DESIGNING COMMUNICATION CURRICULA THAT ARE RESPONSIVE TO STUDENT NEEDS: A PROPOSED MODEL FOR LECTURERS AT CAPE PENINSULA UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY, SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

This article interrogates on Communication curricula and on the learning experiences of students in the Information Technology department (IT) at Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT). It proposes a model for teaching and learning of Communication skills in this University. The article is based on an analysis of reflective exercises on the teaching and learning of communication concepts and on unstructured interviews with Communication lecturers in other departments of the university. This data revealed that although the key objectives of Communication courses are clearly articulated in the university’s academic policies, the teaching and learning strategies seem not to be producing the desired results. This is because most students are dispassionate about the courses and many lecturers tend to focus their teaching pedantically on issues like compiling curriculum vitae, writing technical reports or socializing students within the writing of specific disciplines. The course syllabi and teaching approaches are often devoid of concepts that can develop meta-cognitive skills which underpin students’ creative and innovative insight or which can develop an “educated citizenry” for the new South Africa. The article argues that for Communication courses at CPUT to achieve their main interests, lecturers should refocus sections of the course contents and teaching strategies on the development of cognitive skills such as critical thinking, creative and innovative thinking and problem solving. This approach is likely to provide students with a discursive space for critical inquiry, social debates and for the application of knowledge across different disciplines. It can also prepare graduates for a complex South African workplace constantly challenged by issues of race, power, gender and class.

KEYWORDS: Cape Peninsula University of Technology, critical inquiry, language and communication, teaching and learning, South Africa

INTRODUCTION

Although South African universities graduate thousands of students every year, the economy is yet to benefit from the influx of graduates into the job market. This is because some of the qualifications are not directly responsive to the critical skills shortage in specialised fields such as engineering, science and technology as well as accounting and mathematics. Moreover, many of the graduates lack soft and
cognitive skills that have become equally very essential in global markets. Today, despite myriad of challenges riddling the African National congress (ANC) led post-apartheid government, the two worrisome ones are: low quality education and the unemployability of recent graduates. The transformation processes at many South Africa universities have tended to concentrate not only on addressing racial and/or gender imbalances but also on producing a new breed of graduates with skills that can be marketable both locally and internationally. On the one hand, this implies producing more engineers, scientists, accountants and mathematicians and on the other hand, improving the repertoire of cognitive skills of their students (Ng’ambi & Johnston, 2006; Pineteh, 2010). However, in the bid to respond to the demands of local and international markets, South African universities like many other tertiary institutions around the world, are becoming part of the “new vision of universities as transnational business corporations operating in a competitive global knowledge economy” (Shore 2010: 15). Communication and cognate courses now focus on socialising students within writing of specific disciplines and on the provision of technical skills instead of developing citizens holistically, so that they can be able to engage openly in intellectual debates across different spectrums (Gee & Green, 1998; Shore, 2010). In this article, I propose a model for Communication courses, which concentrates largely on the development of cognitive skills of Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT) students. The paper is written against the backdrop of myriad challenging burdening the teaching of communication skills in this university. Some of these challenges include the pressures to position CPUT strategically within the framework of modern universities of technology and also forging a new identity as a research-driven institution by increasing research outputs. Therefore, despite the endless opportunities for creativity and imaginative thinking that courses like Communication are likely to offer non-traditional universities like CPUT, Communication lecturers have somehow failed to use these unique spaces in “educating people for citizenship or equipping individuals with a broad, critical liberal education” (Shore 2010, p.19). Instead, the course contents are often very pedantic and the lecturers use very mechanistic approaches to articulate key concepts, invariably shrinking the space for imaginative, collaborative and social constructivist learning (McCarthey, 1994; Pineteh, 2010). This approach contributes to produce graduates who are not only robotic in the way they think but also lack a clear sense of individual identity and citizenship.

I draw on personal experiences as a Communication lecturer and on reflective interactions with my students and colleagues to conceptualise the proposed model. The paper is partitioned into the following sections: teaching and learning in the South African context, Communication teaching at CPUT, collection and analysis of data as well as discussion of the proposed model.

TEACHING AND LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION: THE SOUTH AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE

The scholarship of teaching and learning in higher education draws seamlessly on myriad theoretical conceptions. These bodies of knowledge shape the way educators design curricula and impart knowledge. They also shape the formulation of educational policies and illuminate the multiple ways
people learn (Englert et al, 1994; Gee & Green, 1998; Rogers et al, 2005). For example, teaching and learning has always been imagined as a process of transformation and socialisation through a meta-cognitive engagement with knowledge. This means higher education is expected to “engage students in a transformational process by encouraging critical reflection on their learning and actions” (D’Andrea & Gosling 2005, p.2). Universities should be driven by a culture of collegiality; which promotes collaborative thinking. They should be prisms through which students and lecturers negotiate identities and interrogate socio-political issues in their communities without fear of victimisation. Any university experience should therefore be transformative and enlightening, sculpting students into critical and innovative thinkers as well as problem solvers, through the application of knowledge across different contexts (Kress, 1996; Street, 2004; Shore, 2010). Here, educators and learners are required to embed the process of teaching and learning within a context and to reflect on experiences and bring those experiences to bear on the construction of knowledge. It also means teaching should be an interactive intellectual process whereby both educators and learners negotiate meaning through the interpretation and transfer of knowledge from different spaces (McCarthey, 1994; Winkelmann, 1995; Gee & Green, 1998).

In post-apartheid South Africa, teaching and learning has been defined not only by Western and African ideologies but also by a political agenda which claims to redress the ills of the apartheid era. This agenda seeks to eradicate the infamous apartheid educational model – Bantu Education and to foster an equitable educational system which is responsive to the needs of the new South Africa (Jansen, 1998; Waghid, 2002; Ensor, 2004). This has resulted in the irruption of different curriculum policies, educational reform and several academic green papers aimed at restructuring schools and universities and fostering the social changes promised by the new political dispensation. For example, the implementation of outcomes-based education (OBE) curriculum in 2005 and the inception of the National Qualification Framework (NQF) as well as the Higher Education Qualification Framework (HEQF) are examples of policy documents aimed at enhancing the quality of education and addressing the imbalances in South African schools and universities (Jansen, 1998). For example, the NQF was mandated to “to steer South Africa along a high skills, high growth path of economic development [which] would lay the foundation stones of a new democracy society” (Ensor 2004: 341). And OBE was intended to forge a teaching and learning scholarship which privileges outcomes rather than content and process (Jansen, 1998; Ensor, 2004). Unfortunately, the educational challenges in South Africa have difference trajectories and many of these policies have been counter-productive.

In the process of addressing its domestic problems, the new South Africa also wanted to position itself strategically in the global marketplace. Schools and universities were therefore pressured “to prepare South Africa for participation in a sophisticated global economy” (Ensor 2004: 341). Also, almost two decades into democracy, South Africa is still grappling with issues of race, gender, class and ethnicity, particularly in the higher education sector. In this context, teaching and learning is only about imparting knowledge but also about negotiating uncharacteristic social and political challenges, stemming from the racial, multicultural and gender imbalances of the institutions. Today, South African
universities are “increasingly being challenged in terms of their responsiveness and relevance to societal problems” (Waghid 2002: 457). This responsiveness to societal problems involves forging equity in higher education and contributing towards deracialising the new South Africa as well as preparing students to face the challenges of global markets. For this to happen, the government is committed to dismantling the white hegemony and desecrating the elitist status of universities such as Cape Town, Witwatersrand, Stellenbosch and so on (Jansen, 1998 & Waghid, 2002). With increasing access to higher education, these erstwhile elite universities now have to deal with even more under-privileged and unprepared students with mediocre communication skills, matriculating from very dysfunctional high schools. Universities are therefore burdened with the responsibility of addressing these challenges by providing lifelong education which prepares South Africans either for postgraduate studies or for the workplace. Moreover, “the commodification of education is increasingly expressed in a new currency of transferable, portable outcomes and qualifications that provide the logic for qualifications and outcomes-driven approach to educational reform” (Young & Gamble 2006, p.3). Here, the specificities of course contents and teaching strategies focus on the outcomes rather than on the process of knowledge acquisition. The unavoidable consequence is massive graduation of students with no valuable education (Young & Gamble, 2006).

To ensure that higher education is a transformative experience to South African, the development of critical soft skills has occupied center stage. This has forged the inclusion of academic and professional development courses such as Business Communication, Academic Literacy, and Language for Business Students in mainstream curricula especially in universities of technology like CPUT. So, despite the marketisation and massification of universities, these centres of learning are still striving to provide discursive spaces for socialisation into different cultures and academic discourses. They seek to maintain the ethos of critical inquiry and to ensure that knowledge is used to negotiate power, identity and authority (Shore, 2010; Afful, 2007; Gizir & Simik, 2005). This suggests that students and academics should use a repertoire of communication skills such as nonverbal codes, semiotics systems and myriads text forms to construct social relations and give meaning to their lives as university academics and students (Fairclough, 1993; Kress, 1996; Gee & Green, 1998). Moreover, the workplace also engenders the interplay of different communicative skills for operating both individual and team projects as well as fostering organisational identity. Significantly, effective communication is “the process through which social actions and interactions become constructed and reconstructed into an organisational reality” (Gizir & Simsek 2005: 200). For me therefore, succeeding in higher education today requires socialising into the politics of universities using “social semiotic system” and a cross-section of cognitive skills (Kress 1996: 189)

THE TEACHING OF COMMUNICATION AT CPUT

Language and communication courses in mainstream disciplines at CPUT are seemingly failing to remedy the problems that South African students bring to the universities. Evidence from student writings and other array of communication activities suggest that these courses have also been affected
by the new vision of modern universities. Clearly, they have the potential to emancipate, empower and socialise students into academic discourse. However the course lecturers have failed to use this space to stimulate meaningful teaching and learning. Instead, they and their like-minded colleagues in other courses are contributing to produce graduates who can not function effectively in the South African marketplace. Despite the severity of the problem, the South African Department of Higher Education still considers Communication as a mere support course, especially in universities of technology like CPUT, and therefore not entitled to the same financial subsidy as mainstream courses. Consequently, the delivery of Communication courses has tended to suffer from lack of adequate human and material resources as well as adequate contact hours (Ng’ambi & Johnston, 2006). Secondly, CPUT students do not prioritise these courses, even though they support their inclusion in the mainstream curricula. This justifies the unprecedented poor rate of attendance, low pass rates and the incessant disruptive patterns during Communication lectures. Thirdly, the course contents and teaching methods have also contributed unwaveringly to the lackluster performance of students. The contents are not stimulating and do not provide space for critical and creative thinking. Instead they concentrate largely on the development of workplace skills using very mechanistic and pedantic teaching methods (Pineteh, 2010).

Mindful of these challenges, lecturers need to think imaginatively in order to transform the teaching of Communication into an invigorating and memorable experience for both the lecturer and the students (Thomas & De Villiers, n.d.). Very often this does not happen because of the pressure to cover a substantial amount of communication concepts and administer an equally substantial amount of assessments within one academic year. Because of insufficient contact hours, these lecturers tend to pay more attention to work-related or vocational skills such as business correspondence, teamwork, time management and conflict management, and no attention to other essential cognitive concepts such as critical thinking, problem solving, creativity, language and academic literacy (Pineteh, 2012). However, to minimise the risk of failure and also promote the development of the same work-related skills, focusing on vocational skills is not a most viable strategy. This is because the students’ lack of proper communication skills is a direct consequence of their complex linguistic, schooling backgrounds and literacy experiences (Jansen, 1998; Ng’ambi & Johnston, 2006). Consequently, the single most effective way of addressing this problem is the development of cognitive skills and “academic literacy practices—reading and writing within disciplines — [which]constitute central processes through which students learn new subjects and develop their knowledge about new areas of study” (Lea & Street 1998: 157).

METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

This article emerges out of several interactions and reflective exercises with students and colleagues. It is a qualitative analysis of data gleaned from unstructured interviews and informal conversations with Communication lecturers and Coordinators in the Business and Informatics and Design faculties at CPUT. To conceptualise the proposed model, I interviewed two Communication lecturers and two Language and Communication Coordinators. I also conducted one reflection exercise with approximately two hundred first year students in the IT department. The interviews, reflection and
conversations focused on the role of Communication at CPUT, the challenges faced by Communication lecturers and students as well as the contents and teaching strategies. Collecting the data from different sources provided an interesting platform to analyse the discrepant views about Communication and establish how these views can be brought to bear on the new model. The questions in the reflection exercise and discussions with lecturers were framed around the role of Communication in a university of technology (UoT); the content of Communication courses and lecturers and student perceptions about Communication courses. I also crafted questions around teaching and learning challenges, new ways to enrich the courses. Analysis of data focused on the perceptions and misconceptions about Communication as well as the different expectations that students and lecturers bring to the courses. Finally, it also concentrated on suggestions for improving the content and delivery of the course.

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The role of Communication courses in enhancing quality education is a contentious one especially in South African universities like CPUT. Although CPUT academics are aware of the deficiency of skills of their students, they still receive the courses with skepticism and disdain. This is perhaps because many CPUT academics are still disingenuous about the role of the courses in developing lifelong cognitive skills (Pineteh, 2010). But given that South African high schools have failed woefully in their mandate to prepare learners for higher education, the instrumentality of these courses cannot be overemphasised. To demystify the role of these courses, I start with an analysis of the discrepant narratives about the role of Communication in CPUT and ultimately interrogate the implications for the teaching and learning of communications skills. I hope to shed some light on the misgivings riddling the teaching of Communication and to continue to justify this proposed model.

PERCEPTIONS AND MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT COMMUNICATION

For the three years that I have lectured Communication at CPUT, one of the puzzles that many of my colleagues have not managed to solve, is the role of Communication in a university of technology like CPUT. The course seems to lend itself to different interpretations from both lecturers and students, especially in the Information Technology department (IT), where I teach currently. This has had visible implications for the teaching and learning of the course. For example:

“Some lecturers and students at CPUT do not understand why Communication should be included in university curricula. For them, Communication is an extended version of English language and students did English at high school level and therefore it should not be included in university curricula. For me, Communication is not English but the role of English in the teaching of Communication cannot be ignored… (Lecturer response)"

This excerpt brings to the fore one of the challenges facing Communication—the dissimilarity between English and Communication. The tendency to construe Communication as English language is not uncommon amongst CPUT students. For many students, CPUT is not a place to study English but to
engage with heart core science and technology. Interestingly, students think the course is another phase of high school education, especially since it also focuses on English language concepts. To dismiss Communication on grounds that it focuses on academic literacy, exemplifies the extent to which South African students are dispassionate about support courses such as Communication.

The idea of a university of technology especially in the context of South Africa is still in a state of flux. Students come to these universities with different expectations and beliefs. They privilege CPUT because of its seemingly practical approach to teaching and learning and because it provides an opportunity to acquire essential technical skills for the industry. Therefore, the inclusion of courses like Communication in core curricula goes against the imaginations that students bring to this university.

“I am an IT student and really do not see why I should spend time studying how to communicate. Besides, I can communicate well and most of the things that lecturers teach us are things that are easy and I can do them independently especially since most of these things are on the internet. For example, they teach us how to compile a CV [sic]. If I want one I can always download the correct format from the internet (Student response)”

This response points sharply to the focus and teaching strategies in Communication courses. As an IT student, their perception of Communication is premised on the assumption that “technical people can get away with limited human contact” (Evans et al 2004, p. XVIII). However, “the success of systems development and IT projects depends on effective communication between users and developers” (Wynekoop & Walz 1999: 210). Also, in the ever-changing global market of the 21st century, the IT industry like any other industry needs “young people with minds of their own, who can present orally or in writing their views on particular proposals or development” (Kelly 1996: 8).

Furthermore, erstwhile Technikons (Technical colleges) like CPUT are still grappling with realigning “traditionally defined pedagogical variables with newly implemented, proficiency-oriented instructional outcomes” (Grove 1999:817). This suggests that the position of Communication is still obfuscating especially to colleague who have been with the institution for several years and have been caught in this unfamiliar transition to a university of technology. Unable to understand the precise role of Communication or perhaps simply being disingenuous, they have tended to embrace the course with pessimism and misgiving.

“Generally the perceptions about communication especially in my department are negative. Although many lecturers think it is important, they cannot aligned it with professional bodies that our students are likely to service when they graduate. Clearly these lecturers are ignorant about the role of Communication in South African universities. Also, students have this false sense of confidence and care-free attitude towards Communication- they think it is a very easy course and they do not treat it in the same way they treat their main courses… (Lecturer response)”
“...I know the course is important but this is a university of technology, so we should be focusing on preparing these students with the technical skills that they will need in the industry. I don’t see how teaching these students how to write academic essays and read different texts can help them... (Lecturer response)”

The negativities from other colleagues undermine the collegiate relationship that one expects in a university. They also impact on students’ commitment to the course. Ironically, although CPUT students often relegate the course to second level, the quality of student assessments and intellectual interactions shows that they are unable to “respond appropriately and sensitively in various professional and [academic] contexts” (Reif-Lehrer 1992: 212). In simple terms, many of them cannot read and write competently—they cannot “express themselves verbally and non-verbally in social situations” (Langsberg & Nel 2005: 132). Moreover, the respondent’s rejection of academic literacy as critical to the process of learning is in my view a mockery of the idea of higher education in post-apartheid South Africa.

COURSE CONTENT AND TEACHING STRATEGIES

Although the tendency is always for the Communication lecturers to blame other colleagues and students, they have also contributed in devaluing the course. University courses should be designed to influence students’ worldviews and the teaching strategies should be a life changing experience to students. Traditionally, lecturers have always been role models in our societies and despite the endless challenges always plaguing the scholarship of teaching, they “remain the primary method of instruction in higher education” (Schwebel & Schwebel 2002: 88). This implies that their teaching approaches can shift students’ perceptions about a course. However, the following empirical evidence paints a blurred portrait of Communication lecturers:

One of the reasons why students and lecturers at CPUT seem not to understand the role of communication is sometimes because of the topics covered in the subject and the teaching strategies. The course guides seem to focus too much on mechanical or discipline-specific issues. These guides seem to provide limited space for boarder cognitive skills and often do not expose students to the challenges of learning in a university. (Lecturer’s response)

Most of the topics and discussions are on topics students covered at high school, so students are often bored by the lecture and they tend to lose interests in the subject (student response)

Students attend lectures because of the contribution that a course can offer to their learning experience and also because of the lecturer. But the excerpt above suggests that Communication courses have failed “to enhance the learning process beyond mere rote learning” (Schwebel & Schwebel 2002: 88). The focus on “mechanical or discipline specific issues” means that Communication courses are not challenging and therefore do not stimulate high thinking processes (Kreber, 2003; Pineteh, 2010). Yet student performance in Communication courses at CPUT is very disturbing and perhaps one way to
improve pass rates is for lecturers to “make teaching [and learning experience] count” through meaningful collaborative and social constructivist learning (Kreber 2003: 94).

Similar sentiments are echoed in the following quotes from my discussion with a Communication lecturer and from a student’s reflection on the course.

“The way the course is designed in this university can also be blamed for the perceptions that I just mentioned. Universities are influenced by the demands of the industry. Often the support subjects like Communication tend to pay minimal interest in critical thinking and analytical skills especially at undergraduate level. Also, the lecturers do not have the right qualification to teach Communication, so they focus on topics that are easy (lecturer response)”

“The course can help us a lot but the way it is taught also poses a problem with learning. For example, most the topics that we cover are not very challenging and cannot really help us to perform well here. Many of the topics are important for the workplace but they are things that we can handle on our own-like CV, writing business letter and/or letters of application (Student response)”

The conception that Communication courses are relatively easy is untenable because at CPUT these courses produce some of the worst results. This indicates that students lack critical soft skills that can minimise their risk of failure at a university and it reaffirms their value in a university like CPUT(Thomas & De Villier, nd; Pineteh, 2010). But the mediocre student performance can also emanate from the dispassion nurtured by the way these courses are packaged and facilitated. One the one hand, teaching strategies should be student-centred and should speak to the diversity of students that we have at CPUT. On the other hand the course contents should introduce students to concepts that can imbue them with “higher-order cognitive skills” (Li, Long & Simpson 1999: 44).

PROBLEMS CONFRONTED BY LECTURERS AND STUDENTS

The misconceptions about Communication and the negativities from colleagues as well as the teaching strategies of Communication lecturers only partially describe the situation at CPUT. The failure of these courses to adequately address the soft skills deficiencies that South African students bring to the university can also be blamed on the university is immediate interests and the “absence of any systematic effort to understand itself, at least from an educational point of view” (Barnett 1990: 3). The university is constantly haunted by the oppositional co-dependencies- quality education and high throughputs rates. Although quality is the buzzword in the university’s mission and vision statements, its obsession with increasing the throughput rates sometimes undermines the very essence of quality education.

“…There is too much emphasis on throughput rate rather that imparting knowledge. This seriously affects teaching and assessments. When we focus too much on pass rates, it affects the quality of the tuition. Poor attendance and lack of interest in Communication is still a challenge to us. Also we are still receiving negative feedback
from industry. Furthermore, the cognitive skills of our students are too weak and we cannot address this problem within during the notional hours allocated for communication… (Lecturer response)”

“…We are always under a lot of pressure produce results but we are not provided with the resources. At CPUT, the focus seems to be about pass rates rather than on the quality of tuition and this affects the way we teach Communication… (Lecturer response)”

The emphasis on high pass rates is propelled by the fact that the “South African government funding of higher education institutions is based on student throughput, as opposed to intake numbers” (Ng’ambi & Johnston 2006: 244). By contrast, the massification of universities today cannot guarantee an increased in pass rate. Instead it puts immeasurable pressure on the university resources (Barnett, 1990; N’gambi & Johnston, 2006). In the case of CPUT, this is simply one edge of a sharp knife. As a university of technology, it is also mandated to produce graduates for the critical skills shortage in the new South Africa. This locates the university within the ambit of the “new vision of universities as transnational business corporations operating in a competitive global knowledge economy” (Shore 2010:15).

THE ROLE OF COMMUNICATION IN A UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY

In the mist of these confusions and contestations and given that “education is not a service for a customer but an ongoing process of transformation of the participant” (Harvey 2002: 253), perhaps we need to redefine the role of Communication in a UoT like CPUT. Mindful of the mandate of the university and the changing vision of modern universities (Shore, 2010; D’Andrea & Gosling, 2005), Communication courses offer a unique opportunity to improve the professional and academic lives of South African students.

“…Communication underpins all subjects in a university and the world of work is about communication. So Communication is a very important course in a university of technology like CPUT because it can enhance students’ academic and professional skills. It can enhance students’ ability to succeed in higher education because it introduces them to range of skills that other courses cannot… (Lecturer’s response)”

The excerpt above heralds the main interest of CPUT Communication courses: the enhancement of academic and professional skills. Here, the respondent opines that the central role of Communication is to prepare students for future academic challenges and for the world of work. In the context of CPUT, they provide “useful interventions … [and with the correct contents and teaching strategies, they can] create independent learners, and instill critical mindedness” (Ng’ambi & Johnston 2006: 244).

In the following quotations, the respondents also remind us about the slew of skills that Communication courses offer to CPUT students, dismissing some of the perceptions discussed above.
“For me I think the role of Communication tends to be confusing here at CPUT. But I believe it is critical course especially given the quality of students that we have. Communication is one of the few courses that help students with both professional and academic skills such as application of writing, oral presentation skills, social skills, teamwork skills, conflict management skills, academic literacy and professional writing skills… (Lecturer’s response)”

“…Well, Communication is a very useful tool in today’s world. In every business, you have to be able to communicate with other members within the business. Therefore you need those communication skills- Communication can help a student to prepare for his/her future. It can enhance our critical thinking skills… (Student response)”

Here, value of Communication is premised on the notion that the “deductive grammar models… are inadequate for the purposes of promoting communicative competence among” students (Grove 1999: 817). For these respondents Communication offers a suite of skills that can minimise students’ risk of failure and can place them at a competitive advantage in the professional world (Pineteh, 2010). These skills are also “vital to understanding how specific disciplines differentially influence learning and development” (Li, Long & Simpson1999: 46).

SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

In the perspective of teaching and learning at CPUT, students and academics seem to agree that the institution has a clear sense of where it wants to take its students especially in terms of written communication and “oral proficiency development… but how to get there most effectively” remains a quandary (Grove 1999: 817). In this light, the following suggestions provided a platform for the ensuing proposed model:

“The course should develop common conceptual platform for students before focusing on discipline specific themes. They should be more emphasis on analytical and synthesis skills. Students should be taught how to think out of the box… (Lecturer response)”

“I think the course and lectures should give students the opportunity to interact more, debate issues with their peers-express our points of view [sic]. This way it might be less boring. Also the lecturers should introduce some more challenging topics that can get us thinking… (Student response)”

These responses reiterate the fact that Communication courses should include concepts that can stimulate high thinking processes in students. These concepts include critical thinking, creativity and innovative thinking, problem solving as well as academic literacies. The development of these skills is “vital to the professional and personal success of all students” (Li, Long & Simpson 1999: 45).

THE PROPOSED MODEL FOR COMMUNICATION LECTURERS
Mindful of the changing interests of universities and existing Communication curricula as well as teaching strategies at CPUP, this model hopes to address specific challenges bedeviling CPUP. For example, the university’s cohort of student is an eccentric mix with disparate socioeconomic backgrounds, learning styles and interests, exemplifying the complex educational landscape of South Africa (Pineteh, 2012). Majority of CPUP students come from dysfunctional high schools which have failed dismally to prepare them for higher education. Many of these students are often not psychological prepared to confront the demands and stresses that come with university studies. Also, their language and communication skills as well as social skills are often unnerving. All these challenges have visible implications for the way CPUP students socialise into university culture and also for the way they interrogate academic discourses in undergraduate assessments and postgraduate research projects. They also affect their understanding of global trends and the pressures these trends are exerting on the South African workplace (Ivanic et al, 2007; Ensor, 2004; Kress, 2000; Winch & Wells 1995). In this light, Communication courses in a university of technology like CPUP are very essential because they provide an uncharacteristic space for students to develop a cross-section of critical skills that they cannot acquire from specialised courses.

This article proposes a framework with space for students to develop their cognitive skills alongside other relevant professional skills right from first year of university. This involves developing Communication contents along two interrelated strands. The first strand concentrates on developing students holistically through academic literacies, critical thinking, problem solving and innovation and creativity. The second strand focuses on the development of technical skills and discipline specific writing skills such as teamwork, conflict management as well as business correspondence and other cognate topics. Existing curricula already address key professional skills but they do not adequately focus on concepts that can develop students cognitively.

This model is potentially useful in that it provides students with a stronger foundation which can help them to approach academic discourses and discipline specific task in a more heuristic way. For example, existing curricula address academic literacy simplistically as reading, listening and writing. In this model we move drastically away from literacy to literacies positioning the debate within the context of New Literacy Studies (Lea & Street, 1998; Kress, 2000; Street, 2004). This means that Communication lecturers in a university like CPUP should deconstruct academic reading and writing not as “a set of skills or simply a means to academic socialization” (Street 2004: 9). Instead they should recognise writing at higher education level as a literacy practice which “leads to cognitive prowess and/or political emancipation” (Luke 1991: 142). Shifting from literacy to literacies implies that reading and writing in higher institutions of learning is a social practice and/or a mode of representing social meanings, ideologies and identities (Fairclough, 1993; Van Dijk, 1993; Geisler, 1994 Street, 1995; Ivanic, 1998). Assignments should also provide space for students to think heuristically, drawing on myriad personal experiences, interrogating broader sociopolitical issues and negotiating their individual identities as human being instead of simply testing their understanding discipline specific concepts. This approach is likely to influence the way South African students imagine and reconstruct post-apartheid
South Africa in a global setting. It can also help students to interpret academic texts from different perspectives and bring them to bear on their academic development within specialised disciplines.

For student to understand and embrace academic literacies as social practices or as mediums for cognitive prowess and emancipation, they require critical and logical thinking skills. This model therefore consider critical thinking “as a crucial aspect of the competence [students] need to participate in a plural and democratic society” like South Africa (Dam & Volman 2004: 360). The democratic transformation of a country like South Africa depends on its students. As scholars within a political space, they are ordained with the role of intellectually reshaping the direction of the country. For this to come to fruition, they should be able to think and make sound judgments, take informed decisions and reason logically. It also means being intellectually autonomous but yet humble to consider disparate view points and able to concede if there is a contrary position premised on sound evidence (Rogers et al, 2005).

Although critical thinking is a meta-cognitive skill and often very challenging to teach, the global market which I suppose we are preparing our students for, requires more than just “high level knowledge and skills” (Ruppert 2010: 1). For our students to be at a competitive edge, they should be able think critically, innovatively and creatively as well as solve problems across different spectrums. Interestingly, the vision of CPUT is to be at the core of technology and innovation in Africa and for this vision to be realised, university curricula should address these concepts from the outset. This will enable students to approach and interrogate knowledge in a more imaginative way. Furthermore, South Africa students face problems not only at the university but also in their social environments. At the university, they are confronted with several academic projects and out of the university they encounter competing socioeconomic challenges. Their success in any academic environment and in any workplace in South Africa is also contingent on their ability to solve their social problem imaginatively. Essentially, students should be able to “harness intellectual and social capital- and to convert that into novel and appropriate things” (Serrat 2009: 1). This proposed model also encourages the introduction of innovative and creative thinking as well as problem solving concepts in the course contents. Although some core programmes like IT and Engineering teach these skills, combining them with critical thinking and academic literacies in one course like Communication can produce more viable outcomes especially because these concepts are closely interrelated.

CONCLUSIONS

Traditionally, higher education was the “realm of objective knowledge… most effectively maintained and disseminated in institutions which are relatively autonomous” (Barnett 1990: 10). Members of these academic communities were able to interrogate the society with relative freedom and without fear victimisation. The scholarship of teaching and learning was therefore founded on the principles of collegiality, intellectual freedom and unrestricted knowledge exchange. However, new societal complexities such as globalisation, internationalisation and Africanisation have reconfigured the idea of higher education and the principles of intellectual autonomy. Seemingly, critical enquiry has
become a relic of our distant past (Barnett, 1990; D’Andrea & Gosling, 2005; Shore, 2010). Higher institutions are therefore subjected to drastic restructuring in order to locate themselves within the new ideology of higher education. This has resulted in the commercialisation and massification of universities. In a relatively new South African university like CPUT, the meaning of higher education is still uncertain and confusing. The university is not only grappling with the politics of globalisation and internationalisation, it is also struggling to forge an identity as an agent of transformation in post-apartheid South Africa. These challenges have impacted on its institutional policies on research, teaching and learning. Mindful of the new vision of universities and its effects on teaching and learning, we cannot ignore the disturbing fact that CPUT students lack the “cultural and social capital to make the transition into higher education” (D’Andrea & Gosling 2005: 102). The mandate and moral responsibility of academics in this institution are to help socialize these students into higher education and prepare them for the transition into the place of work. This means providing them with critical thinking and problem solving skills as well as nurturing them into innovative and creative thinkers, over and above other specialised skills. The most suitable space for the inclusion and teaching of these skills at CPUT is in courses like Communication.

REFERENCES

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