

AMANDA S. POTGIETER

BECOMING A STUDENT: THE LIMINAL EXPERIENCE

Abstract

Research on the transition of students into Academia has previously focused on intelligence and effort as determinants of success. In this article I will argue that the liminal experience of transition into the academic environment is enhanced by multi-logic spaces where curiosity and focus are key attributes of the academic literacy classroom. In this educative nurturing space the mentor-lecturer and her students engage meaningfully and with academic curiosity with socially rich experiential learning. Monological teaching disregards the voices that should be heard in the multi-logical classroom where the mentor-lecturer encourages constructivist interaction between herself, students as well as reading texts and student generated writing.

Key words: dialogue, liminality, multi-logue, transition, lecturer-mentor, Academia

Introduction

A monologue delivered by a lecturer speaking at her students represents sounds of silence rather than dialogue. Dialogue within the academic environment implies a cognitively and socio-conventional safe space where role-players can mediate within a non-threatening environment. The concept of multi-logueing, however, reaches beyond the confines of merely a dialogue between lecturer of academic literacy and her students by introducing additional voices. A multi-logic academic literacy classroom is established where students may interact with other students, the lecturer-mentor and scholars from other fields. These voices may also include the texts used as pedagogical tools, teaching strategies and multimedia that form part of the curriculum. The voices become reflective tools and strategies for mediation among lecturer-mentor and students towards transition into the university environment and Academia.

Aim of this article

My main research problem and aim of this article, as it flows from the title, is: what guidelines can be developed for lecturer-mentors to improve their understanding and subsequent operationalization of the liminal experience of students transcending into university? The following questions should lead me towards an understanding of this problem.

- Research question 1: What is the ontological nature of monologue, dialogue and of multi-logue educational spaces?
- Research question 2: Who are the participants within the multi-logue educational space in the Academic literacy classroom? How is the liminal experience of thresholding into Academia realised within the Academic literacy classroom?

- Research question 3: What are the qualities or traits necessary for mentor-lecturers to facilitate the liminal thresholding experience within the academic literacy classroom?

The research design I employed to answer my research questions is situated in the interpretivist paradigm using a qualitative methodology situated in the hermeneutic-phenomenology. As data generating methods I used video-analysis and semi-structured focus group interviews, as well as document analysis. The data was analysed using a computer software program, namely ATLAS.ti.TM

My research methodology both enables and requires me as a mentor-lecturer in the multi-logue educational space of the Academic literacy classroom to interpret (i.e. explore, understand and explain) the students' lived liminal experiences (De Vos, et al., 2005, p. 270). As the researcher I engaged in dialogue with information-rich students, who have all experienced the challenges of thresholding into Academia.

Transposing monologue to multi-logue

Lecturer-mentors are challenged when creating safe, dialogic-educative spaces for first-year students, where optimal teaching-learning of academic writing can be accomplished. My research is aimed at creating such safe spaces in which first-year students might not only attain and practice writing skills, but in which a liminal portal towards their future scholarship may also be created. Scholarship in this context refers not only to the intellectual ability of the student but also to critical evaluative capacity to a *paideia*¹ (full-blown completeness) of the soul. These qualities should be allowed to emerge and permeate all in-class proceedings as overarching pedagogical purpose, rather than acquiring the mere *techné* (skills and knowledge) of writing. Du Preez (2008, p. 64) articulates the notion that a teacher (lecturer-mentor) should facilitate learning and not merely act as a knowledge conveyor. The mentor-lecturer should support students in their own efforts at dialogue and multi-logueing rather than simply supplying the skills and knowledge as stipulated in the outcomes of academic literacy.

Novice students are widely believed to be enquiring *works-in-progress*. They often display vulnerability when taking their first excited yet daunting steps within the novel milieu of Academia. According to Palmer et al. (2009) and Gourlay (Shady & Larson, 2009, p. 181) this period of transition should not merely be studied as an entrance into a 'community of practice' using an apprentice-type model. Gourlay (Shady & Larson, 2009, p. 108) proposes that the impervious nature of both the transition into Academia and the process of acquiring academic literacy skills are closely related. A liminality approach to student thresholding through the academic literacies is suggested as a probable methodology of practice towards full-

¹ The term *paideia* (Greek: παιδεία) refers to the education of the ideal member of the polis. Originally, it incorporated both practical, subject-based schooling and a focus upon the socialization of individuals within the aristocratic order of the polis. The practical aspects of this education included subjects subsumed under the modern designation of the liberal arts (rhetoric, grammar and philosophy are examples), as well as scientific disciplines like arithmetic and medicine. An ideal and successful member of the polis would possess intellectual, moral and physical refinement.

blown completeness. This is a lacunus I specifically intend to investigate, by means of video analysis of Academic literacy classes, in order to explore, understand and explain how multi-logueing is taking place in these classes.

Dialogue was coined from the Greek *dia* and *logos* (*dialogos*) denoting discussion and discourse (Rule, 2007, p. 320). This presupposes that the teaching and learning of subject related knowledge and skills, particularly in the academic literacy classes, can best be done within a critical, open and transparent dialogic environment.

Definitions of dialogue seem to emphasize the changes in conceptualising dialogue in the past. Authors including Rule (2007), Du Preez (2008) and Shady & Larson (2010) depict various definitions of dialogue, specifically with regard to the semantic transformation that these definitions have undergone over time, as educative understanding and paradigms developed. Rule (2007, p. 320) defines dialogue with reference to Plato (428-328 BC), who understood dialogue as a relationship. Buber (1878-1965) believed that authentic dialogue, imply participants who are attentive to one another and emphasised that dialogue is the opposite of monologue. In 1929 Jürgen Habermas theorised dialogue as communicative action which was non-authoritarian and non-prescriptive (Du Preez, 2008, p. 65). It is from this definition that the spirit of dialogic harmony was conceptualised (Rule, 2007, p. 323). Paulo Freire's (1921-1997) amongst others conceptualised dialogical education as an exercise of freedom whereas Moacir Gadotti (1941) argued that conflict is at the core of essential dialogue (Rule, 2007, p. 320). Burber, Shady and Larson as well as Volf (1956) transcends the restrictions of merely tolerating difference within dialogue by asserting that dialogue presupposes accepting and embracing one another's locus (Shady & Larson, 2010, p. 95) Although there seems to be conflicting definitions of dialogue, theorising about the nature of dialogue brings about a greater need for reconceptualising dialogue as multi-logue.

The concept multi-logueing is as yet a somewhat tangled and vague term. The term multi-logue was first created and used by Newman in 1999 (Newman, 1999, pp. 653-654) in a different setting from that of learning-teaching environment. In the context of transition into Academia of the novice student multi-logueing needs to be re-conceptualised. I will attempt to do so in the following section.

Transition into Academia through multi-logical spaces

Transition can be conceptualised as an event or point of orientation where a change of relationships as well as practices and roles in a person's life are evident. Novice students in the liminal position of transition into Academia are perceived as adults in transit (Schlossberg, 1984, pp. 5-13). These students find themselves in an anticipated liminal situation where they know they will experience the impact of the transition into Academia (Evans et al., 1998, p. 3). According to Schlossberg et al. (1989) adults in transition often feel marginalised but if they are able to communicate within a community, in this instance the Academic literacy classroom community, they become involved with the lecturer-mentor, co-students and academic texts used as pedagogical tools, teaching strategies and multimedia that form part of the curriculum. The communal setting of the Academic literacy classroom energises and navigates novice students' transition into Academia. In this sense the communality of the liminal experience provides a reassuring multi-

logueing space for students to evolve skills and knowledge regarding the academic environment which spans university life and is closely linked to student success and student wellness within the academic environment.

The concept of multi-logueing reaches beyond the confines of merely a dialogue between lecturer of academic literacy and her students as well as inter-student communication by introducing additional voices. The anthropology of the multi-logic Academic literacy classroom consists of groups of role players that may vary according to the content and skills (critical thinking, reading, discussion, critically evaluation and writing) dealt with during a particular session. The core participants, however, always include the novice students, a lecturer-mentor and academic text. The social and intellectual interaction between students and lecturer-mentor contributes towards a milieu of recognition and approval but also includes conflict. The Academic literacy classroom offer both teachers and learners with a safe educative space for discussion without fear of humiliation, discrimination and derision (Rule, 2007, p. 321). Within this space academic text, which form the focus of most learning-teaching activities, seems to become a role player or additional voice interplay within the multi-logic educative classroom. Students also recalled during the focus group interviews that members of staff and scholars from various faculties and institutions added their voices to discussions as guests when we dealt with specific themes.

As transition comprises of individual interpretation, environment and social interaction, providing students with a multi-logic setting where the liminal position they occupy may be embraced and shared, conventions of Academia implicitly and explicitly learnt and individual participation fostered should be encouraged. The Academic literacy classroom provides the opportunity and institutional space for transition.

As a mentor-lecturer of academic literacy as transitional tool for newcomer students into the academic world my aim is to educate leaders and visionaries who will become trendsetters of new vistas in their chosen fields of study. This goal can, however, never be accomplished if I allow only my own voice to be heard. A monologue delivered by a lecturer speaking at her students represents the sounds of silence rather than the collective academic discourse needed for students within the liminal experience of transitioning Academia. Dialogue within the academic environment represents a socio-conventional space where participants can mediate within a non-threatening environment (Rule, 2004, p. 1). The concept of multi-logueing, however, reaches beyond the confines of merely a dialogue between lecturer of academic literacy and her students by introducing additional voices. These voices may include the texts used as pedagogical tools, teaching strategies and multimedia that form part of the curriculum. The voices become reflective tools and strategies for mediation among lecturer – mentor and students towards transition into the university environment.

The academic literacy lecturer-mentor as facilitator of multi-logueing and transition

Transition, whether a positive or negative experience, creates stress reactions (Evans et al., 1998, p. 3). Although students are aware of the liminal phase they are about to enter and the changes they might have to make, they often rely quite

substantially on support from other people to get through the transition. Evans et al. (1998, p. 5) suggests that intervention by a professional, in this case the lecturer-mentor in the multi-logical Academic literacy classroom, is one of the fundamental partners of student transition into Academia.

As the process of data coding progressed I was able to identify characteristics of lecturer-mentors students found particularly important and valuable as being conducive in their transitional process. These included flexibility in coping with challenges and questions, fairness to all students, challenging the students to achieve, positivity, fairness and consistency in teaching standard. An additional challenge for lecturer-mentors seems to be guiding students into an unfamiliar culture (Academia) where academic wellness is very closely linked to emotional and physical wellness (Van Dyk, 2012, p. 4). The complexities of the Academic literacy classroom as transitional multi-logic space.

Homer, in his heroic story, *The Odyssey*, describes a mentor as a trusted friend and guide (Riverside Webster's II New College Dictionary, 1995). Mentoring refers to a series of minor successes achieved through consistent and enduring rapport with the student. The lecturer-mentor, consequently, leads the student in transition towards his journey by supporting and acknowledging the goals achieved. She creates a supportive multi-logic educative space within the Academic literacy class where the student feels free to make his academic voice and opinions heard without fear of ridicule (Rule, 2004, p. 1). She fills the role of academic companion to the novice and becomes an example of scholarliness. Although the student himself has to transit through his own porthole into Academia the lecturer-mentor fuels his development.

Students perceive their own primary goals within the academic environment to be acquiring academic knowledge and skills and to be able to think about, read, discuss and critically evaluate academic content and theories. According to Mulnix (2010, pp. 2-4) these skills, and especially critical thinking and argumentation, are not merely acquired through formulas and rules taught and learned but has to be practiced within an environment conducive to social learning. It is within this context that the role of the lecturer-mentor is established.

Conclusion

The true mentor is a provocateur who supports the transition of her learners towards the pivotal experience of the novice student. We hear our students' voices amongst those who speak. The voices resound and bounce off the walls of each other, outwards and inwards they sound and are heard. Our novices are in transition but the path is set, their journey mapped. As their lecturer-mentors we take on the challenge and create safe, multi-logic educative spaces for our students, where optimal teaching-learning of academic speaking and writing can be accomplished.

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Amanda S. Potgieter
Lecturer of Academic Literacy
North-West University
Potchefstroom Campus
South Africa
Optentia Research Focus Area
amanda.potgieter@nwu.ac.za