The 'no problem' Discourse model: Exploring an alternative way of researching student learning

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we explore an alternative way of characterising the student learning experience, drawing on sociocultural perspectives on learning. Here, learning is not merely the application of an approach to a cognitive task, but a social process of identity formation. In particular, we draw on Gee's concept of Discourse models to identify the implicit theories students use to make sense of their learning and assessment experiences. From interviews with third year engineering students, we identified what we termed the 'no problem Discourse model', in which students construct an upbeat portrayal of their experience of a course, despite experiencing crises induced by assessment events. Through a process of justification the seriousness of the crisis is denied. This Discourse model appears to have its roots in a popular Discourse of self-actualization. There was evidence of co-construction of this model during the student learning interviews. This suggests implications for the roles that teachers can play in either maintaining or challenging the Discourse models that are adopted by students.

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1. Introduction

The last few decades have seen the emergence of a field of research which has responded to a key set of research questions around students' experiences of learning. This research has been primarily motivated by concerns about the quality of student learning and associated learning outcomes. We will refer to this research endeavour as 'student learning research'. A key concept which has driven this field is that of deep and surface 'approaches to learning' (Marton & Säljö, 1976). These and related constructs are now described in a number of texts for tertiary educators (for example, Biggs, 2003; Ramsden, 2003). Such has been the popularity of this theory that Webb (1997) has described it as the 'canon for educational development' (p. 195). However, there are a growing number of scholars who have raised questions around this particular characterisation of the student experience (for example, Haggis, 2003; Malcolm & Zukas, 2001; Mann, 2001). In summary these critiques point to the predominant focus on cognitive processes which results in a relatively asocial characterisation of the learner. This research approach also tends to lead to explanations of student learning outcomes which are somewhat detached from broader sociocultural context.

This paper reports a study which was located in a third year chemical engineering course in a traditional research-focused South African university. Although a fairly conventional theoretically oriented course with lectures, afternoon problem-solving sessions, a class test and a final examination, there were many elements of the course which were innovative and

aimed towards supporting student learning and the development of conceptual understanding. For example, for most of the duration of the course students engaged in a design project which required them to apply the course concepts. This project entailed significant class discussion, group work and many interactions with the lecturer as the course progressed. Although the students perceived this as a relatively challenging course, they were especially positive about their experiences of the lecturer and the course. This seemed, however, at odds with the final course results, in which a quarter of the class failed, and less than a third achieved a final mark of more than 60%.

The study aimed to characterise students' experiences of the course and to understand the apparent disjuncture between students' positive descriptions of the course and their poor course results. In a first phase of data analysis, we 'measured' students' approaches to learning as indicated by a standard inventory (Entwistle & Tait, 1995). Results suggested a widespread use of a deep approach to learning, with generally low scores on the surface approach scale (Case, 2004). These findings did not offer an explanation for why many students had performed relatively poorly on the course, and following the critiques of the approaches to learning theory we therefore looked to sociocultural perspectives on learning to better characterise this experience.

In contrast to views on learning that focus on cognitive processes in the individual, a sociocultural perspective views learning as a social activity (Lemke, 2001). There are a range of theories that can be used to characterise learning in this way, including situated cognition (Lave & Wenger, 1991), activity theory (Engestrom, 1990) and Bourdieu's theory of social practice (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). The recent 'linguistic turn' in the social sciences has also seen a particular focus on the use of language in enacting social activities, and there are useful ways of characterising learning which focus on discourse (for example, Fairclough, 1992; Gee, 2005; Kress, 1985). In this paper we have chosen to work predominantly with Gee's framework, mainly because of his strong focus on identities, and the obvious applicability of this work to student learning research.

2. Theoretical framework

In the context of research on student writing, Lea and Street (1998) identify three different research perspectives, moving with increasing sophistication and breadth from a focus on 'study skills', through 'academic socialisation', to 'academic literacies'. We suggest that these are analogous to developments that are evident in the literature of student learning research, except that it is only the first two stages that have to been substantially explored to date. The 'study skills' approach is exemplified by research in cognitive psychology which attempted to characterise learning in a context-free manner. The 'academic socialisation' model is represented by research which attempted to characterise more naturalistically the student experience of learning, and which consequently identified deep and surface approaches to learning. The shift between these first two perspectives is explained in some detail in Entwistle (1997), and indeed the move towards a focus on students' lived experience was a substantial improvement on the narrowness of cognitive laboratory-based experimental research. However, as mentioned above, there has now been some suggestion in the literature that student learning research is too narrow in its orientation. It is possible then that a focus on Lea and Street's third perspective, 'academic literacies', might provide this broader viewpoint, and in fact Haggis (2003) suggests exactly such a move. In this paper we start to explore what student learning research using this perspective might look like.

The 'academic literacies' perspective has emerged from the area of the 'New Literacy Studies', in which literacies are seen as social practices, and where students need to negotiate often conflicting literacy practices (Lea & Street, 1998). In this framework, learning is characterised as the acquisition of a specialist discourse (Lemke, 2001), and as involving the development of new identities. Importantly, the discourses that university learning might require students to acquire will often be in conflict with more experiential discourses that students have acquired in the community.

It has struck us that the focus on identities, which is at the heart of Gee's work on discourse, could profitably be applied to the same research questions which have driven the student learning research endeavour, with potentially very different outcomes. In this paper we therefore draw almost exclusively on the theory exemplified in Gee's recent book (Gee, 2005), in order to explore the utility of this approach properly.

Gee (2005) argues that acquiring a new discourse has relatively little to do with acquiring new grammar or vocabulary, but more to do with a whole way of interacting in the world in order to 'pull off' a particular identity. This involves 'acting–interacting–thinking–valuing–talking–(sometimes reading–writing)' (p. 26) in an appropriate way in order to enact a particular identity. To emphasize this distinction between language acquisition and all these other attributes that are part of enacting a particular identity, he uses the term 'discourse', with a 'small d', to signify language-in-use, and the term 'Discourse', with a 'big D', to signify the combination of language plus the actions, interactions, ways of thinking, believing, valuing, etc.

In order to characterize students' learning experiences we have specifically drawn on Gee's concept of 'Discourse models', which he takes to be 'the "theories" (storylines, images, explanatory frameworks) that people hold, often unconsciously, and use to make sense of the world and their experiences in it' (p. 61). These theories are connected to specific Discourses, in Gee's terms 'specific socially and culturally distinctive identities people can take on in society'. We used this notion of Discourse models to identify the implicit theories that students use to make sense of their learning experiences, and have attempted to link these to the broader Discourses that are in operation in society.