

IN PURSUIT OF SOCIAL JUSTICE IN SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION: EXPLORING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EPISTEMOLOGICAL ACCESS AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF STUDENTS' ACADEMIC LITERACIES

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ABSTRACT

The concept of epistemological access, formulated by Morrow (1994; 2007), has been highly influential in higher education. It has been widely used in the sense of moving beyond physical or formal access to meaningful access to the “goods” of the university. An academic literacy approach acknowledges the complexity of literacy practices at university level. According to this approach, students need to master disciplinary literacies in order to learn and engage with knowledge (Lea and Street 1998; 2006). Epistemological access, social justice and academic literacies have been widely researched in the South African higher education field. This conceptual article explores the relationship between epistemological access and the development of students' academic literacies to enhance social justice within the South African higher education context. We draw on related literature and our current experiences as academics to critique current institutional practices aimed at addressing the development of academic literacies and promoting student success. We argue for greater attention to be paid at institutional and faculty level to enhancing epistemological access and social justice. This article ends by putting forward a number of propositions towards strengthening student epistemological access and academic literacies development in higher education from a social justice perspective.

Keywords: socially just, social justice pedagogies, academic literacies, epistemological access, student success, South African higher education

INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

This article grew out of our shared concern as academics and Writing Centre staff related to the challenges of achieving student success. We wanted to explore how epistemological access and academic literacies could be mobilised within a social justice pedagogy to enable student success. We are located in different disciplinary areas with different foci and have all come to a point of awareness that the issue of students' writing development needs to be relooked at by our higher education institutions (HEIs). As researchers engaged in the development of student academic literacies in our institution, the experiences of Lillis and Scott (2007) resonate with our own. They argue that:

“The teacher-researchers who drive much academic literacy/ies research are usually grappling with the worlds of academic knowledge making on the one hand, and pedagogy, course design and institutional policy making, on the other, and often from marginal institutional positions.” (Lillis and Scott 2007, 14).

The concept of epistemological access has been defined as moving beyond physical or formal access to meaningful access to the “goods” of the university (Morrow 1994; 2007). An academic literacies approach views students' development of academic reading and writing and engagement with other modes of communication as socially situated practices within social and disciplinary contexts (Goodfellow and Lea 2013; Lea and Street 1998; 2006; Lillis and Scott 2007).

We take the position that the concept of student success which is so prevalent in higher education needs to be critically examined in relation to epistemological access and the role that academic literacies play. We draw on the concepts of epistemological access, academic literacies and social justice to explore their contribution to student success in higher education.

As academics we experienced how in the last five years our institution has placed an emphasis in their planning on resources directed at enhancing student success. These initiatives included the Student Success project, the First Year Enhancement project and tutor development programmes. There were increased efforts to strengthen policy and innovative practice related to teaching, learning and assessment. Macro-level curriculum development, included a focus on the development of Graduate Attributes as cross-curriculum outcomes and alignment of assessment (UWC 2020).

While there has been much focus on the content aspects of curriculum development, less

attention has been paid to the process aspects of curriculum support. Professional staff development with regard to teaching and learning continues to be under-resourced. Centres and courses aimed at developing academic literacies are fragmented, with few coordinated programmes for development of students' academic literacies as an essential part of the university's strategy for enabling student success (Boughey and McKenna 2021; Dison 2018). For example, the Writing Centre has very few staff resources and academic literacy practitioners are located in stand-alone courses, and not oriented towards providing a resource for staff to embed academic literacies in their curricula.

HEIs, both nationally and internationally, are enmeshed in neo-liberal values that prioritise measuring and quantitative accounting for success (Badat 2020; Du Preez and Du Toit 2022; Machika and Johnson 2015). These discourses co-exist and intermingle uncomfortably with discourses of social justice and decolonisation (Badat 2020; Bozalek and Zembylas 2017; Du Preez and Du Toit 2022). The neo-liberal influence manifests itself in the emphasis on measured outputs, strategic planning, performance indicators, quality assurance measures and academic audits (Badat 2020; Olssen 2006).

Badat (2020) argues that since 1994 there have been inadequate resources to support comprehensive higher education transformation, and this has had negative consequences for equity, quality, and development. Badat (2020, 28) critiques the lack of focus on the liberation of the curriculum from "orthodoxies that devalue certain modes of knowing and impede knowledge-making is long overdue and must be part of strategies for transforming universities." The current focus in HEIs on the decolonisation of the curriculum is an attempt to redress past inequalities and injustices, to challenge the dominance of Western knowledge, pedagogy, and research, as well as to question the colonial roots of university practices and curricula (Du Preez 2018).

Scott (2018, 2) has argued that student success should be "at the heart of the higher education agenda". Higher education outcomes are complex and there has been debate about what should be most valued. Nevertheless, for the great majority of the key stakeholders – the individual students and the country and society at large – student success means "mastering a field of learning sufficiently to earn a sound tertiary qualification" (Scott 2018, 3). The Council on Higher Education (CHE 2014) defines student success as "enhanced student learning with a view to increasing the number of graduates with attributes that are personally, professionally and socially valuable" (CHE 2014, 1). Scott thus sees the end goal of higher education with regard to its formal educational role as successful completion of studies and the key measure of success is number of graduates. Thus, student success needs to be foregrounded as a central strategy for achieving social justice in higher education, by shifting away from "patterns of

provision” that reproduce inequalities (Scott 2018, 3). In this way student success has a critical transformative role, for individuals and the country as a whole.

Zepke and Leach (2010) identify tensions in how student success is measured in New Zealand. They argue that in policy documents, student success tends to be judged by “hard” quantifiable outcomes, such as retention, completion and employment after graduation on the one hand and “soft skills” on the other hand.

In South Africa, student throughput rates are a grave area of concern. However, they cannot only be judged by “hard” quantifiable outcomes, for example, how well students have been retained, how many completed their courses, as well as work-related outcomes such as graduate employment. While quantitative measures, such as student throughput rates, which are directly linked to subsidy, are used to determine student success, more qualitative measures are harder to identify and measure.

Dhunpath and Subbaye (2018) and Scott (2018) highlight that HEIs have been unable to achieve student success despite an increase in resourcing and support for student learning. They observed that:

“despite successive efforts and increasing resources directed at enhancing student success, the outcomes have been minimal, largely because student failure has been pathologized as a function of student deficits rather than a consequence of systemic dysfunction, especially as it relates to the curriculum.” (Dhunpath and Subbaye 2018, 85).

Interventions such as first year experience programmes and extended curriculum programmes have been directed at specific areas where students are identified as vulnerable without implementing “fundamental and systemic” changes (Scott 2018, 3). Furthermore, the key challenge to HEIs are “to establish approaches that can be applied in the mainstream teaching and learning process across the sector, to benefit all students who need them” (Scott 2018, 7). In a similar vein, Leibowitz and Bozalek (2015, 8) assert that:

“foundation provision focuses on a narrow band of students, over a limited time period, and that it separates the educational thinking and planning for foundation students from mainstream students. This is to the detriment of either group of students and lecturers.”

Badat (2020) argues for the need to focus on the quality of staff capabilities for transforming universities. He contends that although there has been a shift towards a more representative and qualified academic workforce this does not mean “that the academic capabilities for transforming universities are in place, or greater engagement with questions of knowledge and epistemic justice” (Badat 2020, 28).

It is within the context outlined above that we explore the relationship between epistemological access and the development of students' academic literacies to enhance student success and social justice within the South African higher education context.

CONCEPTUALISATION OF EPISTEMOLOGICAL ACCESS (EA)

The term epistemological access (EA) has been used, developed and critiqued by numerous scholars in higher education in South Africa and internationally (Gamede 2005; Muller 2014; Moll 2004; Omar and Arif 2020; Omar and Chaudhry 2019). More recently Morrow's notion of EA has been applied to online teaching environments to address the link between EA, online teaching and the digital divide during the COVID-19 pandemic (Themane and Mabasa 2021; Du Preez and Le Grange 2020). The development of this concept and its implications for teaching and learning and student success in higher education are explored below.

Morrow first used the notion of EA in response to the democratisation of education and widening access by universities in South Africa from the early nineties (Morrow 1994; 2009).

Morrow (1994) makes the distinction between formal physical access to an institution and EA. He states, "To register as a student at a university is not yet to have gained access to the knowledge which the university distributes" (1994, 40). He elaborates:

"Epistemological access is not a product which could be bought or sold, given to someone or stolen, nor is it some kind of natural growth, such as the growth of plants or bodies. Epistemological access cannot be supplied or 'delivered' or 'done' to the learner, nor can it be "automatically" transmitted to those who pay their fees, or even to those who also collect the handouts and attend classes regularly." (Morrow 1994, 40).

To gain epistemological access, Morrow (1994, 40) argues that students need to learn "how to become a participant in an academic practice. He comments that in the same way in which "no one else can do my running for me, no one else can do my learning for me". In order to access the learning, he asserts that learners need to face the difficulties and challenges of systematic learning and teachers need to face their responsibilities as teachers by supporting learners to face these challenges (Morrow 2009). He argues that learning how to become a participant in an academic practice "is to learn the intrinsic disciplines and constitutive standards of the practice" (Morrow 1994, 40). Initiating students into the discourses (the grammar, image, rules and logic) is critical to EA (Morrow and King 1998).

Student agency or epistemological labour is identified as a necessary requirement to gaining EA (Morrow 1994; 2009). Morrow argues that this is a long-term project which requires "both systematic learning and, perhaps, the sympathetic assistance of those who already

understand the practice ...” (1994, 39). Although Morrow recognises the role of the lecturer in supporting EA of students he does not foreground this role.

Bak (1998) elaborates on Morrow’s argument (1994), emphasising the need for both “epistemological labour” or “agency” on the part of the student, as well as “systematic teaching” (Bak 1998, 206). Systematic teaching requires “epistemological labour” (Bak 1998, 206) on the part of the teacher/lecturer that involves selecting and sequencing information to ensure continuity and progression in learning, which gives rise to knowledge acquisition.

Although Morrow (2009) does acknowledge that learners come from diverse backgrounds, and that having certain resources and support can facilitate EA, it still does not guarantee it. He comments:

“We might think here of historical and institutional conditions, various kinds of facilities and resources (a library, for instance), particular levels of physical and mental health, natural talent, access to good textbooks, the company of other serious learners, the sympathetic assistance of teachers, etc. But all of these things can, at best only facilitate, and never guarantee, my epistemological access; I must be trying to learn.” (Morrow 1994, 40).

Morrow’s conceptualisation of EA has been criticised for not taking institutional, socio-economic and political contexts into account (Gamede 2005). Gamede (2005) criticises Morrow’s point that “only those who are willing to learn will achieve epistemological access” (Morrow 1994, 42). According to Gamede, Morrow’s argument underplays the fact that EA requires “more than the ‘willingness’ to abide by existing rules but also the willingness of the institution and teachers to provide an environment conducive to maximum learning” (Gamede 2005, 66). Thus, according to Gamede, Morrow’s emphasis on the need for students to do the labour to fulfil the epistemic requirements and standards of disciplines in the university, demonstrates an uncritical acceptance of “institutional culture and practices” of a university (2005, 66).

Gamede (2005) proposes that universities need to be more responsive to student needs and societal change in order to enhance conditions for EA. He proposes that there be a focus on:

“who provides knowledge, what kind of knowledge is made accessible, what kind of knowledge is valued, who is being taught and what is the time allocation to the topic and the language of learning and teaching, as well as various teaching styles employed ...” (Gamede 2005, 4).

Boughey (2005) puts forward an alternative and nuanced perspective on EA, highlighting the importance of addressing cultural and linguistic diversity in both curriculum design and pedagogy. She argues for the facilitation of EA to address the mismatch between the

“expectations of the dominant context of culture and context of situation” (Boughey 2005, 232). Boughey (2009, 6) argues that the “values and attitudes and the practices that a language user needs to draw on all relate to what counts as knowledge and the ways in which we make knowledge”. Responsiveness to students’ language and cultural needs in relation to the cultural and linguistic experiences of students and the curriculum (both as contained in the course outcomes and curriculum as informed by the institutional context) would require mediation. Boughey (2005; 2009) calls for bridging the gaps between the respective worlds students and lecturers draw on, as well as the institutional culture. Bridging those gaps, according to Ballard and Clanchy (1988), not only requires negotiation and mediation, but also making overt the rules and conventions that determine what can count as knowledge.

Both Moll (2004) and Slonimsky and Shalem (2006) identify the need for “curriculum responsive teaching” (Moll 2004, 4) and “curriculum responsiveness” (Slominsky and Shalem 2006, 36) as a way for students to gain access to powerful knowledge in higher education. Moll (2004) advocates for different types of responsiveness, namely: economic, cultural/institutional, disciplinary and learning responsiveness. According to Moll (2004, 4) an economically responsive curriculum denotes “the extent to which the teaching and learning in a university meet the changing needs of employers by producing graduates that are innovative, skilful and competitive”. A culturally responsive curriculum – would be one that accommodates diversity of socio-cultural realities of students, by developing a wider variety of instructional strategies and learning pathways. A disciplinary responsive curriculum would include “a close coupling between the way in which knowledge is produced and the way students are educated and trained in the discipline area” (Moll 2004, 7).

Muller (2014) expands on what EA affords access to in a responsive curriculum by adding that students need to be provided with “access to both the insights of rationalism (knowledge as theory or ‘know that’) and insights of the practice theorists (knowledge as practice or ‘know how’)” (Muller 2014, 264). For Muller (2014, 262) “both must be accounted for in the curriculum”. Muller (2014) advocates for a focus in higher education on powerful knowledge and argues that “that higher education studies has, through a well-intentioned focus on practice, at times taken its eye off knowledge” (Muller 2014, 264). However, “know that” and “know how” he argues “are more inter-related than previously thought; and both must be accounted for in the curriculum” (Muller 2014, 262). Morrow provided insight into “knowing that” but was very vague in terms of “knowing how”.

Garraway (2017) argues that within higher education the conditions for epistemological access have a strong social justice agenda. Jacobs (2021) suggests a move away from generic views on teaching and learning, which plague most HEIs and advocates for “contextually

responsive teaching and teaching that is knowledge-focused (Jacobs 2013). She argues that “academics need to make explicit to their students the values, specific structures and organising principles underpinning how knowledge is produced in their disciplines and how knowledge claims are made” (2021, 8). She elaborates that:

“the role of academic teachers is about being contextually responsive, while inducting students into their disciplines of study and making explicit for them the values, organising principles, and knowledge structures underpinning the ways in which knowledge is produced in their disciplines of study.” (Jacobs 2021, 4).

Jacobs (2021, 3) calls for a holistic approach to teaching and learning, one that takes into account both the social and the individual. As she puts it “a holistic approach to teaching and learning would focus on our students, within an understanding of the social context of universities and the nature of the knowledge produced there” (Jacobs 2021, 3).

While Morrow’s original concept of epistemological access had been criticised for not taking socio-economic contexts into account, various researchers have drawn on the concept of epistemological access to assist with theorising more contextually situated responses to curriculum and pedagogy and the promotion of social justice in higher education (Moll 2004; Gamede 2005; Boughey 2005; 2008; Slonimsky and Shalem 2006; Garraway 2017; Jacobs 2021).

In summary the agency of students, lecturers, as well as that of the institution is required to support the conditions for EA. While students have a key role to play in taking agency in the learning process to engage in systematic learning, academics and the institution need to provide systematic teaching and support. This requires contextually responsive teaching, curriculum and assessment design which inducts students critically into the powerful knowledge of their disciplines, as well as the values, knowledge structures and organising principles (Jacobs 2021) underpinning how knowledge is produced. The lecturer needs to take responsibility for inducting the student into academic inquiry of specialised knowledge. Providing students with a curriculum that gives both access to, “knowledge as theory” – “knowing that” and “knowledge as practice” – “knowing how” (Muller 2014). Learning responsiveness of the curriculum entails teaching and assessing students in ways that are accessible to them. This includes making available “what is valued about the underlying discipline, how it is assessed, and which evaluative criteria are of significance, but also adjusting teaching to the rhythms, and the tensions and emotions of learning” (Slonimsky and Shalem 2006, 36–37, citing Moll 2004). A holistic and contextually responsive approach to teaching, assessment and learning that includes a consideration and sensitivity to the individual student, and the social and institutional context

is needed. Addressing these content and process aspects to enable epistemological access, promotes a strong social justice agenda (Garraway 2017).

ACADEMIC LITERACIES

An academic literacies approach in higher education arises from the “New Literacy Studies”, within which literacy is conceptualised as social practice (Street 1984; Gee 1990). Street (1984) critiqued what he termed the “autonomous model” of literacy. This model views literacy as a decontextualized set of skills and claims that it enables cognitive development independently from the social and cultural contexts in which it exists. He proposed the “ideological model” which views literacies as concrete social practices which interact with social factors, including political and economic conditions (Street 1984).

Lillis and Scott (2007) outline three specific ways in which individuals use language in socially and culturally situated contexts. Firstly, spoken and written texts do not exist in isolation but are bound up with practices in the material, social world. Secondly, ways of doing things with texts become part of “everyday, implicit life routines” both of the individual and of social institutions (Lillis and Scott 2007, 12). Thirdly, they argue that the notion of practice offers a powerful way of conceptualising the link between “the activities of reading and writing and the social structures in which they are embedded and which they help to shape” (Barton and Hamilton 1998, 6, in Lillis and Scott 2007, 12). This approach, which views development of academic reading and writing as social practice, relates to what Muller (2014) calls “knowledge as practice”. An academic literacies approach emphasises the contextualisation of development of the practice of academic literacies within university and disciplinary contexts. Furthermore, the development of academic literacies is intertwined with learning and acquiring knowledge in academic and disciplinary contexts.

Lea and Street (1998, 158) identified three approaches to students’ writing, a *study skills* approach, an *academic socialisation* and an *academic literacies approach*. These are not seen as mutually exclusive. A *study skills* approach views literacy as “a set of atomised skills which students have to learn and which are then transferable to other contexts” (Lea and Street 1998, 158). The theory of language on which it is based emphasises surface features, grammar and spelling.

An *academic socialisation* approach refers to induction of students into academic cultures and conventions. The *academic literacies model* is linked to both the skills and academic socialisation models but goes further by “paying particular attention to the relationships of power, authority, meaning making, and identity” implicit in the use of literacy practices within particular institutional settings (Lea and Street 2006, 228). The plural form of literacy is used

as students are required to switch practices between different settings, to “deploy a repertoire of linguistic practices appropriate to each setting, and to handle the social meanings and identities that each evokes” (Lea and Street 1998, 159).

Academic literacies specialists have argued for a move away from a skills-based deficit model of student writing which locates problems with individual students to consider the complexity of writing practices required at university (Lea and Street 1998; Jacobs 2007; Boughey and McKenna 2021). Learning in higher education is understood as involving new ways of knowing, interpreting and organising knowledge, which is deeply embedded within the ways that the “various disciplines construct themselves through language” (Jacobs 2007, 875). Within a disciplinary approach to academic literacies development, students need to learn the disciplinary norms and conventions, which constitute the invisible “rules of the game” (Jacobs 2013, 132). Lecturers need to make explicit to students “what counts as knowledge in the discipline” and the principles through which new knowledge is created (Jacobs 2013, 132). Jacobs (2013, 132) argues that facilitating literacies development within a disciplinary context should also involve, amongst other things, “a critical examination of disciplinary discourses and genres”.

In higher education institutions in South Africa, the term “academic literacy” is often used to refer to stand-alone academic writing courses (Boughey and McKenna 2021). However, the term is dislocated from the rich theoretical background in which an academic literacies approach is grounded. In other words, according to Boughey and McKenna, it “has been misappropriated to support the very model it was developed to contest” (Boughey and McKenna 2021, 67). Most HEIs in South Africa have strategies for developing academic literacies which are decontextualised, such as “stand-alone” courses and writing centres which are outside of the teaching and learning in departments. Often those teaching on general “academic literacy” courses are not themselves members of the target field. Thus, they are unlikely to have a firm grasp of the requisite literacy practices (Boughey and McKenna 2021). Thus, these courses tend to focus on generic academic writing skills, such as elements of essay writing “devoid of disciplinary content and context” (Boughey and McKenna 2021, 67). In many cases, academic literacy teachers try to make their courses relevant to the target field. However, the success of such an endeavour relies on consultation and cooperation with disciplinary lecturers and is not built into the model of literacies development (Dison 2021).

From data gathered in institutional audits from 2005 to 2012, Boughey and McKenna (2021) observed that most institutions which were audited did not draw on the “sophisticated, theorised account of students and student learning” arising out of scholarship (Niven 2012, cited in Boughey and McKenna 2021, 75). Rather they relied on common-sense understandings of

language and academic practices. These common-sense understandings “allow institutions to believe that, simply with the “right” set of neutral, generic and transferable skills, students should succeed”. There has been consistent evidence that interventions based on common-sense understandings were not addressing students’ need for epistemological access. However, in spite of this, billions of rands of state funding was spent on such interventions in South African universities (Moyo 2018, cited in Boughey and McKenna 2021, 68).

To sum up, research and practice conducted within an academic literacies approach rejected a dominant model of literacy which viewed it as a decontextualized set of skills which could be developed independently from social and cultural contexts (Street 1994; Lea and Street 1998). An academic literacies approach understands students’ academic literacies as social practices bound up in the material, social world, interacting with political and economic conditions (Scott 2007; Street 1984). This approach recognises a need for skills development of students and socialisation into disciplinary cultures and discourses. In addition, both in research and in practice, there is a need to pay particular attention to “the relationships of power, authority, meaning making, and identity” implicit in the use of literacy practices within particular institutional settings (Lea and Street 1998, 228).

There has been a wealth of scholarship both internationally and in South Africa which point to the need for academic literacies development and teaching and learning interventions to be located within the mainstream curriculum and specific disciplinary contexts. In spite of this, Boughey and McKenna (2021) demonstrate that between 2005 and 2012 the dominant models of teaching and learning that universities adopted were decontextualised models. Within the field of academic literacies, the most common strategies have been decontextualised academic literacy courses and writing centres that predominantly work with individual students on the margins of the mainstream teaching activity.

Scholars and practitioners working within an academic literacies approach have recognised that developing students’ academic literacies needs to involve more than socialising students into the dominant academic and disciplinary discourses. Learning takes place in social, political and economic contexts. Students’ agency needs to be mobilised in order to learn and learning involves meaning-making and is linked to identity formation. Students need to engage with power relationships and authority, for example, negotiating their own world experience in relation to powerful discourses within disciplinary and institutional settings. Lillis and Scott (2007) explore this further, using the concepts of normative and transformative approaches to academic literacies development. This will be discussed further in the next section.

SOCIAL JUSTICE

The concept of social justice is a contested concept. Goodlad (2002) argues that it has been used to mean different things to different people, such as equal opportunity or equity. More broadly it could include relational concerns and extends beyond distribution of resources (Cribb and Gewirtz 2003). Musara, Grant and Vorster (2021) argue that a social justice perspective should include a focus on individual and family relationships, as well as political, economic and cultural aspects.

In the last ten years scholars and practitioners in South African HEIs have placed an increasing focus on enhancing social justice pedagogy alongside protests by students for curriculum and institutional transformation (Musara et al. 2021). Leibowitz and Bozalek (2016, 111), drawing on Nancy Fraser's (2009) three dimensions of social justice, assert that social injustice continues to "persist with regard to matters of ethnicity and identity, thus of recognition, matters of distribution of material and cultural resources, and matters of power and voice, thus of framing". Nancy Fraser (2009) and Moje (2007) identify affirmative and transformative approaches to enabling social justice. At a higher institution level, Moje (2007, 3–4) argues for both socially just and social justice pedagogical practices to support the development of student academic literacies. She defines socially just pedagogy as "a call to ensure that all youth have equitable opportunities to learn." Social justice pedagogy, Moje (2007; 2008) argues, must provide access to mainstream knowledge and practices but also provide opportunities to question, challenge, and reconstruct knowledge.

"subject-matter pedagogy that is socially just in its provision of opportunities to learn how to make sense of and produce the texts of different subject areas and teaches social justice as teachers guide youth in critiquing, challenging, and constructing knowledge in those disciplines and in everyday life." (Moje 2007, 37).

Leibowitz and Bozalek (2016) however argue that ameliorative changes which include actions such as redistributing resources fall short in addressing inequalities in the system. They argue that transformative approaches which focus on addressing the root structural causes at an economic, cultural or political level are required (Leibowitz and Bozalek 2016).

Lillis and Scott's concepts of normative and transformative approaches to academic literacies (2007, 12–13) arise out of Lea and Street's (1998) concepts of "academic socialisation" and "academic literacies" respectively. They argue that a transformative approach would involve a critical engagement with academic conventions and an ability to locate these conventions within "contested traditions of knowledge making" (Lillis and Scott 2007, 13). It requires the questioning by writers of how these conventions may affect their

meaning making. This approach would require the exploration of alternative ways of meaning making in academia, which would value the resources that students bring to the university as “legitimate tools for meaning making” (Lillis and Scott 2007, 13). A transformative approach to academic literacies aims to foster critical thinking within scholarly communities and reduce inequalities in society.

From a transformative perspective, Leibowitz and Bozalek (2016) identify structural injustices relating to both global issues such as the impact of the digital divide and differential access to knowledge production and consumption (Leibowitz and Bozalek 2016) as well as national and institutional barriers that need to be addressed. Promoting social justice practices in higher education teaching and learning requires what Bozalek and Zembylas (2017, 3) refer to as an orientation towards justice at the societal level that “nurtures relational values such as care, compassion, respect, and solidarity.”

A number of scholars highlight the systemic and institutional constraints to social justice pedagogy (Bozalek and Zembylas 2017; Garraway 2017; Leibowitz and Bozalek 2016 etc.). Leibowitz and Bozalek (2016) argue for the need to identify which knowledges at a programme and institutional level have more respect and esteem than others and who gets to be valued in terms of their racial and ethnic orientation, sexual orientation, gender, ability or nationality. They give examples of institutional injustice such as the silencing of the voices of students and academics through language, policies and cultural practices as well as distribution of resources such as time for building relationality (Leibowitz and Bozalek 2016). Cleyle and Philpott’s study suggests that factors such as institutional support structures could be instrumental in supporting student engagement and success. They add that providing students with access to information and advice, high quality of courses and programmes and quality instruction and guidance are all critical components of institutional factors that could improve student engagement and success (Cleyle and Philpott 2012, cited in Pather et al. 2017).

Proponents of the need for incorporating a transformative approach into the development of students’ academic literacies argue that both normative and transformative approaches are important and necessary (Lea and Street 1998; Lillis and Scott 2007; Moje 2007; 2008). It would not do students justice to take only a transformative approach without assisting them to master the current dominant literacies of the university and formal literacies required in the workplace. In adopting an academic literacies approach, one needs to incorporate both normative and transformative dimensions, seeking “to give students access to both the means to work within [established disciplinary communities successfully] and the means to eventually critique, challenge and change their knowledge-making practices over time” (Dison and Clarence 2017, 8).

A social justice perspective to supporting student success would thus hold a more systemic and integrated perspective of those dimensions in a student's life which play a role in them gaining access to the "goods of the university". These would include addressing a range of factors at a personal, interpersonal, institutional and contextual level that may constrain the ability of students to gain access and succeed. The literature suggests that both socially just and social justice approaches are required to support the development of student academic literacies and student agency (Lillis and Scott 2007; Leibowitz and Bozalek 2016; Moje 2007). Bozalek and Zembylas (2017) strongly emphasise an orientation towards social justice at the societal level which foregrounds relational values and solidarity. They place an emphasis on the processes and cultural dimensions of relating at an interpersonal, institutional and contextual level which are strongly linked to student and staff agency. They argue that there needs to be acknowledgement of the structural dimensions at these levels that constrain agency.

EXPLORING THE LINKS BETWEEN EPISTEMOLOGICAL ACCESS, ACADEMIC LITERACIES AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

The concept of epistemological access as articulated by Morrow (1994; 2009) has generated much discussion, criticism and debate in higher education (Moll 2004; Gamede 2005; Muller 2014; Omar and Arif 2020). One of the criticisms has been that Morrow did not consider the broader economic, social and political factors that constrain a student's ability to take agency (Gamede 2005) and, furthermore, that he did not acknowledge the extent of the impact of the diverse challenges faced by students (Gamede 2005). From an academic literacies approach, students' reading, writing and learning would be viewed as being deeply embedded within social, political and disciplinary contexts (Jacobs 2021; Lea and Street 1998; Lillis and Scott 2007). Higher education institutional cultures and structures, as well as the curriculum and pedagogy can constrain students' agency and EA and this needs to be acknowledged and addressed (Bozalek and Zembylas 2017; Boughey and McKenna 2021).

We have discussed the distinction identified by Moje (2007) and Lillis and Scott (2007) between what Lillis and Scott call a normative and transformative approach to literacies and social justice in education. All of these scholars argue that both of these approaches are needed. We would argue that Morrow's view of epistemological access and access to the "goods of the university" can be located within a normative approach as he focuses on the need for students to fulfil the epistemic requirements and standards of disciplines in the university, while demonstrating an uncritical acceptance of the "institutional culture and practices" of a university (Gamede 2005, 66). Not providing students with ongoing opportunities for scaffolded learning of the university's forms of knowledge and engagement with knowledge,

limits their ability to take agency to gain epistemological access. Supporting both “normative” and “transformative” approaches to the development of student academic literacies (Lillis and Scott 2007) in course programmes goes to the core of addressing social justice pedagogy and student access and success.

While Morrow (1994; 2009) emphasises the epistemological labour that needs to be undertaken by the student, we agree with Bak that epistemological labour from the lecturer is required as well (Bak 1998). Lecturers need to have an informed, clear and agentic stance towards their teaching, curriculum content and assessment tasks (Garraway 2017; Jacobs 2021). Moll (2004) and Slonimsky and Shalem (2006) argue for curriculum responsive teaching that supports student agency and epistemological access. Jacobs (2021) calls for contextually responsive and holistic teaching. We support the position that for students to gain epistemological access, the systematic teaching of both disciplinary content knowledge, and ways of knowing (habits of mind) is required (Jacobs 2021; Moje 2007; Slonimsky and Shalem 2006). We argue that attention to the process aspects of learning needs to be explicitly taught within the disciplinary curriculum (Collett and Dison 2019; Bertram, Johnson, and Dean Goldring 2022; Jacobs 2021; Moje 2007). For this to happen lecturers need to be supported by academic literacies specialists who can assist them to focus on what Moje (2007, 10) refers to as “disciplinary literacies pedagogy”. Curriculum planners and lecturers need to acknowledge that the development of academic literacies and epistemological access are complex social practices that evolve over time. Thus, students’ development needs to be scaffolded in a sustained and incremental way as a student progresses through a degree or programme and should not be provided as an add-on (Collett and Dison 2019; Dison 2018; Jacobs 2021; Leibowitz and Bozalek 2015).

Transformational practices which support student success need to engage students and lecturers in dialogue linked to knowledge critique and creation. Archer and Parker (2016) note that changes in academic life within the neo-liberal university, such as shifts towards performative practices and accountability have increasingly resulted in a reduction in dialogical spaces. They highlight the valuable space that a Writing Centre can provide for its writing consultants, a space where “contesting knowledge and subject positions are foregrounded, and where interrogation within and across disciplines can occur, even where the fabric of higher education can be questioned” (Archer and Parker 2016, 56).

We propose a broader and more developmental conceptualisation of the term “student success” with a focus on both engagement with disciplinary knowledge and the overall scholarly development of the student. This would necessitate more focus on curriculum design and institutional transformation with regard to teaching and learning and support for the

development of student academic literacies. Student success is currently primarily conceptualised in terms of retention and throughput rates (Dhunpath and Subbaye 2018; Nyoni and Agbaje 2021; Pather and Dorasamy 2018; Zepke and Leach 2010). By focusing primarily on a numerical approach to success we may be losing sight of what processes and learning environments facilitate learning. From this perspective one could argue for a greater allocation of resource provision towards staff and curriculum development focused on the embedding of academic literacies to enhance student agency. Badat (2020) raises the need for HEIs to build the capacity of staff in order to raise the quality of scholarship and critical debate.

Engaging in critical reflection on their own pedagogical practices with peers through lecturer learning communities and reflexive learning spaces within and between universities, would be ways for academics to be supported in identifying their own role in constraining or enhancing epistemological access, as Boughey and McKenna (2021, 71) note:

“Such blind spots [e.g. correlation of race with success/failure] make it possible for some academics, even those who understand themselves as activists strongly committed to broadening access, to ignore their own role in maintaining the status quo through teaching in ways that constrain epistemological access.”

Furthermore, Boughey and McKenna (2021, 71–72) argue that changes at a macro level need to be followed through by “micro-level practices such as the ways in which students are given feedback on assignments or are supported in developing their writing”.

Drawing on our arguments outlined above we make a number of propositions to enhance student and lecturer epistemological access and the promotion of social justice in higher education through a focus on the development of academic literacies.

PROPOSITIONS TOWARDS STRENGTHENING STUDENT EPISTEMOLOGICAL ACCESS AND ACADEMIC LITERACIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION FROM A SOCIAL JUSTICE PERSPECTIVE

We propose that strategies to promote student success include processes that enable learning and academic literacies development in forms that are embedded in mainstream curricula throughout a qualification as a whole, i.e. not just in the first year (Leibowitz and Bozalek 2015; Nyoni and Agbaje 2021).

Lecturer and institutional commitment to addressing both normative and transformative dimensions of academic literacy development at a course, departmental, faculty and institutional level is needed (Moje 2007).

Contextually responsive teaching and curriculum design (Moll 2004; Jacobs 2021) needs

to be promoted at faculty and institutional levels.

There needs to be greater input from academic literacy specialists into institutional teaching and learning policy and strategies. This would bring more understanding of the central role of academic literacies in facilitating student success, as well as the need to embed academic literacies in course and programme curriculum design and delivery (Collett and Dison 2019; Dison 2018; Jacobs 2021).

Institutional and faculty academic and practical support for staff on embedding the development of academic literacies within courses and programmes is needed. This would include support for disciplinary experts (lecturers) by academic literacy specialists (Boughey and McKenna 2021; Jacobs 2005; 2021).

More emphasis should be placed on professional development of academics with regard to teaching and learning and assessment through engagement in lecturer learning communities “within and across disciplines ...” (Archer and Parker 2016). Within these learning communities a focus is needed on “questions of knowledge and epistemic justice” (Badat 2020, 28) as well as processes to support and scaffold the development of student academic literacies (Jacobs 2021; Moje 2007) to enable epistemological access.

Development and implementation of institutional policies on teaching and learning that are informed by scholarly research on pedagogy and specifically what Moje (2007, 10) refers to as “disciplinary literacies pedagogy” in higher education.

CONCLUSION

This conceptual article has explored the relationship between epistemological access and the development of students’ academic literacies to enhance social justice within the South African higher education context. We have drawn on related literature and our current experiences as academics to critique current institutional practices aimed at addressing the development of academic literacies and promoting student success. In conclusion we make a number of propositions towards strengthening epistemological access and student success through a focus on normative and transformative approaches to enhancing academic literacies development in South African higher education from a social justice perspective.

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