The challenge of diversity: staff, student and curriculum development

S. Starfield
University of the Witwatersrand

ABSTRACT

Using examples of difficulties encountered by students in essay writing which can be seen to be related to the absence of the explicit teaching of academic literacy, the paper argues for staff, student and curriculum development to be viewed as interlinked. It is argued that changing the contents of the curriculum to present different ethnic and cultural perspectives as a response to multiculturalism is not sufficient to promote the success of educationally-disadvantaged students. What is needed is a curriculum which allows students access to the fundamental ways in which disciplines structure knowledge and the genres by which this knowledge is communicated. Academic Support Programmes can act as facilitators for both student and staff development via a process of curriculum development based on the proposed "curriculum for diversity".

INTRODUCTION

The Academic Support Programme (ASP) of the University of the Witwatersrand (WITS) was started in 1980 to assist the then fairly small numbers of students from disadvantaged schools and communities entering the university. In the first ten years of the programme, support was almost entirely student-focused. The students were mainly black South Africans from the Department of Education and Training schools who spoke English as a second language (EL2). Students were seen to have been underprepared by their schooling to cope with the demands of university study. The ASP put in place a system of subject-based tutorial programmes in which ASP subject-specialist tutors, based in their home departments, offered weekly classes to these students in what has been termed the "adjunct" model (Brinton *et al.* 1989). This system is still operational and is proving effective in helping students pass their first-year courses (Agar 1992).

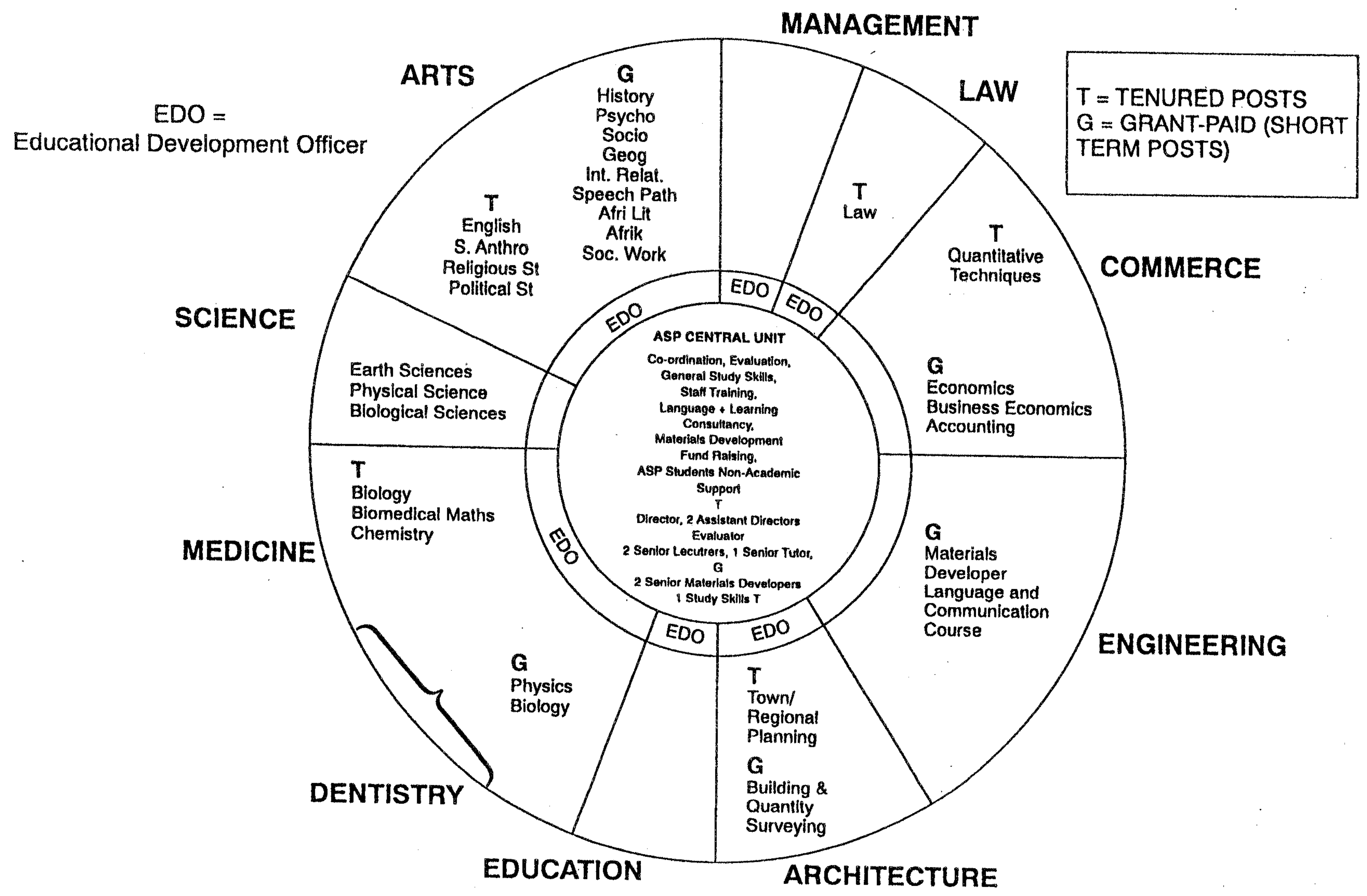
It has, however, become clear that a student-focused approach to academic development will have limited success in the longer term. The "problem" cannot be solely located within the student: many of the difficulties which students from historically-excluded communities encounter at WITS can be seen to arise from the curricula which they encounter and the types of teaching which prevail. Many lecturers and departments are certainly underprepared to cope with a student body diverse in its race, gender and class composition. This awareness has led the ASP, over the last five years, to become involved in staff and curriculum development. Starfield (1994) provides a fuller account of this evolution. Figure 1 illustrates the structure and function of the WITS ASP: the central group of language and learning specialists function as consultants to departments on curriculum development and teaching and learning in a context of diversity. An intermediary tier of faculty-based Educational Development Officers are also engaged in curriculum development projects and may coordinate student support activities. In order to meet the challenge of diversity it is essential that all three components – student, staff and curriculum development – are seen as interactive and interacting. As the improvements in the teaching/learning process benefit all students in the institution, diversity then becomes a resource for an institution rather than a problem needing a solution.

I would like to illustrate, with the use of some data from research I am carrying out in a university department, how "problems" which seem to be student located can be seen as being situated in a "zone of development" for both students and staff. These problems arise directly out of the nature of the curriculum and the conceptions of assessment and

ISSN 1011-3487

Figure 1

Academic support programme (1994)



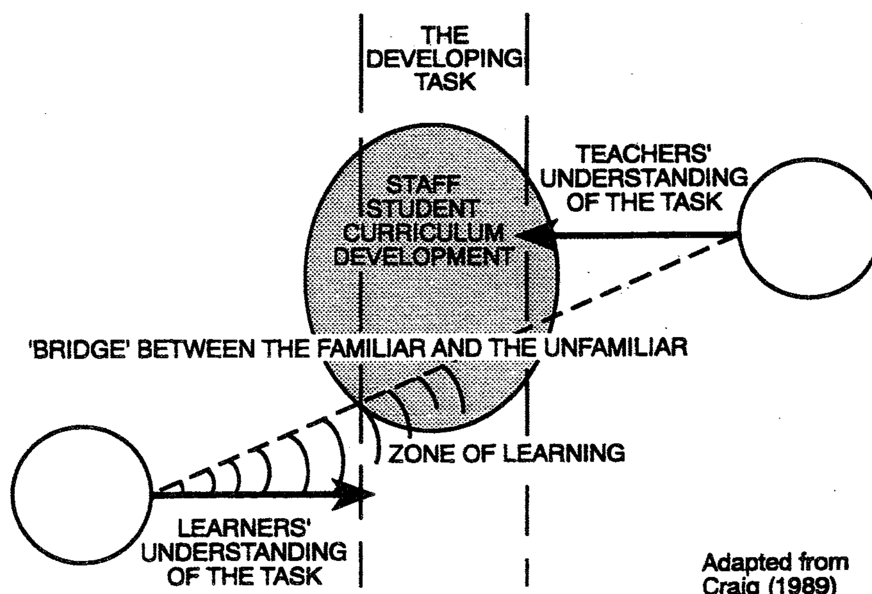
teaching and learning which it constructs. Craig (1989:166) addresses what she calls "the apparent mismatch between what (some) students bring to the learning-teaching situation and what the university in general demands in terms of its 'standards of success' ". She discusses the typical university task: "through attending lectures and tutorials, doing assignments, writing tests, reading prescribed/recommended texts/papers, perhaps independent study in the library and sometimes with the help or guidance of a tutor, students are expected to obtain, acquire, develop, learn the necessary content and reasoning styles/ forms of argument ... to produce 'answers' in a test/ exam situation" (p. 167). She further adds, "What is not so clear is how each of these situations or tasks could serve as learning opportunities for those who do come unprepared to meet the demands of typical university tasks." Craig's (1989) diagram (reproduced and slightly modified by me in Figure 2), while clearly pointing to the need for a "bridge" between differing student and staff understandings of university tasks, neglects the question of how this bridging is to be facilitated. Most university teachers are ill-prepared for opening up the demands of academic tasks to their students in the ways which are necessary if disadvantaged students are to achieve academically. It is in this zone of development, which is one in which much is unfamiliar to student and teacher, that the ASP and its "staff development team" can play a key role (indicated by the shaded circle I have added to Craig's original diagram) which I shall tease out. I conclude this paper by proposing a "curriculum for diversity" which I believe offers the possibility of reconstruction and development within our universities which will allow us to value the contributions of all members of the academic community.

WHERE DO PROBLEMS LIE?

In a recent survey of student and staff perceptions of assessment procedures at WITS, (Peirce, Starfield, Agar, Moss 1994) 42% of EL2 students surveyed said they had not known what to expect in the examinations, and only 26% of these students said that they had known how they were going to be assessed. This is a very significant piece of information. By the "what to expect" students are referring to factors such as the length of the paper, the number of questions to be answered in the given time and the broad content areas on which the questions will be set. The "how" opens up a range of issues relating to assessment criteria and practices as currently implemented (not only in examinations) and how these are made known to students, particularly students from disadvantaged schools whose first language is not English, and who may not have developed the kinds of academic literacies needed at university. Students surveyed frequently commented on the mismatch between

Figure 2

Zone of proximal development



their expectation of success and the marker's assessment of their assignments. Comments such as "your expectations never coincide with others' assessment of your work" and "students should be informed as to how marking is being done and the necessary expectation from the students", were reiterated. One student summed up a common perception and the frustration expressed by many: "Because what was needed in the essay I wrote, it. Even when we do revision of the essay you realise that you wrote everything that was needed only to find that you get lower marks." All the departments surveyed responded that they did make students aware of the criteria used for assessment in exams. The most commonly cited way of doing this was, "Lecturers tell students the format of questions; students are given detailed instructions for essays" (Peirce, Starfield, Agar, Moss 1994).

If we look at two essay topics set in a component of the first-year course in which I have been engaged in ethnographic research, we begin to understand how students and lecturers are both "doing their best" but often not succeeding. The course deals with three social theorists, Marx, Weber and Durkheim. One question in the list of six possible topics asked: *Why, in times of economic boom and economic crisis, do people commit suicide?* Why did some students not fare well on this topic? They discussed the question in general terms, consulted Psychology textbooks and attempted an answer. Missing however from these answers was the key reference to Durkheim and his theory of suicide. This was in fact what the question demanded. All the other questions on the list of topics contained the name of the relevant social theorist while the "suicide question" did not. Were the students who did not focus exclusively on Durkheim's views on suicide wrong? Had they not answered the question?

Perhaps we need here to consider the notion of "ground rules", the "complex systems of tacit expectations and norms" (Sheeran & Barnes 1991:1) governing teaching and learning in classrooms. As Sheeran and Barnes suggest, these ground rules may be apparent to white, middle-class, English first-language students but to students from working-class or disadvantaged backgrounds, they may need to be made explicit. In the instance under discussion, the lecturer's assumption was that as the course was on the three theorists, all essays topics would relate to their work and their work only. The absence of the theorist's name from one of the six essay topics, however, led some students to assume that it was permissible to seek other sorts of evidence and other theories.

Moreover, I would argue that these students do not have a clear sense of what the disciplinary boundaries are, of where sociology begins and ends, and where, for example, psychology does. For new students what one might call these epistemic ground rules are far from evident, they are in the zone of the unfamiliar. To teachers, the idea that knowledge at university level is divided up into disciplines is terribly familiar – it is self-evident. So much so that the notion of the blurring of disciplinary boundaries can be accepted and lived with. For first-year students however, to ignore the boundaries is unacceptable and they will fail. These students have not understood the "what and the how" of assessment. In fact there is much that has not been made familiar to them and I will return to this below.

The following topic also proved difficult for some students to analyse: *Loss of time through sociability, idle talk, luxury, even more sleep than is necessary for health, six to at most eight hours, is worthy of absolute moral condemnation. According to Weber, in what specific ways did these features of Calvinist doctrine compel believers to work in a manner that promoted the development of capitalism?* To most readers of this paper this type of essay/exam question and the tasks it requires must seem very familiar. The students, however, focused on the phrase "in what specific ways" and were attempting in their essay-planning to break down each of the items listed in the long quote and analyse each one, whereas what the markers wanted was for the quote to be seen in a more illustrative light, leading to a discussion of Weber's theory of the Protestant ethic and its relationship to the development of capitalism. The students however were treating each item in the quotation as a discrete fact and not interpreting the sentence as being used evocatively, to capture the essence of Weber's theory. They wrote what they knew to be "needed in the essay" but were operating at a similar level to those in our survey who said "When discussing in class, the points that are touched on are usually those on my assignments but I will not get a passing mark" (Peirce, Starfield, Agar, Moss 1994). Yet when one examines these essays one often finds that there are indeed lists of "facts" or "points" but that what is lacking is organisation and structure, argument and evidence.

In this instance, some of the ground rules necessary for the interpretation and performance of the task could be enunciated as: "quotes from the original writings of the theorists should be seen as illustrative of broader concepts, issues and themes in their work. You are being asked to demonstrate your understanding of these concepts, themes and issues. To successfully complete this task you will need to

develop a written argument to show that you understand Weber's sociological method as developed in the theory of the rise of capitalism and its relationship to the development of Calvinism. You will need to organise this information in the traditional academic essay format – have an introduction, a body and a conclusion and provide evidence in the form of quotations from Weber's work in your reading pack that you have read the texts. You must not simply provide a list of facts or points". Once again we see how what is so familiar to lecturers, teachers and markers – "a typical university task" – can be blindingly unfamiliar to students. Putting up notices which inform students of the format of exams, placing information in course outlines to tell students "what and how" cannot, in the current situation, suffice. Only one department, of thirty surveyed, provided examples of how they made students aware of the criteria by which they would be assessed. It is worth citing at length for it gives a flavour of the kinds of thoughtful teaching practices needed in a context of diversity whereby tasks can be turned into learning opportunities:

> By their June exam, students have completed several pieces of written work. Each student gets extensive written feedback on projects during the year. On return of each project there is a period devoted to feedback on that project. This feedback constantly stresses the kinds of requirements expected in exams: addressing the question of careful selection of material and construction of a focused, developed argument, making a plan so that the essay is coherently and logically structured, backing up generalisations with reference to discussion of specific examples, etc. (Peirce, Starfield, Agar, Moss 1994).

The two instances of student confusion cited above, as well as the responses to the survey, provide us with a small window into the challenges that diversity brings to the classroom. They point to a much wider set of issues – issues of curriculum and staff development – of how lecturers and departments, in a context in which few assumptions can be made, can make their teaching more explicit or "transparent". As I hoped to show by my adaptation of Craig's diagram (Figure 2), there is much that is unfamiliar not only to students but to staff too. In a discussion of Bourdieu's notion of "cultural capital", Barnes and Sheeran (1991:109) state, "The way in which all academic knowledge is framed, and the underlying assumptions that are made by teachers and examiners when setting academic tasks must also be taken into account. Cultural capital is thus a set of interpretive frameworks that give middle-class children an advantage in understanding both the nature of knowledge and the nature of society." These interpretive frameworks are known to teachers in an unconscious way – as "experts" in their discipline they have often "forgotten" what it might mean to be a novice learner.

Delpit (1988), Martin (1993) and Cope and Kalantzis (1993) critique traditional progressive pedagogies in which the hierarchies, sequencing rules and criteria that order pedagogic discourse are invisible, and advocate instead, particularly for children from working-class backgrounds, explicit or visible pedagogies. A visible pedagogy will be one that makes the interpretive frameworks or ground rules explicit. If all students at our universities are to acquire critical academic literacy we need both theories and practices of instruction which explicitly enable students from non-mainstream backgrounds to do so.

Much of the literature on multicultural education calls for increasing the amount of curriculum content which looks at ethnic groups' cultures. An appropriate pedagogy for the multicultural classroom is seen to be instruction which is sensitive to differences in learning and cultural styles (Gay 1986). Banks' (1986) concern for a multi-factor approach to explaining the poor achievement of "lower-class and minority students" (p. 21) in Western societies alerts us to the importance of examining institutional norms and values, assessment procedures and curriculum and teaching materials to ensure they "present diverse ethnic and cultural perspectives on concepts, issues and problems"(p. 23). While all these are laudable approaches and may or may not succeed in attaining the stated goal of improving the life chances of all citizens, I would argue that they are not sufficient to lead to significant improvement in the academic achievement of students who are not from the dominant cultural groupings in society. Restructuring the content or subject matter of the curriculum to make it more sensitive to race, class and gender issues is not in and of itself going to necessarily increase the success rates of students from previously excluded communities. While this may certainly assist their progress, in the department in which I am doing the research under discussion in this paper, the course content is particularly relevant to the social contexts from which the majority of the students come and embraces the viewpoints of the historically-oppressed communities in South Africa. However, this does not in itself appear sufficient to promote success. In my view, this is, in part, due to issues of curriculum and pedagogy – until these are fundamentally transformed, in the ways I suggest below, to allow students what has been called "epistemological access" to higher education (access to the knowl-

ISSN 1011-3487

edges and know-how stored in disciplines) (Morrow 1992:3), there will be no substantial change in the success rates of students from disadvantaged communities.

WORKING WITH A CURRICULUM FOR DIVERSITY

In this section of the paper I set out a proposed "curriculum for diversity" (Figure 3) which attempts to "go beyond" subject content to access the "underlying principles that give structure to that subject" (Bruner 1977:31) – along the lines of what Perkins (1992) calls the "metacurriculum". This would include, according to Perkins (pp. 101–102) "higher order knowledge" about both how subject disciplines organise knowledge, and "people's knowledge of how they think and learn".

grounded as they are in the disciplines, and jointly embarking on a process of reflection about curriculum.

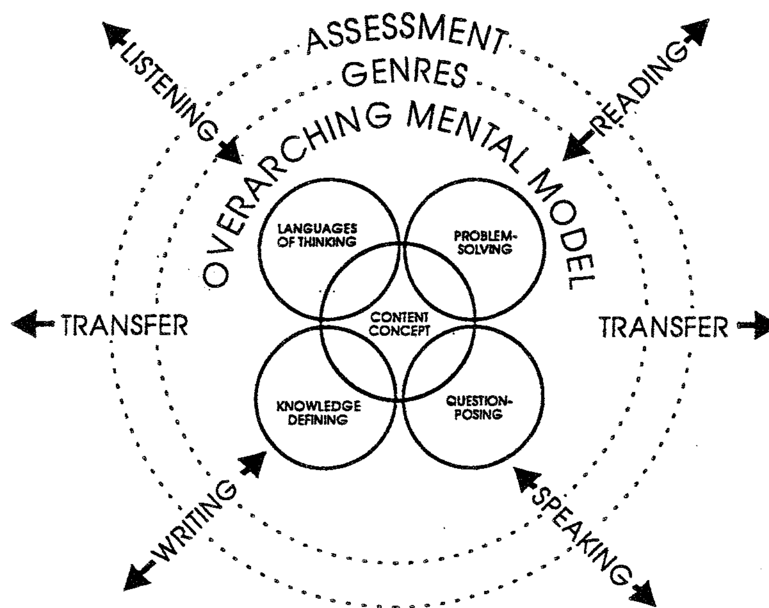
The *interlocking circles* in Figure 3 are my reworking of Perkins' metacurriculum. Issues addressed include:

- how is knowledge constructed and defined in my discipline;
- what questions does my discipline pose;
- what constitutes argument and explanation in my discipline;
- how does my discipline solve problems;
- what language can be used to think and talk about the discipline?

If we return to the essay topics with which I introduced this discussion, the metacurricular issues

Figure 3

Curriculum for Diversity



If we agree with Cornbleth (1990, p. 5) that curriculum is "an ongoing social process comprised of the interactions of students, teachers, knowledge, and milieu", then my diagram should not be seen as a blueprint but as a way of facilitating talking and thinking about what the construction of curriculum might involve. I have found it a useful basis for engaging in a dialogue with university teachers,

involved in the "suicide" question become clearer. The students who sought their answers in psychology textbooks were testing the limits of knowledge and knowing at a university. The lecturer assumed that these limits – how my discipline constructs knowledge and the boundaries its sets – were clear. Yet there was a huge gap – a zone in which no development could take place to bridge this absence

of mutual understanding. Somewhere in the curriculum, whether it be in foundation courses, bridging years or in the normal course of events, whatever that may be these days, teachers need to find the space to explain to students how universities structure knowledge: that knowledge comes packed in parcels called disciplines and that this knowledge is further parcelled up within the disciplines. Even first-year students can cope with some epistemology provided it is introduced in accessible ways.

The kinds of questions students ask reveal that they are able to engage at this level: for example, a student asked her tutor "Is the 'class' they talk about in Politics the same 'class' they talk about in Sociology?" But lecturers are often not aware that students are formulating these sorts of questions. It is here that academic development practitioners can help both lecturers and students bridge the gap – precisely through working at metacurricular levels. Students' difficulties with the Weber question were also clustered around several metacurricular issues, what Craig (1989:169) calls "epistemic cognition – consciously interpreting the nature of a problem and defining the limits of a strategy to solve it". Teachers' understandings of what would count as knowledge, and as evidence of the knowledge claims advanced; of the problem to be "solved" and of the nature of argument were, for these students, in an unfamiliar zone. By introducing teachers to metacurricular understandings of students' learning needs, ASP practitioners can help them begin to explore the "unconscious interpretive frameworks" governing current definitions of university learning and teaching.

Teachers and students can together, according to Perkins, construct *overarching mental models* of the discipline which integrate the different contents in a cohesive fashion. For example, in one course I observed, the tutor used the metaphor of "pegs on a washing line" to suggest to students how different concepts developed in the course might "hang together". Possibly because Perkins is referring to schools rather than universities, he does not allow for conflict within a discipline over the nature of the discipline's project. My own work however indicates clearly that amongst those who teach in a discipline there is frequently contestation over fundamental metacurricular issues such as what constitutes acceptable knowledge. Within a discipline there may be conflicting paradigms in operation struggling for domination – for example, a humanistic paradigm and a post-modernist paradigm. Unless these "deep structures" are made explicit to students, they may become very confused when an essay in which "truth" and "beauty" are depicted as absolute and eternal is acceptable to one lecturer but ruled out by another for whom beauty is always socially constructed. Overarching mental models allow for this contestation to be examined and brought to the surface.

As Martin (1993) and others (Christie 1992; Cope and Kalantzis 1993) argue, students from working-class or educationally-disadvantaged backgrounds may not have access to the dominant *genres* of the classroom. Genres such as the argumentative essay, the report and the seminar are central to university discourse but students are seldom explicitly taught how to perform them. The essay topics cited earlier were themselves an unfamiliar genre to many students who did not know how to "read" these particular manifestations of academic literacy. The formal university examination can also be seen as a genre needing explicit induction. A curriculum for diversity will examine ways in which these genres can be made available to all students, thus promoting equality of opportunity.

As the essay topics illustrated, *assessment* practices are often at the heart of student success or failure. Traditionally, assessment is frequently viewed as external to teaching – as happening after teaching has taken place and measuring what students have learnt. In a curriculum for diversity, assessment is seen as part of pedagogy for it is assessment that in fact determines the "real" curriculum. If students are expected to compare and contrast three theorists according to specific aspects of their theories, then the diversity curriculum makes this outcome clear from the outset of the course, and the skills and processes of comparison and contrast are discussed and practised. The students do not simply arrive at the exam room to find a question which invites them to compare and contrast the work of x, y and z. Instead, they are helped to gain access to the *"languages of thinking"* (see Figure 3) in the metacurriculum through a process of modelling in which the "how to do it" is shown. A challenge for teachers is to find ways of assessing students in which the formulation of the questions is in itself not an obstacle to understanding. ASP specialist staff's understanding of students' struggles to make sense of the task demands of higher education (arising out of research and practice) helps them work with teachers in what is for many a zone of development – appropriate question formulation and assessment practices for diverse classes.

In the diversity curriculum, the more traditionally taught "academic skills" of listening, speaking, reading and writing are then always taught and learnt in

ISSN 1011-3487

relation to the "deep structures" of the curriculum. Finally, the success of the curriculum relates to how it deals with the question of *transfer* – knowledge and skill transfer between different components of a course, between different disciplines and to life outside the academy. Teachers operating within this framework will help students understand how the concept of social class is and is not the same in the disciplines of Sociology and Political Science. Students will come to understand how and where knowledge may be transferable and when and how to test the limits. As Perkins (1992) emphasises, when teachers explicitly teach for transfer, transfer can occur. Teaching for transfer, along with all the elements of the diversity curriculum, offers, in my view, a real chance of promoting equity in our institutions. Lifting restrictions on "formal access" (Morrow 1992:3) to higher education, refining selection procedures to search for elusive indicators of potential, even providing comprehensive funding packages to worthy students will not "deliver the goods" unless our universities begin to undergo the fundamental transformations of pedagogy for which I have been arguing, by providing access of a different order to the knowledge and the power that is stored in the disciplines.

Morrow's (1992) response to the challenge of teaching a history and philosophy of education course to several hundred students gives a sense of what I am advocating. Morrow and a colleague drew on the "intelligible structure ... the thoughtful, lucid, orderly, and detailed specification of the tasks to be engaged in by the learners" (p. 12) as embodied in texts produced by the Open University. They also devised "learning packages" for each student containing copies of the week's reading and an interactive text written by Morrow which "led the students through the arguments and material to be covered and showed them how and with what purpose to read the readings" (p. 13). This enabled the two teachers to use the traditional contact time not to lecture but to engage with students on questions that arose from the learning packages. On my own campus, colleagues in a department working closely with a member of the ASP "staff development team" recently decided to cover less content in their first-year course, thus freeing up one lecture period a week to explicitly teach essay-writing (also to classes of about 300 students). There has been a clear improvement in the quality of students' essays and particularly in the number of higher grades awarded (Adler, Alfred, Dison & Selikow, 1995). These encouraging initiatives which begin as responses to, and a recognition of, difference and diversity, will, as I have argued throughout this paper, improve the quality of learning of all students.

Through using two essay topics as an illustration of one of many challenges facing students in a university course, and by drawing on research carried out by ASP staff, I have tried to show how student and staff development are intertwined. The "problem" requires a response grounded in intensive curriculum development of the kind I have advocated. Staff and student development will happen through this process in which Academic Support/Development Programmes will play a central, facilitative role.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank my colleagues Dee Pinto, Laura Dison and Lynn Slonimsky as well as two anonymous reviewers for comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

REFERENCES

ADLER, G., Alfred, L, Dison, L. & Selikow, T. (1995) Integrated teaching at the first-year level in sociology. Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the South African Sociological Association, Grahamstown.

AGAR, D. (1992) Evaluating academic support programmes – what have we learnt in the last six years? ***South African Journal of Education*** 12(2).

BANKS, J.A. (1986) Multicultural education: Development, paradigms and goals, in ***Multicultural education in Western societies***, edited by J. A. Banks & J. Lynch. London: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

BRINTON, D., Snow, M. & Wesche, M. (1989) ***Content-based second language instruction*** New York: Newbury House.

BRUNER, J. (1977) ***The process of education*** Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

CHRISTIE, F. (1992) Literacy in Australia ***Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*** 12.

COPE, M. & Kalantzis, B. (1993) ***The power of literacy*** London: The Falmer Press.

CORNBLETH, C. (1990) ***Curriculum in context*** London: The Falmer Press.

CRAIG, A. (1989) The conflict between the familiar and the unfamiliar ***South African Journal of Higher Education*** 3(1).

DELPIT, L.D. (1988) The silenced dialogue: power and pedagogy in educating other people's children ***Harvard Educational Review*** 58(3).

GAY, G. (1986) Multicultural teacher education, in ***Multicultural education in Western societies***, edited by J. A. Banks & J. Lynch. London: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

MARTIN, J. R. (1993) Genre and literacy – modeling context in educational linguistics ***Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*** 13.

MORROW, W. (1992) A picture holds us captive. Paper presented at Kenton Conference, Johannesburg, October, 1992.

PEIRCE, B. N., Starfield, S., Agar, D., & Moss, S. (1993) ASP student perceptions of assessment practices at the University of the Witwatersrand. Unpublished Report.

PERKINS, D. N. (1992) ***Smart schools*** New York: The Free Press.

SHEERAN, Y. & Barnes, D. (1991) ***School writing*** Milton Keynes: Open University Press.

STARFIELD, S. (1994) Cummins, EAP, and academic literacy ***TESOL Quarterly*** 28(1).