

From the shadows to the university's epistemic centre: Engaging the (mis)recognition struggles of students at the postapartheid university

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Misrecognition of South African university students is at the heart of this address. Misrecognition refers in this address to the exclusionary institutional discourses and practices of this country's universities, which continue to prevent the majority of their (black) students' from achieving a successful education. It sets out to develop an account of the ways in which these misrecognised students develop a complex educational life in their quest for a university education. I will suggest that they do this through building their agency in the shadows of the formal institutional structures of the university and through strategic intersecting practices with their programs of study and universities' academic support services. I would argue that at the heart of students' university experiences is an essential misrecognition of who they are, and how they access and encounter their university studies. I suggest that gaining greater purchase on their (mis)recognition struggles may place the university in a position to establish an engaging recognition platform to facilitate their educational success. This address is interested in building a conception of recognition that opens space for what I call the 'recognitive agency' of the education subject, who remains largely unknown to the university. I concentrate on the nature and extent of black students' survivalist educational navigations and practices in their family, community, school and university contexts. Such an account would enable an appreciation and recognition of their complex and largely ignored struggles to persevere in their educational journeys.

The address will be based on what I call the rescaling and respatialisation of education reproduction. Such a view would allow for an understanding of students' educational subjectivities not as limited to their study at the university or the school, but as arising from scaled processes across the domestic, environmental and institutional spaces, and which articulate in particular ways on their bodies, i.e. fluid educational bodies in and across space. The complexities of urban life, with particular focus on the social compressions of life in urban South African contexts, provides the 'lived texts' for students' encounters with their educational institutions including the university. And, it is against this backdrop that the students splice together their social and epistemic resources to build an educational path in respect of their complex and circuitous life trajectories.

Understanding students' becoming as a journey involving subjective processes challenges the dominant view of students' education and learning, which limits such understanding to classroom- or lecture-room-based cognitive processes. Such a view fails to account for students' learning as involving complex educational processes that are transacted in and across various lived spaces. Leander, Phillips, and Taylor (2010, p. 329) explain that this dominant "classroom-as-container [view] ... functions as an 'imagined geography' of education, constituting when and where researchers and teachers should expect learning to 'take place'". This perspective is based on a view of learning as predominantly occurring in the lecture hall and shapes educational understanding even when, as Leander et al. (p. 330) suggest, learning crosses 'in school' and 'out-of-school' borders. Viewed as a journey, students' educational becoming is more aptly understood in respect of how they traverse their various daily lived environments of, for example, their family, school, neighbourhood, university, lecture rooms, tutorial spaces and peer learning groups. In other words, educational becoming is transacted 'on the move' across multiple spaces. Leander et al. (331) proffers this perspective by way of the following question:

How are the dynamically moving elements of social systems and distributions, including people themselves and all manner of resources for learning as well, configured and reconfigured across space and time to create opportunities to learn?

A perspective on educational becoming founded on a 'decontainerised' time-space nexus posits an understanding that highlights the impact of political and sociocultural dynamics in an attempt to bring

the impact of life outside the university into play in our consideration of life inside the university (Fataar 2015). This would provide a lens onto students' educational pathways with reference to their community and family circumstances, their schooling and their university lives. The focus thus shifts to an understanding of students that stretches across their lived spaces. It concentrates on how the dynamics in these spaces position and inform their education, and how they go about developing their educational practices in respect of the affordances, through resources, literacies, urban knowledges, discourses and tools, of their complex livelihoods.

The university educational journeys of urban South African students' are made up of at least three inter-related aspects: first, their pre-university paths from their family and community contexts and transitioning into university study; second, their educational engagement practices in the university field in terms of which they establish a platform for their epistemic becoming; and the third aspect is the manner in which they engage in disciplinary concept acquisition on the basis of bodily practices that involve cognitive, affective and strategic dimensions. Working their way across the community/school and university divide – what is referred to as the articulation gap between school and university – the majority of South Africa's first-generation non-white students are exposed to precariousness associated with township living, and the materially (not to mention culturally) deficient institutional environments of their universities for meeting needs bred in precarious conditions beyond mainstream university imaginaries.

I will argue that these students, in giving meaning to 'spaces of possibles', develop a number of instrumental and strategic practices to navigate their township environment as part of staying on educational course. Confronted daily with their communities' social pathologies, including alcohol and drug abuse, crime, violence and teen pregnancy, they develop an ability to recognize and articulate what Zipin (2009) calls the darker aspects of their lifeworlds. They avoid crime-ridden areas, choose friends carefully and generally do not indulge in behaviour that jeopardizes their educational struggles (Norodien-Fataar, 2016, p. 94-96). With regard to their schooling careers, students report that they navigate their schools' lack of optimal resources and relatively dysfunctional learning environments by remaining disciplined and focused on their school work. They do this by adopting self-efficacy-type discourses that enable them to embrace rote learning practices that are narrowly focused on tests, examinations and achieving good results. They report that they draw on religious and cultural support to position them as learning agents with the ability to focus on achieving school success (see Kapp, Badenhorst, Bangeni, Craig, Janse van Rensburg, Le Roux, Pym, and van Pletzen, 2014).

What emerges from these commitments is a view of students who are motivated by high educational aspirations to enter university and succeed at their studies. They initially harbour aspirations to become scientists, astronauts and doctors, which keeps them motivated to gain university admission (Fataar 2015). Their pathways to university admission are often longer and more circuitous than those of middle-class students, having to secure money to register and pay fees, work after classes, and deal with low matriculation marks by rewriting subjects or repeating the final school year to improve their marks. Most of these students enter the university by settling for 'lesser' courses and are often placed on university extension programs that are tailored to meet the needs of students with lower marks (Norodien-Fataar, 2016, p. 102). Based on their experiences of surviving and adapting to difficult community and school circumstances, these students are able to harness complex mediating capacities in order to enter and adapt to the requirements of university study.

Upon entering the university these students are confronted with materially deficient and uneven educational environments and relatively ossified institutional cultures. Less than optimal university environments are a consequence of inadequate funding and poorly resourced campus facilities, which have resulted in lack in areas such as lecturing facilities, accommodation, transport, library and ICT infrastructure, and sport and recreation facilities (see DHET 2008). Universities' unchanged institutional cultures are a reflection of the failure of universities to transform their functional environments to adapt to the socio-cultural and educational requirements of first-generation black students. For example, the professoriate has remained largely white, curricula have not engaged the

imperative to 'Africanize', and African languages remain peripheral. Students thus have had to establish their recognition struggles at universities in materially uneven and untransformed institutional contexts.

Norodien-Fataar (2017) highlights the varied and uneven field conditions of universities in terms of which students have had to navigate their studies. Kapp and Bangeni (2005, p. 16) refer to the 'unhoming' transitional identifications that students make as they become alienated from their homes upon entering the university, but do not go on to become engaged educational participants at the university. Their processes of becoming as university students are unsupported, with universities focusing narrowly on immersion into academic discourses but neglecting the identification and affective dimensions of their students' transition (2009, p. 595). This narrowly focused university immersion is informed by a deficit view of students that constructs them "as being 'less able' and 'ill-prepared'" (Boughey, 2010). They are deemed to require academic support to fill "content gaps of schooling ... students have to be taught ways of thinking, problem solving, reading and writing that challenge the formula-driven, rote-learning models that characterize many black and working-class rural schools" (Pym and Kapp, 2013, p. 273). The focus of university academic development programs is largely on students' lack of preparation for university study, which contributes to students' experiences of marginalization in the university.

Given their positioning as relatively disengaged from the university infrastructure such as their lectures and tutorials, the students nonetheless draw on their family and community-acquired resources and skills to mediate their university studies, which they use to develop a type of mediating capacity to confront their alienation and lack of knowledge about university study. They find ways of mitigating their lack of know-how in areas such as concept and language acquisition, study skills and the use of the library. In the absence of systemic support, they work out how to engage with their learning, how the university functions in relation to course provision, and how its institutional support structures are set up to support their education. One definitive practice is found in the emotional and educational support they receive from student peers. In addition to providing a sense of belonging, peers are crucial in the students' struggles to understand course content and disciplinary concept acquisition. During the course of their studies students work out how to strategically engage the university's formal structures to inform their educational becoming. They work out how to interact with their programs, lecturers and academic support structures. Students are thus able to establish their agency by way of strategically and tenaciously navigating through the challenges posed by the university field, which enables them to establish a platform for their university learning. They cultivate their learning practices based on establishing disciplined and strict learning routines. They commit themselves to long hours of study. They establish learning activities individually as well as in groups, and are constantly involved in various projects to improve their learning effectiveness. The students are focused on developing productive learning activities. They employ arduous trans-linguaging strategies for concept acquisition, which involves developing greater facility in English as the language of the courses, and using their mother tongue to aid their grasping and understanding of concepts (see Kapp and Bangeni, 2005, and Norodien-Fataar, 2017). They become adept at using information communication technologies (ICTs) and mobile technologies to access social media tools in order to augment their learning and create purposeful activities. YouTube, Facebook and WhatsApp are their favoured ICT and social media platforms. ICTs become a core part of their learning activities.

In their quest to establish productive activities, the students have become attentive to the skills and knowledge they need to engage successfully with their respective courses. They focus intently on the intellectual aspects of their learning and become competent in acquiring the skills and the knowledge proffered by their courses. The students hone in on learning practices in support of key scientific tasks such as writing reports and doing experiments, which they realize are essential for their course learning. Successful students thus become independent learners who develop personalized learning styles.

I will argue that students at universities ought to be understood in the light of the complex access paths and practices that they establish across their community, school and university spaces, which are crucial for their educational becoming. While these paths and practices are unrecognised by their universities, the students go on to establish mediating educational practices to mitigate their institutional misrecognition, initially in the shadows of the university's formal operations, and later through strategic action that secures them a viable educational path.

This final section of my address endeavours to present a normative argument for developing an education platform for supporting and engaging students' recognitive agency. This address responds to a crucial aspect of the imperative to decolonise education, which is the epistemic becoming of university students. Black students navigate precarious family and community circumstances to carve open a path into the university in terms of which they go on to develop mitigating strategies to establish a complex education life. Their epistemic becoming is by and large constituted by subjective engagement processes which they transact relatively parallel to the university's formal structures and through strategic engagement with their courses, lecturers and academic structures. Their epistemic becoming mostly occurs in peer networks on the margins of the university. They therefore experience their educational becoming by and large as alienating, never becoming properly 'homed' at the university. Students are doing the best that they can, under challenging circumstances for them, to negotiate their aspirations in relation to alienating conditions of the mainstream university. It then is incumbent on universities to meet the students from their 'side' of it – i.e. for universities to change their terms of recognition, in order for students' agentic processes of epistemic becoming to gain greater possibilities of fruitful actualisation via their university study.

The core challenge for a compelling university education is the development of a broader social-structural commitment to social justice in terms of which schools and universities would play a key part. Whether universities are able to transform their institutional orientation for greater inclusiveness is dependent on developments in the broader social-reproductive apparatuses of society. Universities are not able to serve as progenitors of social change in the absence of a broader set of political commitments to transform society. It is thus clear that, firstly, responding to the structural arrangements and material dimensions of universities to address institutional inequities, and secondly, developing radically inclusive institutional cultures, are necessary conditions for processes of university decolonisation. These two issues are central to reframing the purposes of universities in ways that challenge their current instrumentalist orientations.

However, I would argue that these necessary conditions (i.e. structural arrangements and institutional culture) must be understood in respect of the nature of the curriculum knowledge to be taught at the university, which I regard as a primary condition for a decolonised education. I suggest that facilitating students' recognitive agency comes most prominently into view around the question of what curriculum knowledge is most worth teaching in the decolonising university. In other words, the debate should centre on the type of curriculum knowledge that universities offer to address students' epistemic becoming. In the context of the call for decolonising education, I will argue that students' active educational engagement processes are key to their epistemic becoming. And, I will suggest that the 'knowledge of the university' must engage their epistemic becoming, via their programmes, courses and broader support experiences, as citizens located in complex Africa-centered contexts.

The address will therefore present an argument for such epistemic becoming to be informed by what Cooper and Morrell suggest, as "a fluidity of articulation in place of the rigidities of [knowledge] classification" (2014, p. 15). My core argument is the view that students' ability to establish their epistemic becoming must be engendered in respect of their capacity to work productively with such 'fluidity of knowledge articulation'. Such a perspective would address the need for students to acquire reflexive capacity to establish productive livelihoods in respect of which the knowledge acquired at the university ought to have both an exchange value for entering the world of work, and use value for productive and adaptive living in complex worlds.

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