The role of prior experiential knowledge of adult learners engaged in professionally oriented post-graduate study: an affordance or constraint?

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Introduction
This paper is based on a cross-disciplinary research project at a South African University, which aims to explore post-graduate students’ acquisition of academic literacies. The paper focuses on a case study of an MPhil in Disability Studies. The programme is of interest because it draws in significant numbers of adult learners via RPL (Recognition of Prior Learning), in particular, people who have been activists in the disability movement nationally and locally.

The key question posed and explored is: Do adult learners’ prior experience and knowledge act as affordances or constraints for the acquisition of the academic literacies necessary for successful post-graduate study? The research is work in progress, and draws on course documents, participant observations over a two year period, and interviews with lecturers and students.

The programme
The MPhil in Disability Studies was launched in March 2003 as a taught Masters programme, running over two years in ‘blocks’ of ten days each, to allow students from across the country (and Southern Africa) to participate. It comprises seven taught courses in addition to which students complete a mini-dissertation.

What makes this programme interesting as a case study is its transformatory intent in a variety of ways: it attempts to challenge boundaries both within the university, and between academic and everyday knowledge, as well as to shift the dominant discourse within the field of Rehabilitation Sciences.

Challenging the boundaries and rules of the field?
The new field of Disability Studies attempts to effect a paradigm shift within the wider field of Rehabilitation Sciences, by challenging the biomedical model of disability which has historically been the dominant discourse in the field. The MPhil programme’s founding document states that:

The field aims to decisively and multifariously engage with and interrogate disability as a social phenomenon rather than just an individual experience, where groupness, discrimination, systematic exclusion and oppression are the appropriate foci of critical analysis (Proposal, 2002).

The programme crosses traditional disciplinary boundaries by drawing in lecturers from four divisions in the School of Health and Rehabilitation Sciences, as well as from the departments of Psychology and Sociology. Furthermore, it has consciously sought to overcome the divide between academic and everyday knowledge. From the outset the
programme worked in partnership with the disability rights movement in South Africa to negotiate the aims of the programme and to develop curriculum. The programme is seen as a site for dialogue between academics and social movement activists, and disability movement leaders and activists have been drawn into the programme as guest lecturers.

The programme has asserted not only an academic identity but also an advocatory role for itself within the university, seeking to ally itself with institutional efforts to address the ‘oppression and exclusion of disabled people studying at UCT’, and to promote ‘teaching and research on disability as part of the mainstream curriculum across a range of programmes’ (Minutes, 14 March 2007).

**Transforming pedagogy?**

The programme has actively recruited participants who are activists within the disability movement. From the outset, it put in place a system of RPL aimed at providing access to those with significant organisational and life experience of disability, but relatively low levels of formal education. A profile of students between 2004 and 2005 indicates that just less than half of the 19 students were disabled, and more than half were given access via RPL. The majority were women, and there was an even spread of students from rural and urban areas.

Harris – who has done extensive work on RPL, particularly within the South African context - asks: ‘Can RPL be conceptualised as a two-way bridge between existing mainstream curricula and non-traditional students? And if so, under what conditions?’ (Harris, 2006, pp.71). This research poses the question: how is the experiential knowledge of students (particularly those admitted through RPL) treated in the course curriculum, and with what implications?

It is clear from my interview material that the experiential knowledge of disability activists is valued by lecturers, precisely because it is different to academic knowledge: some understandings and insights are seen as being uniquely available to those who are affected by disability. Experiential learning is viewed as something that can complement and enrich formal curriculum; as one lecturer put it: ‘I love working with them because they are located out there …. There is a different suss about how society works in people who are out there….’ Another lecturer argued that in the classroom, the RPL students who have come in mainly from the disability movement are ‘very strong’ in terms of policy, lobbying and advocacy, and weaker in knowing the theoretical background – ‘But that’s what the course gives them’.

The course has been a site for creative pedagogic interventions on the part of some of the lecturers. For example, lecturers have experimented with different assessment tasks, including allowing students to do oral examinations: ‘The idea is that some people are strong in written skills and others are strong in oral skills and it’s giving space for both….’ Students can ask questions of each other and are also examined on how well they can handle questions from the floor, ‘…so the exam process becomes a learning experience’.

There seems to be a real attempt to move dialectically between the experiential knowledge of the adult learner, and formal, theoretical knowledge, and a key factor making this possible is the ability of some lecturers to recognise the experiential knowledge of students who have been active organisationally, and to bridge the worlds of the academy and the world of disability professional work and disability activism.

Despite this sensitivity towards students’ experiential knowledge however, the writing
which students are required to do (particularly in their thesis) is of quite a conventional academic kind, and it is here that students – particularly, but not exclusively, those admitted through RPL – have clearly struggled.

**Problems encountered by students**

Two years after the launch of the programme, it had become clear that many of the students – particularly those with strong ‘movement activist’ backgrounds – were experiencing difficulties with their academic work. There seemed to be a significant disjuncture between these students’ competence in highly responsible, capable and demanding jobs and their English language and writing abilities. One lecturer expressed his frustration thus after the course had been running for a year:

> With a minority of exceptions (reflecting I think the formal academic backgrounds of the students) what was produced (in assignments – LC) was cautious, often badly plagiarized, not clearly relevant, and not structured through the deployment of evidence towards a conclusion. This from people who each has showed the ability in class discussions, let alone their outside lives, to be courageous, learn from their own experience for themselves, articulate and share that, and act and work as powerful and effective advocates.

This was echoed by another lecturer 3 years later:

> If you give people an oral – it’s so rich! But then they are expected to write their thesis in Queen’s English.....

Many of the writing problems experienced were not restricted to those students who had come in via RPL; for example, those graduates who came from the sub-disciplines of Occupational Therapy, Nursing or Physiotherapy struggled to make the transition from a medical to a social science paradigm. However, those students coming in from an activist background did seem to face particular challenges. For example, one lecturer felt that while the disability activists are not inferior intellectually to graduate students, ‘you have to work with concepts in a different way’ as they come with ‘very definite agenda’s’. As will be shown later, for these students knowledge is not neutral, and their activist experiences lead them to position themselves strongly politically and in relation to policy.

A supervisor whose student was the first student admitted via RPL to qualify with her masters degree, commented that this student did not struggle so much ‘in terms of putting things down and putting her argument there’, but she did struggle with how to write academically:

> … I think because of her activism, Linda. She shoots from the hip sometimes. And it was a struggle for her in terms of letting the data speak, and ... almost challenging her own frameworks that she had set for herself. That’s where her struggle was. And then writing it academically because she speaks so passionately.

How should the difficulties encountered by students be understood?

The arguments put forward below are very tentative, and require a lot more empirical grounding. Nevertheless, it seems that the academic writing difficulties encountered by those adult learners admitted via RPL derive not simply from their lack of prior academic training, but should be understood in the context of a number of further factors relating to: (a) the nature of this disciplinary field, (b) the nature of the pedagogy of this programme, and (c) the nature of the students’ habitus.
Nature of the field

Drawing on Bernstein’s conceptual vocabulary, Harris (2006) argues that interdisciplinary programmes such as the MPhil in Disability Studies have weak identities due to the weakening of traditional boundaries (classification) around disciplines. The more permeable boundaries might make it easier to draw in students’ experiential knowledge; at the same time however, ‘…. it needs to be borne in mind that the integrated curriculum code is far more ambiguous in its knowledge structures and social relations’ (Harris, 2006, pp.60). This makes it harder for the learner to recognise and acquire the appropriate discourse, particularly when the teacher's perspective or lens is tacit and invisible.

The MPhil programme has weak boundaries not only on account of its multidisciplinary knowledge base, but also in terms of it assuming an advocacy role within the university – thus creating slippage between pedagogy and advocacy. If Harris is correct, then the multifaceted identity of the programme could make it difficult for students to recognise what it is that they are required to be and do (as a competent student), even though many elements of the programme may well ‘speak’ to their activist experience.

Harris is sceptical about the possibilities of students’ experiential knowledge being able to ‘survive intact’ within academic programmes. It would seem that on the surface, an interdisciplinary, social studies programme such as the MPhil in Disability Studies, with its foregrounding of social critique and focus on deconstructing and challenging power relations, would have much in common with the kinds of everyday knowledge that circulate in social movements such as the disability movement, thus facilitating epistemological access by disability activists. But there are important differences too between everyday and academic knowledge (see Cooper, 2006). Harris argues that when ‘everyday’ or experiential knowledge enters the academic field, the latter ‘….. becomes subject to the rules of the formal context’ (Harris, 2006, pp.65), and its social basis (including its power relations) is removed. In other words – as will be shown a little later – when students attempt to challenge the academic discourse drawing on their experiential knowledge, the knowledge-power which they enjoy as activists within a vibrant social movement does not have the same efficacy within the academy.

I would argue that a second factor affecting students’ ability to recognise and acquire the appropriate academic discourse is the ambiguity around what constitutes cultural capital in this field, where historically separate sub-disciplines, with different hierarchies of capital privileging different forms of habitus, have been brought together.

Pedagogy: Reconstituting the cultural capital valued by the field

Bourdieu has argued that fields are always spaces of conflict and competition:

A field is simultaneously a space of conflict and competition … i in which participants vie to establish monopoly over the species of capital effective in it (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, pp.17).

In the new, emerging and as yet unstable field of Disability Studies, what counts as cultural capital is contested, and the evaluative rules of this programme bear traces of its complex aims and ambitions.

The following observations of the forms of cultural capital valued in this field are drawn from interviews with two of the lecturers on the course, documentary sources as well as observations of the ‘RPL’ students undergoing an oral examination. Many criteria used to judge students are traditionally academic: students have to demonstrate a grasp of
theoretical concepts, familiarity with academic debates in the field and an ability to integrate the literature. In their written projects, some students were criticised for lacking ‘academic rigour’, not being able to write in a ‘scholarly’ way (in particular, lack of academic referencing), or being ‘too anecdotal’; their experiential understanding of the field is not sufficient – they ‘ need to substantiate experience with theory and critical analysis’.

In addition to traditional academic criteria, the capacity for personal critical reflection, and personal growth and transformation is also regarded as important. Conceptual tools need to be applied not only at the societal level, but also at the interpersonal and intrapersonal (psychodynamic) levels. For example, in the oral exam, one student (the mother of a disabled child) was asked by the examiners: ‘as a parent of disabled child, did you feel differently positioned on this course?’ and ‘what is the biggest barrier for your son?’ In their assessment of another student’s presentation, examiners felt that he ‘avoids the personal’ - it ‘is not within his comfort zone’ – and there is ‘no sense that he’s re-thought his positions’.

In addition, and reflecting the programme’s close relationship with the disability movement outside the academy, students are expected not only to acquire critical social theory, but also to ‘integrate theory and application’ and show an ability to make strategic responses. For example, some of the questions posed to students in their oral exam were strategic/political rather than academic; they included ‘what strategies would you use to mainstream disability studies within academic institutions?’ and ‘The course has a partnership approach with DPSA; how can we address the pressures on adult students who are working in full time jobs in the movement?’ Numerous other questions focused on partnerships and alliances.

Not only are the evaluative criteria – and hence, the forms of cultural capital valued in this course – diverse and complex, they are also contested. Assumptions of staff about what constitutes ‘good research’ remain largely tacit, and where they have surfaced, there has been some disagreement and contestation amongst the different ‘disciplinary’ staff over what constitutes ‘good research’ – indicating different disciplinary histories of what counts as cultural capital. This disagreement and contestation has extended to understandings of the primary aim of the course, as expressed by a staff member in one curriculum planning meeting: ‘What are we trying to produce: a professional or an academic researcher? An activist or a researcher?’

**Student habitus: resistance and accommodation**

Students’ difficulties in acquiring academic discourse should not be seen simply as a deficit; students need to be seen as active agents, who at times choose to resist this discourse. This conclusion emerges out of an in-depth interview with one of the first ‘movement activist’ students on the course, but is corroborated by other anecdotal evidence.

Mandla (pseudonym) had been a national leader of one of the main disability organisations for 5 – 6 years when he began the MPhil in Disability Studies in 2003, and had an even longer history of activism within the movement. His prime motivation to do the course was ‘…to build internal leadership – that’s why in 2001 we started our relationship with institutions of Higher Learning.’ Leadership within the movement had begun to realise that the organisation was dependent on ‘experts’ to do policy development and interface with government, and felt increasingly that they needed to ‘indigenise’ this expertise ‘…. because we were not able to engage academics at an equal level’.
At the time of the interview, Mandla was just about to submit his thesis; it was clear that he had successfully been able to enhance his existing cultural capital with academic capital, but it was equally clear that his academic habitus had not supplanted his activist habitus. His activist identity remained his primary identity at the end of this course, and his key concern was how he was going to use his new-found expertise to benefit the organisation and the disabled.

His acquisition of an academic habitus had not been without conflict and struggle. Mandla found it difficult to submit to an ‘academic way of writing’; for example, he felt that the academic convention of not using ‘I’ in his writing curtailed his voice: ‘I was doing the writing and I realised that all the time, people would say: ‘But why are you saying this, why you saying ‘I’, you know – and not ‘the researcher’?’ Asked how he felt about having to change his way of writing, he diverged from his own story and described how activist students reached a ‘crossroads’ where they challenged and resisted the imposition of academic ‘rules’ on a more general level:

Well, this is part of the .... cross-roads we were subjected to, as we participated in the course... there (was) a high tension arising in the class because... we feel we understand issues, but are told: ‘this is academic work, this is how you need to do it’, this is how we need to behave, you know.

There were big arguments:

I remember Y would become extremely emotional, and then people would say: ‘Look, you either shape in or shape out... in terms of how we need to do these things.

Asked to give an example of such an issue, Mandla referred to the two contrasting approaches to disability – the ‘medical’ and the ‘social’ model. Students were told:

... there was a need for us to recognise the role of medical knowledge, and that we can’t just replace it and say it’s of no use... there was this thing of saying: there are two sides of the coin ... you know... all the time you have to understand that as a student, you must also give (the other side). (But as Activists) ... you can’t be in (the centre), you have to take a position and say: this is what I feel...!

Students from activist backgrounds thus found it very difficult to accept ‘this cautious route in the way you present yourself …’ where they were not allowed to ‘take a position’ but rather had to dispassionately put forward all perspectives on an issue.

Mandla’s resistance to some elements of academic discourse was not simply a function of his activist background; it also derived from his strong belief that there is a wealth of knowledge within the disability movement from which the university could gain:

And I think for me, this might be an opportunity for the university to learn something different, kind of see how they could integrate that knowledge and experience, you know, within what is being done.

He felt that students’ experiences were drawn on unevenly, and only by some lecturers, and that the experience and knowledge of activists who had been RPL-ed into the programme could have been used better to shape the Masters programme.

Mandla ended his interview by making numerous suggestions of how the academic support of students on this programme could be strengthened; it seems that many of his
suggestions have already been taken seriously, and important new interventions made in the last two years.

Conclusions

This paper shows how the success or otherwise of adult learners in post-graduate study (including the completion of a research thesis) may be facilitated by their prior professional, activist and life experiences. However, such experiences are not sufficient in themselves to ensure academic success; the latter is crucially dependent on the pedagogic assumptions and educational interventions made by their lecturers and supervisors, in particular, the way they understand the relationship between adult learners’ prior experiential learning, and the forms of knowledge that their disciplinary field of study privileges.

At the same time, adult students are not passive objects in this process. Their habitus and dispositions, and they way they choose to engage with their teachers’ education interventions, also shapes their educational achievements. In other words, whether or not prior experiential knowledge - the cultural and symbolic capital that adult learners’ bring into post-graduate study – can be turned into a productive pedagogic resource is determined not only by the role of the educator, but also by the active learning strategies that adult learners adopt.

References


Harris J (2006) ‘Questions of knowledge and curriculum in the recognition of prior learning’ in Andersson P and Harris J (eds.) Re-theorising the recognition of prior learning, Leicester, NIACE.

Minutes of Programme Committee Meeting, 14 March 2007.

Proposal for MPhil (Disability Studies) Programme – July 2002

Notes

1 One of the leading organisations in the disability movement.

2 For example, a lecturer with extensive experience of doing research in/for social action organisations has been brought in to offer a substantial 'Research Literacy' component to the programme.

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