, in the form of pre-tertiary experiences and educational background have had to be rectified so universities have lowered their entrance requirements in a bid to provide open access. Students, on entering university, then face other challenges: institutional conditions, resource allocation and the way learning opportunities and services are organised. Such factors impact on their engagement. One of the conditions, massification, has resulted in large class sizes which have inadvertently opened up the opportunity for various student behaviours, one of which is student absenteeism.
The current study focused on a rural and peri-urban university implicated by past history in privilege and disadvantage. Most of the students are black, working class, first generation students with different value systems to those that sustain the university. The majority come from marginal, impoverished backgrounds although they have the free will to decide where, what and how they will study. The mediating event for access is available financial aid and policies. Once enrolled, students realise that progression rests on multiple factors. They need to negotiate the political history and feel comfortable in the present student body. Furthermore, motivation, aptitude and university readiness are vital; adequate academic preparation for lectures is important, as is academic literacy acquisition. As soon as students find they are either challenged academically or if the expected community support or positive role model is absent, they often become overwhelmed and stay away from lectures. Not being English mother-tongue speakers, acquisition of academic discourse proves challenging. These students have not attended former Model ‘C’ schools and this leaves them with unequal opportunities; fewer chances to interact in the diverse world; and facing the challenge of negotiating this space.

In the current study, the community of practice was the central concept with respect to learning and it was placed ‘in interactional relationships that seek to represent the complex dialectic between the subjective and the systemic views’ (Bloomfield 2008, 9). Tension can arise because lecturers feel committed to professional and ethical standards of teaching, yet meaningful student engagement is not always possible. The university’s charter reflects its particular orientation toward teaching and learning excellence. Those aspiring to these principles and values would hope to find themselves surrounded by enabling factors, not constraining ones as experienced by the absentees in the study.

The study began when the researcher wrote numerous evaluation reports reflecting an attendance rate of less than 50 per cent. He queried the possible reasons. Soon after, a concerned dean requested a survey of the different faculty levels. When he tabled the report at the next Deans’ Forum, it was suggested that other faculties be surveyed so that an understanding could be reached at institutional level. The researcher then surveyed the respective groups in each faculty, obtained the deans’ and students’ permission to present this data at a conference and then in a journal article. Hopefully these findings and recommendations will provide a new understanding of student challenges in a rural and peri-urban university.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A review of the extant literature revealed that the reasons for absenteeism can be divided into student or university related (Dolnicar, Kaiser, Matus and Vialle 2009). Furthermore, absenteeism is not confined to a particular sector in any country. Instead, it is a global problem in the business sector, amongst government employees (Lambert, Hogan and Altheimer 2010) plus on school (Hartnett 2008) and university campuses (Dolnicar et al. 2009).
Student-related factors

First generation students can be expected to have relatively low educational expectations and low rates of application (Lloyd 2005), but Kuh (2007) suggests that motivation can be an accelerator. Peer groups reportedly have more influence than parents (Harris 1996, 263) so the student who finds acceptance in a group of ‘bunkers’ will likely suffer the effects on his/her academic outcome. Connell (2008, 14) suggests that some academics lack ‘meta-competences’ – they struggle to balance responsibilities and priorities, to choose and use particular competences. This could include those who have family responsibilities, such as care-giving (Patton and Johns 2007) or part-time work. The South African Survey on Student Engagement (SASSE 2010), however, showed that the most overwhelming reason for absenteeism is financial needs. Sachs, McArthur, Schmidt-Traub and Kruk add that poverty is crippling hygiene and health (2004).

University-related factors

Research shows that students are more likely to attend compulsory lectures and tutorials (Berenson, Carter and Norwood 1992; Devadoss and Foltz 1996; Dolnicar et al. 2009). Chan, Shum and Wright (1997) and Kiiker (1976) report a slight increase in grades after lecture attendance is made mandatory. However, Moore (2006) suggests that being penalised for absenteeism does not affect attendance that much. Jenne (1973), St. Clair (1990) and Marburger (2006) support the mandatory approach, adding that examination performance can be improved.

Crede, Roch and Kiezeczy (2010, 272) conducted a meta-analysis of the relationship between class attendance and class grades and they hold that ‘these relationships make class attendance a better predictor ... than any other known predictor of academic performance’. To monitor attendance, a baton and chip could be introduced such as recommended by Hoekstra (2008).

Eckert (1989) and Hartnett (2008) reveal that organisational structures either reward or reject particular peer groups if their attitudes, values and beliefs coincide with the institution’s mission. Huxham and Vangen (2000) in Bloomfield (2008) cite three important elements in collaborative partnerships, namely, resources and aims, language and culture, and trust and power. If the relationship between lecturers and students is understood to be a partnership, then this finding would hold true in the current study also.

Access to alternative information resources is quoted as a key reason for absenteeism by Friedman, Rodriguez and Mc Comb (2001). If students can gain the lecture information either by photocopying notes or collecting a handout, they diminish the importance of lecture attendance. They also quote poor lecture quality as a contributory factor to absenteeism. This is supported by Romer (1993) and Dolnicar et al. (2009). Students say that lectures are ‘repetitive and boring’. Some students also feel that the lecturers have no real interest in them as people nor in their challenges. If students are experiencing difficulty with environmental factors,
it would be helpful if the lecturers reached out and made students feel welcome, holds Hartnett (2008). She suggests that displayed empathy would improve class attendance. She further offers the following predictors of student success, namely, family identity, income and choice of peer group.

A South African, Eastern Cape HEI student’s perspective

It becomes clear that misalignment between university expectations and those of the described students could exist. If application levels are as low as the reviews indicate, then academic success could be elusive. This could be accentuated by students having less dedicated friends. Culture and custom also impact on student behaviour: With the strong hierarchical and power relationship in the Xhosa home, for example, students would never dare to defy a parent’s instruction to stay home and tend the sick even if academic responsibilities called. First generation students could have superficial support structures at home owing to family members not knowing how to assist a student. Only high motivation could counter this. The family’s attitudes, values and beliefs would also differ widely from those of the institution, which is aiming at excellence and ploughing back into the community – the student would aim to pass, the first rung of the success ladder. This elephant would need to be eaten one bite at a time! Coping information would be critical in large classes where students easily feel overwhelmed.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study was informed by Engeström’s Activity Theory which assumes that human action takes place within specific social and historical contexts that are inseparable from the action. An activity is needs-driven and goal-oriented (Bakhurst 2009, 199). Furthermore, Engeström (1993, 67) holds that ‘an activity system integrates the subject, object and the instruments into a unified whole’.
Figure 1: Engeström’s (1987, 78) Activity System Model

Figure 2, a modified version of Engeström’s Activity Theory (1999) illustrates sets of interconnected triangles with their mediating elements of ‘subject/s’, ‘object/s’, ‘tools’, ‘rules’, ‘community’ and ‘division of labour’.
The activity system under study here is the Student Experience Activity System; the subjects are undergraduates; the ‘object’ is to learn successfully; and the goal is to graduate. The key components of this model are:

- The university ‘community’ of lecturers, tutors, supplemental instruction leaders, language and writing consultants, student counsellors and librarians depicted as facilitating students’ learning. The home ‘community’ is depicted as providing support and encouragement to its children who are studying. The part-time work ‘community’ employer expects labour/service in exchange for money.
• The ‘tools’ and ‘rules’, defined by the university and aligned with institutional standards plus those of the Council on Higher Education and South African Quality Assurance, that are aligned with the National Qualifications Framework levels of accreditation. Tools include texts, lectures, tutorials, lecturers, peers, finance (for food, medical needs, stationery, transport) and programmes which all mediate the learning experience. The hierarchical relationship between the lecturers and students entails an element of power. ‘Rules’ cover enrolment, course criteria, lecture attendance and compliance, for example, expected norms regarding behaviour.

• The ‘community’ would be the stakeholders such as the university community, that of the home and that of the city – they are not the primary ‘subjects’ but they share the ‘object’ of the activity.

• ‘Division of labour’ is also hierarchical amongst lecturer/consultant/librarian, tutor and student at the university ‘community’ level, between parent and child in the home and between employer and time-on-task employee in part-time positions held by students needing extra funds to support their studies.

It should be understood that the activity system changes constantly because different tensions arise at different times between the ‘mediating elements’. Any shift in the form or function of the ‘community’ element when placed within an activity system requires consideration of new interactions and responses within the linked elements and vice versa. This can be likened to the ripple effect seen when a pebble is thrown into a pond. The Activity Theory framework thus allows dynamic complex representation that focuses on the broader ‘activity system’ unit, not merely the learning ‘community’. Questions on whether rule givers, rule enforcement plus manner of ‘division of labour’ enable or constrain the learning process all impact on the student and the amount of learning happening.

Yamagata-Lynch (2010) suggests the importance of activity settings and the three planes of socio-cultural analysis. Rogoff (in Yamagata-Lynch 2010, 25), suggests zooming into one plane at a time – either personal, interpersonal or institutional. Relevant features of the other two planes will be considered as they highlight the complex activities of the zoomed-in plane of analysis.

According to the Centre for Activity Theory and Development Work Research as cited in Thomen (2001, 75 and 76), four levels of activity system ‘contradictions’ can be distinguished, namely:

• Primary ‘contradictions’ that arise when there is a contradiction within the elements in relation to the ‘object’. For example, a student pays fees (tools) for examination admission (object). The student, however, has not received a bursary (tool) so cannot write examinations (tool). This results in a primary contradiction within the ‘tool’ element in relation to the ‘object’.
• Secondary ‘contradictions’ that appear when new ‘elements’ enter the activity system. For example, deans expect 60 per cent lecture attendance (rule) for students to qualify for the Duly Performed (DP) mark (tool) for examination admission (object). The student, however, is repeating one subject, has a clash on the timetable between first and second year courses resulting in a primary contradiction between a rule disallowing timetable clashes and the ‘object’ of studying, and a secondary contradiction between the ‘rule’ and ‘tool’ element in relation to the ‘object’, which is to gain examination admission.

• Tertiary ‘contradictions’ that appear when a ‘culturally/more advanced object’ is introduced into an existing activity system leading to a tension with the existing ‘object’. For example, when a lecturer changes from contact sessions to enrolling students on Blackboard for on-line responses, this gives rise to tensions for technologically challenged students.

• Quadternary ‘contradictions’ that emerge between an activity system and a neighbouring one. For illustrative purposes, quadternary contradictions could arise when Nursing Science lecturers in the university activity system receive prescribed text books from the South African Nursing Council (a neighbouring work place activity system) which possibly do not meet with lecturers’ approval.

These ‘contradictions’ lead to the search for their origins within the system. This could result in ‘transitions and transformations between the components of an activity system’ (Engeström and Miettinen 1999, 9) or in solutions being found (Li’enkov 1982, 83–84). Engeström and Miettinen (1999, 9) suggest that they may be resolved through change or alternatively could lead to the ‘object’ being redefined. For instance, regular absentees might find themselves not achieving their DP certificate and thus not writing examinations. This could, in turn, lead to them dropping their studies. In this light, they would have to redefine ‘learning to be able to graduate’ to ‘searching for an opportunity to earn money’. Activity Theory is thus an appropriate conceptual framework with an interpretive paradigm. It also allows for participant observation to interpret interaction between people and to negotiate meaning in the real-life context of the university.

**METHODOLOGY**

The survey questionnaire for the study was purposefully compiled. The enquiry centred on the frequency of absenteeism; the reason for it; the course of actions performed after students miss lectures; the effects of absenteeism; and the prevalence of absenteeism. The data from the open-ended questions evoked qualitative and quantitative responses.

Sampling followed and the course coordinators identified one core course at each level of study, a possible 1 428 students. The four faculties to be surveyed were Law, Education, Management and Commerce, and Humanities and Social Sciences.
– referred to as Faculty A–D henceforth.

Questionnaires were administered to identified students and associated faculty staff. This was in line with the research sampling method (Terre Blanche and Durrheim 1999). Arrangements were made for a 30-minute slot to complete the questionnaire, but students were not forewarned as that would have been self-defeating. Each class was addressed by the same administrator who verbally assured students of confidentiality and anonymity. Consenting participants stayed, others were given the freedom either to abstain or to leave. Completion of the questionnaire was thus equated with written consent. The purpose of having one administrator and capturer was to keep the method consistent. This strategy also heightened the reliability factor in terms of interpretation.

Themes were generated inductively by reading and rereading responses. Identified themes were then coded and categorised (Lyons 2002). Analysis and interpretation of participants’ perceptions followed (McMillan and Schumacher 2001).

The student questionnaire was designed to reflect both a subjective and an objective perspective of absenteeism. This was done by asking participants questions about their own absenteeism and that of their peers, thus providing a second lens. The perceptions of lecturers provided the third lens. Triangulation followed. The study was approached using an interpretive paradigm (Terre Blanche and Durrheim 1999). On completion, reports and recommendations were sent to the Executive Management Team (EMT).

**FINDINGS**

On the survey day, the attendance rate was 48.7 per cent (ie, an absenteeism rate of 51.3%). The absenteeism rates were corroborated by lecturers whose agreement ranged from 71.4–92.3 per cent as shown in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Tabulation of findings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Aspect</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attendance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree that absenteeism occurs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absent 1–5 times per term</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First reason for absenteeism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second reason for absenteeism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third reason for absenteeism</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
An Activity Theory analysis: Reasons for undergraduate students’ absenteeism

The reasons for absenteeism fell into two groupings, namely, personal and those within staff control. This equates with Dolnicar et al.’s (2009) categorisation of ‘student-related’ and ‘university-related’ factors. Faculty A, C and D students absented themselves mostly for academic obligations such as the writing of assignments or preparing for tests or examinations. These reasons can be classified in a number of ways:

- as a primary contradiction between ‘tools’ and ‘subjects’ – many students are underprepared, cannot bridge the gap between school and university expectations so use avoidance techniques;
- as a primary contradiction between ‘tools’ and the ‘object’ or the test and examination preparation can be a tertiary contradiction because students are being faced with a stressful educational challenge of a summative nature;
- as a secondary contradiction between class attendance (‘tools’) and workload (‘division of labour’).

The students’ second reason (a primary contradiction between ‘tools’ and ‘object’) was financial, that is, having insufficient money for taxi fares, text books and stationery. Their third reason was ‘own or other’s sickness’. As ‘own’, it would be a primary contradiction between ‘tools’ and ‘object’, but as a care-giver, it would be a secondary contradiction between ‘rules’ of class attendance and ‘community’. Most respondents stated ‘sickness’ or ‘family chores’ as their reason with no qualifier, and the researcher chose to use the secondary contradiction categorisation in this instance. For all four faculties, the areas within staff control, namely being late for lectures or being repetitive and boring, became insignificant in faculties B and D. These responses resonate with Romer (1993) and Dolnicar et al. (2009). These ‘university-related’ factors could be classified as a secondary contradiction between lecture attendance (‘tool’) and non-involvement (‘division of labour’) because students reported, ‘I get nothing out of lectures where lecturers repeat the information in the text book. I can just as well read my own text book at home.’ The timetable clash could be categorised as a primary contradiction between ‘tool’ element and ‘object’.

The course of action followed when students miss lectures primarily revolves

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Areas within staff control: repetitive, boring lectures</th>
<th>18%</th>
<th>3.36%</th>
<th>29%</th>
<th>3%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Absenteeism a departmental problem</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absenteeism an institutional problem</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absenteeism a global problem</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>83.5%</td>
<td>65.3%</td>
<td>75.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The course of action followed when students miss lectures primarily revolves...
around reliance on friends; the third choice is based on etiquette; the fourth to sixth on personal effort. The findings showed students are comfortable with a friend collecting notes for them or with paying for photocopies of a friend’s notes. Less than 22 per cent courteously visited the lecturer and less than 16 per cent were prepared to attend a supplementary instruction session or read supplementary material to fill them in on work missed. This corresponds strongly with Friedman et al.’s (2001) findings.

There was strong agreement that absenteeism can become a habit. However, the only area where students felt they had let their peers down was in group work. Responsibility towards the lecturer did not rank highly. Most students said their absenteeism affected them more than it affected others. One wrote, ‘My being absent doesn’t mean that everyone else won’t understand the work!’

The area of work and performance affected most was class work, especially group work requiring inputs. Absenteeism resulted in a disruption of the ‘division of labour’ and affected their tests and assignments – they indicated that scope might be given in their absence and that their not knowing could impact on their later performance. As mentioned earlier, this could be classified as either a primary or tertiary contradiction.

There is evidence to suggest that absenteeism is a concern on campuses. This is corroborated through the staff lens. However, the majority feel it is a nationwide phenomenon, as corroborated by Australian and British literature.

**DISCUSSION**

**Outcomes**

In Activity Theory, activities are goal directed. In the Student Experience Activity System, achieved ‘outcomes’, such as graduation, rest heavily on certain ‘objects’, such as passing. Passing is achieved through ‘tools’, such as mental processes, knowledge, academic literacy acquisition, skills, social and cultural values and experience. However, the different ‘subjects’ that constitute the body of students do not necessarily share the same understanding of values and goals. This can give rise to tension and may affect operational processes, like the way people work together. For instance, with group assignments, some students put in their best effort, while others do the bare minimum.

The outcome stated as the ‘object’ of being enrolled for a course of study is to acquire knowledge, skills, values and a new identity. The skills acquired during growth and development of potential can be applied and transferred, thereby enabling a pass each year and eventual graduation, reflecting student success. Entailed in the process of building knowledge and skills is class attendance where interaction potentially takes place. In lecture halls, cross-cultural perspectives and understanding of viewpoints enrich the learning. Li’s (2009) article stresses how
diversity in the classroom is vital to education and how absentees miss out on this edifying experience.

Given the 51.3 per cent absenteeism rate and the admission by 50–77 per cent of students that they miss lectures and tutorials up to five times a quarter, it becomes clear that students do not see the connection between ‘tools’, such as regular attendance, and performance. Their pre-occupation with survival and coping sidetracks them. These students should heed Crede et al.’s (2010) findings of class attendance being a better predictor of grades than any other. Their absenteeism rate is slightly higher than Romer’s 40 per cent in 1993 for American universities (Ryan, Delaney and Harmon 2010). Disjuncture, therefore, exists between the students ‘object’ of their study and the institutional ‘object’ as expressed in the university mission and charter.

Tools
‘Tools’ can be divided into conceptual and material. Many under-prepared students could be experiencing conceptual difficulties, not having developed the conceptual tools for academic discourse (Boughey 2005). Many second language English speakers have bridged the language gap by acquiring mental constructs and the conceptual ‘tools’ for part of the learning process, but find discipline-specific discourse problematic. Some students also do not anticipate the long-term consequences of poor class attendance – this supports Connell’s (2008) findings.

Material ‘tools’ facilitate the development of certain behaviour. For example, funding for text books and transport facilitates use of texts to advance content knowledge and understanding if read and reflected upon critically. By encoding and decoding, students can become predisposed towards reading certain things in certain ways. In short, academic literacy improves. By attending lectures, they learn first-hand from the lecturer and participate in group work and tutorials with peers. They are learning to don the clothes of that discipline (Boughey 2005). Therefore, merely having a ‘tool’, for example, a text book, is not enough to ensure facilitation of learning; it is only through incorporation into the student’s activity, when a mental tool is directing the student’s actions, that effectiveness is assured. This would be favoured by Burd (2006) whose research results show a strong correlation between attendance and attainment. Bennet, Eden and Bell (2003) suggest that absentees do themselves an injustice by relying on course material only because they are limiting their retention of relevant discussed material. The subjects under study, who rely on peers for handouts and photocopies, would do well to heed this.

Rules
Rules that govern the acceptance and behaviour of students revolve around the minimum admission and placement criteria, payment of fees, course selection and progression requirements. There are also norms and conventions that enable or restrict within the activity system. The contradictions that have arisen have mainly been cases where the students have not adhered to the university rules and regulations.
Fifty to 77 per cent of absentees admit to ‘skipping’ lectures despite the rule stating, ‘The Head of faculty/Dean concerned shall determine what constitutes satisfactory attendance ...’ (University of Fort Hare 2011, 77). This implies that students have either not read the rules or highlighted them, or that students deliberately or circumstantially disobey them. They also arrive late for lectures despite the accepted norm of entering within the first ten minutes after commencement. Taxis and busses cannot be controlled by users so this is a cultural and material matter which impacts on the whole class. How are individuals’ rights to 50 minutes of tuition balanced with those who have an equal right, but have been unwittingly delayed? Granted, some students play the system, but many are late for reasons beyond their control. When students are absent, hunger for knowledge prompts their willing acceptance of handouts secured by a peer. The inconvenience to the peer and the added responsibility imposed on him/her is taken for granted by the absentee. This corresponds strongly with the findings of Friedman et al. (2001).

The rules regarding submission of tasks and assignments as part of the semester mark also create tensions. Many students struggle with time management as evidenced by the fact that academic obligations are one of the top three factors responsible for absenteeism at the institution. Students confirmed they stay away to complete assignments and study for tests and examinations. These actions create a contradiction within the rules regarding attendance (‘tool’) as opposed to the submission of assignments which contribute towards the DP (‘division of labour’) which, in turn, either admits or disallows a student from writing examinations (‘object’). These examinations would then either prove the student to be successful or to have failed (‘outcome’). Table 2 illustrates the double jeopardy effect absenteeism has on academic success and throughput, from the subjective and objective perspectives of Allardt’s (1989) School Well-being Model. Clearly, the elements of the activity system are dynamic and continuously interacting with the other elements and the ‘object’.

**Table 2:** Cross tabulation of results using Allardt’s (1989) School Well-Being Model for interpretive purposes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subjective Indicators</th>
<th>‘Having’ at university</th>
<th>‘Loving’ in the community</th>
<th>‘Being’ as personal growth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Financial</td>
<td>Academic obligations</td>
<td>Bonds with friends</td>
<td>Academic tasks are</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic obligations</td>
<td>Health care</td>
<td>Bridge vertically</td>
<td>challenging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health care</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Response to lecturers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Creativity and self-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>esteem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objective Indicators</td>
<td>Environment and</td>
<td>Group dynamics in</td>
<td>Large classes = low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>resources</td>
<td>lectures</td>
<td>personal interaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Academic tasks and</td>
<td>Residence and distance</td>
<td>between lecturer and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>clashes</td>
<td>from friends</td>
<td>students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>HeAids</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Division of labour**
At any university, the ‘division of labour’ element refers to the horizontal division of tasks between the lecturer, the tutors and the students and to the vertical division of power and status. In many courses, large classes and fixed seating make collaborative work during a lecture challenging. For this reason, a fair number of lecturers use the transmission mode and do not actively engage students. This non-engagement results in students becoming bored and distracted and they then resort to ‘skipping’ lectures. This impacts negatively on the ‘object’ of learning and writing examinations and the ‘outcome’ of graduating.

In terms of compulsory tutorials, there is also a contradiction. Some faculties enforce the rule, while others do not. Because of this inconsistency, students ‘play the system’. Even where students’ attendance is captured, there is not necessarily a follow-up consultation to discuss the reasons for their absence.

At the ‘division of labour’ level where growth should be taking place, students struggle with time management and, therefore, find themselves using lecture time for writing assignments and preparing for tests. Lecturers try to set the dates for assignment submission according to the work that will have been covered and also allowing themselves enough time for assessment before the marks are due. It can thus happen that students have a number of assignments due within the same week. If the students’ time management is poor and they have not worked on these tasks at regular intervals, they will find themselves facing a lecturer to ask for an extension. The response of one lecturer was quoted as, ‘I do not want to hear any excuses. Do not make your problem mine’. It is at that point that power relations come into play: the lecturer has the last say. It is hoped that the majority of lecturers ascribe to humanising pedagogy and that they would be willing to deal with each case on its own merit. These types of challenges do not build students’ self esteem nor afford time for creativity. Students become more alienated instead of integrated. The dynamics in class are further complicated by large class numbers which only allow for low interaction between lecturers and students. This also results in a double jeopardy effect as illustrated in Table 2.

The community
The ‘community’ element in the Student Experience Activity System comprises the university community in each lecture hall where students interact with their lecturers and peers and the wider university staff which includes both lecturers and support staff; the macro-community of the town/city which incorporates businesses which have an interest in graduates; as well as the family/residence community which supports the student.

The university community experiences contradictions within the ‘division of labour’ element when there are tensions between students and their peers regarding group work. Furthermore, students want to bond with their friends, which supports Harris (1996), and build good relationships with their lecturers, yet they find group dynamics difficult and are also hampered by not being able to arrange or finance transport from their residences or homes situated at a distance from campus when
they want to do collaborative assignments. In this case, ‘tools’ and the ‘object’ are in tension as a primary contradiction.

The second community, the town/city business sector, had an impact in the sense that a fair number of students reported having part-time work as a means of securing enough finance for some of their student expenses. These jobs, usually on a shift or ‘if and when’ basis, sometimes clashed with lecture hours thus creating a primary contradiction within the ‘tools’ element, namely class attendance versus earning finance for fees. In terms of the tension between the attendance of lectures (and observing university rules regarding DPs) and fulfilling the requirements of a part-time job, the choice made could impact on future job opportunities and it could impact on academic performance and throughput.

Contradictions also arose in the family community where parents expect students to do home chores and the students feel trapped between parental respect and academic obligation. Some students reported having ‘family commitments’ or ‘responsibilities at home’ which hindered them from fulfilling their student responsibilities. If a sibling was sick, for example, and the parent needed to go to work, the student was asked to be the care-giver. In this way, the community’s ‘division of labour’ is in contradiction with the ‘object’ of studying for examinations culminating in graduation, the ‘outcome’. Should either the business sector or the family make continual demands, the student will need to redefine the ‘object’ because the living conditions will have changed. This supports Konu and Rimpela’s findings (2002, 79). Table 2 reveals that a double jeopardy effect is being experienced at institutional and personal levels (columns 1 and 3). Students are being alienated, not integrated, so growth and development are severely restricted. Their poverty and life of need pushes them into a state of hopelessness, which is very far removed from the well-being advocated by Allardt (1989). Students are thus focussing on their deficiency needs and without outside intervention, their growth and self-actualisation will be stunted.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

Lecturers need to be encouraged strongly to use assessment creatively and strategically in order to increase students’ attendance. They can capitalise on motivation and cognitive ability. Close mentoring and monitoring is advised so that early signs of exigent factors influencing class attendance can be recognised. Having an attendance register (or using Hoekstra’s baton and chip idea) and including an attendance mark in the DP would also assist in evoking a more responsible attitude. It would be prudent to heed Wilkins’s advice (2008) of creating an academic environment, a climate conducive to teaching and learning, firm but fair discipline, and good interpersonal relationships to improve class attendance. Curriculum reform focussed on relevance would also be advantageous.

Staff members need to recognise the disparity between the university Charter’s ideal and the real situation on the ground. Students’ motivation to succeed, in many
cases, is held in check by exigent factors relating to human needs at the physiological and security level. A family outreach programme which gives attention to the students’ out-of-university problems would be a good starting point. Should government funds be available, these should cover students’ basic needs, not just tuition fees. A bus needs to be purchased to ferry students from collection points at half-hourly intervals thus minimising their costs. Financial resources, time and energy need to be expended in alleviating deficiency needs. The old adage still applies: ‘You cannot preach to the hungry.’ If the educational system wants to produce individuals who can reach their highest potential, then HEIs need to broaden their focus on education to include students’ basic needs.

CONCLUSION

The findings of the study suggest that primary, secondary and tertiary contradictions exist in the Student Experience Activity System. Financial problems (affecting transport, accommodation, food supply and meeting of basic needs), together with academic obligations and ill health are the three most common reasons for absenteeism which impact on academic success at the HEI. These reasons have been framed and described, using Activity Theory, particularly the notion of contradiction. It is clear that contradictions exist between the ‘tools’ and ‘rules’ and also between ‘rules’ and ‘division of labour’. Tensions also exist between the ‘community’ and the ‘object’. The ‘subject’/students’ health status can also impede achievement of the stated ‘object’: being sick and incapacitated results in non-attendance of lectures, which can in turn affect academic performance and throughput.

The contradictions reflect the multiple demands made on students who have entered the higher education system in tight financial times, when bursaries are not large enough to cover all the costs involved with higher education. In such situations it is unsurprising that the solution cannot be found within the Student Experience Activity System; instead the ‘object’ has to be redefined when students cannot succeed at their studies. This forces them to leave university and seek employment or join the ranks of the unemployed.

The strong correlation between the self and peer lenses would suggest the reliability of these results. The slightly higher rate of academic obligation amongst Faculty A students might possibly be attributed to their inability to handle a heavier workload whereas those of Faculty D were subjected to scanning of student cards to register attendance so reflected a lower absenteeism rate on the day surveyed and through the self and peer lens. The staff lens also perceived the reasons for absenteeism to be financial, clashes in timetable or students preparing for tests or examinations. This supported the other findings and triangulated them.

The three main reasons cited for absenteeism at the given institution by students, peers and staff alike take the focus back to the physiological, safety and security needs on Maslow’s (1968) Hierarchy of Needs. It becomes clear that students find themselves at a certain level and then keep returning to a lower level to satisfy
deficiency needs. As Maslow (1968, 209) says: ‘What man needs but doesn’t have, he seeks for unceasingly.’ Thus, students spend most of their time trying to cope. These findings support Huitt’s (1999). The deficiency needs must be met before growth will be enabled. Allardt’s (1989) categories of well-being, namely, studying conditions, social relationships, means for self-fulfilment and health status are all compromised. The students struggle to form a social identity within the university community and their personal growth is stunted by their limited participation in a balanced set of activities and by their poor health status.

Activity Theory allowed for the identification of contradictions and tensions within and between the elements in the Student Experience Activity System. It ascertained that the contradictions and tensions were either resolved or not resolved. It is hoped that a humanist approach by the EMT will help them to decide how the students’ lack of engagement can be turned around to meet their success goals. Hopefully, interventions will be developed that can identify those students who are about to drop out and that resources will be allocated in a meaningful way so that these students can graduate and plough back their resources into their rural and peri-urban communities.

REFERENCES


