

Educational Research for Social Change (ERSC)

Volume 11 No. 2 October 2022

pp. 76-91

ersc.nmmu.ac.za

ISSN: 2221-4070

“Stop Bombarding Us With Work We Don’t Even Need”: Reconceptualising a First-Year Course for Increased Relevance Through Action Learning¹

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Abstract

South African lecturers and students often struggle to reconcile the demands of an increasingly globalised world with pedagogies that can be adapted to harness students’ local contexts, and which can be used to draw on students’ lived experiences in the African context. This paper explores how a first-year academic literacies course could be reconceptualised to become more relevant to education students’ lived realities, while also preparing them for a competitive degree and a career with global relevance. The current iteration of this course can be described as mainly theoretical with a typical Western course structure. Student feedback indicates that students fail to see the relevance of the course to their degrees and future careers. This conceptual paper considers how the course could be reimagined within a paradigm of action learning that is centred around project-based, socially embedded community-based learning to firstly, encourage students to draw on deep approaches to learning (Biggs, 1999) and secondly, to counter the effects of alienation (Mann, 2001) experienced by students. Ultimately, the paper hopes to offer an example of innovative course design that could successfully be implemented in resource-poor contexts.

Keywords: community-based learning, experiential learning, deep approaches to learning, academic literacies, alienation

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Please reference as: Fouche, I. (2022). “Stop Bombarding Us With Work We Don’t Even Need”: Reconceptualising a First-Year Course for Increased Relevance Through Action Learning. *Educational Research for Social Change*, 11 (2), 76-91 | <http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2221-4070/2022/v11i2a5>

¹ Ethical clearance number: H21/08/05

Introduction

Worldwide, universities have been faced with existential challenges over the past few decades. Universities today are almost unrecognisable from the university of the past, as described by John Stuart Mill (1874) in his inaugural address as Rector of St Andrews University in Scotland, where he stated:

[The university] is not a place of professional education. Universities are not intended to teach the knowledge required to fit men for some special mode of gaining their livelihood. Their object is not to make skillful lawyers, or physicians, or engineers, but capable and cultivated human beings. (p. 334)

The role of higher education remains contentious; in recent times, social justice as an imperative for higher education has entered the discourse on this topic. As Hornsby and Osman (2014, p. 712) noted, “higher education is viewed as an integral part in resolving social and economic inequalities present in societies.” In South Africa, this was illustrated by the #FeesMustFall protests that occurred between 2015 and 2018, which challenged the colonial foundations still present in higher education institutions in the country as well as the financial, epistemic, and linguistic exclusion of students from nondominant backgrounds (Langa, 2017). In South Africa, as in many other countries, this is both a daunting and exciting time for curriculum development in higher education. We have the opportunity to reimagine our courses in ways that not only equip students for their chosen professions (as much as this might have horrified Mill in the 19th century), but which also work towards social justice and, maybe ironically, to something akin to what Mill (1874, p. 334) termed “capable and cultivated human beings”—graduates with a sense of civic responsibility who use the knowledge and skills gained during their studies for the greater good.

Two years ago, I took responsibility for an academic literacy course aimed at first-year pre-service high school teachers. This course, which aims to equip students with the literacy skills and knowledge to support them in their university studies as well as in their chosen profession as teachers thereafter, is mainly theoretical with some attempts to make concepts applicable to students’ lived realities. Despite existing attempts to make the course relevant to students’ lives, student engagement is largely lacking. In this conceptual paper, I consider how this course could be reimaged to enhance student engagement and learning by rebuilding it around the paradigm of action learning, centring it around a small-scale socially embedded community-based learning project. The two main theoretical lenses through which I consider the reconceived course are those of *deep approaches to learning* (Biggs, 1999; Moon, 2013) and *alienation* (Mann, 2001). By offering one example of an innovative course design that could be implemented in resource-poor contexts, I aim to contribute to possibilities of practice within the broader field of educational research as social change.

The paper starts by engaging with the concepts of deep approaches to learning and alienation. Thereafter, it briefly describes the current iteration of the course under discussion, drawing on student feedback received during yearly evaluations of the course. It then considers the principles of action learning and finally, investigates how this course could be reconceived by drawing on these principles—consequently, encouraging students to engage with deeper approaches to learning and reducing most aspects of alienation while harnessing other aspects thereof for more effective learning. The article focuses on imagining new learning experiences for the first-year students participating in the envisioned projects. The experience of other role-players in the project fall outside the scope of this article.

Deep Approaches to Learning

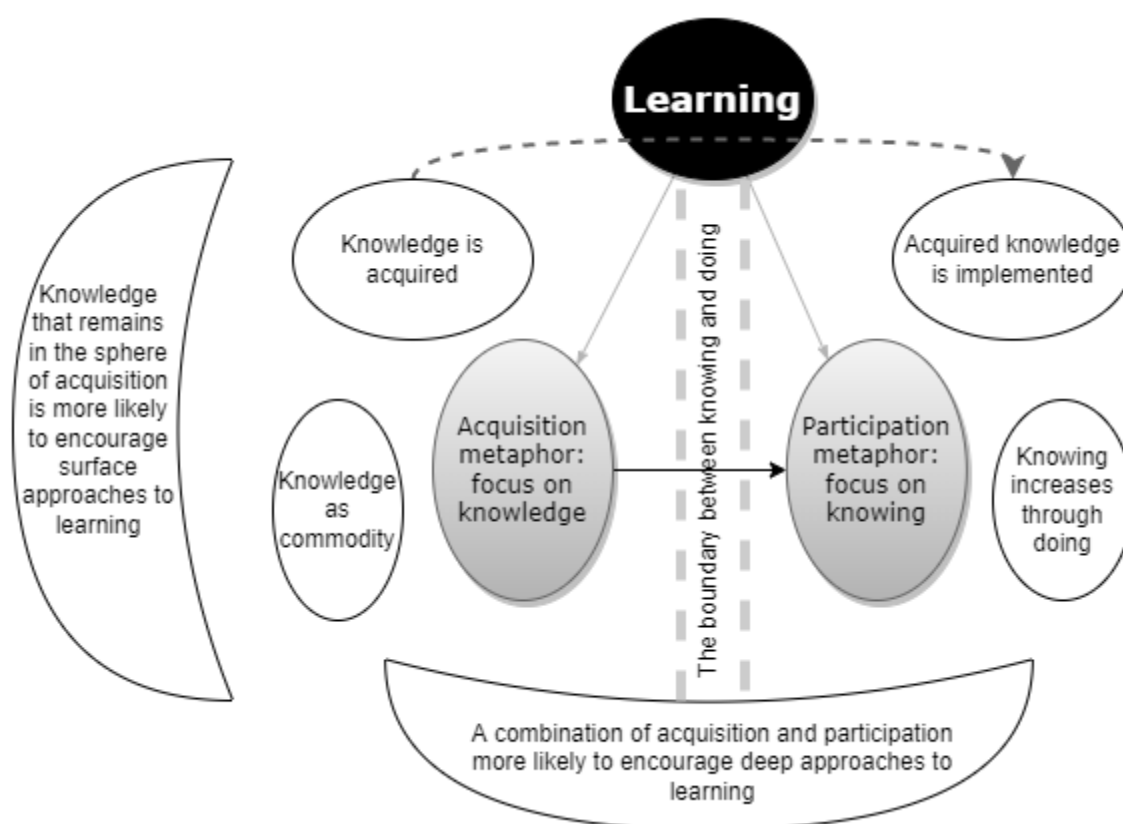
Marton and Säljö (1976) first conceived of the concepts of surface and deep-level processing as related to learning; although this was close to 50 years ago, the concept of deep approaches to learning is still widely drawn on in the field of education as an ideal to strive towards to bring about more engaged, effective, and lasting student learning. Deep approaches to learning are typically contrasted to surface approaches to learning, which are characterised as passive learning, accepting knowledge as absolute, being uncritical, learning disjointed facts, and fully trusting the lecturer in conveying undisputable facts which students can learn, often relying on rote learning (Biggs, 1999; Entwistle, 2017; Moon, 2013). A surface approach “yields fragmented outcomes that do not convey the meaning of the encounter” (Biggs, 1999, p. 60). Deep approaches to learning, in contrast, are characterised by a questioning of the validity of knowledge, an understanding that all knowledge is constructed and contestable, and being critical of what students read and what they are told by lecturers. Students who follow deep approaches to learning investigate, question, and critique knowledge, are open to having their own beliefs challenged and changed if appropriate evidence is presented, and to forming new opinions based on new evidence (Biggs, 1999). Deep approaches to learning bring about “conceptual change in students’ understanding of the world” (Biggs, 1999, p. 60). Entwistle (2017, p.3) argued that “effective university teaching . . . depends on establishing a relationship between the specific subject content and the ways in which students are helped to engage with the ideas, so as to develop their own understanding.” This resonates with Biggs’ (1999) argument that while some students naturally gravitate towards either surface or deep approaches to learning, it is also possible to structure teaching to encourage and facilitate deep approaches to learning.

For that, specific elements should be in place for students to move towards deep approaches, if approaches to learning are seen as being on a continuum. A good course facilitates learning by structuring how learners construct the knowledge we want them to learn (Hatano, 2013). A carefully planned curriculum that is scaffolded and structured to guide students along this continuum can go far in encouraging deep approaches to learning. Such a curriculum should elicit and demand increasingly independent and critical responses from students. Furthermore, to enable students to transfer knowledge to other contexts, it becomes important that target knowledge is not merely transmitted and constructed, but that it is also reconstructed in some way by the student so as to become usable in a variety of problem-solving situations; this will assist students in using knowledge not only in the domain in which it was acquired, but also in related domains (Hatano, 2013).

The concept of transfer is of particular importance in the field of literacy, and especially in academic literacy studies. Sfard’s (1998) conception of the acquisition and participation metaphors is useful in discussing how transfer between domains can be achieved, and is illustrated in Figure 1. The acquisition metaphor, where knowledge is considered a commodity, takes the stance that once knowledge has been acquired, it can be applied and transferred “like any other commodity” (Sfard, 1998, p. 5). In the acquisition metaphor, on the other hand, the focus is more on “knowing” than on “knowledge,” thus indicating a shift towards action (Sfard, 1998, p. 6). The concept of “*having* gives way to the constant flux of *doing*” (Sfard, 1998, p. 6). In this metaphor, the learner is viewed “as a person interested in participation in certain kinds of activities rather than in accumulating private positions [i.e., knowledge, or courses ticked off]” (Sfard, 1998, p. 6). In the case of students studying to become teachers, these activities could be considered to be those involving teaching; these students do, after all, want to become teachers, *doing* teaching, rather than *having* knowledge.

Figure 1

The Relationship Between the Acquisition and Participation Metaphors, in Relation to Deep and Surface Approaches to Learning



In the Wits School of Education, students' learning generally remains theoretical until at least the latter part of their second year when they are occasionally allowed to teach some classes during a 6-week teaching experience period. We do not trust them to draw on their existing resources (cf. Yosso's, 2005, discussion on community cultural wealth) to start doing this thing called teaching from the beginning of their academic careers in a symbiotic relationship of *learning* and *doing*, and learning *through* doing. Therefore, we default to an acquisition narrative for at least the first one and a half years of their academic careers, rather than immediately inviting students into their own learning through doing.

Sfard (1998), however, warned of dismissing the acquisition metaphor completely:

Learning transfer means carrying knowledge across contextual boundaries; therefore, when one refuses to view knowledge as a stand-alone entity and rejects the idea of context as a clearly delineated "area," there is simply nothing to be carried over, and there are no definite boundaries to be crossed. (p. 9)

Thus, students do need to acquire knowledge that they can draw on when participating, or which can be transferred to other contexts (see Figure 1). Designing a course using a combination of principles underlying these metaphors may be the most effective route to enabling transfer and effective learning.

To bring the discussion back to surface and deep approaches to learning, and as indicated in Figure 1, it might be too simplistic to equate surface approaches to learning as adhering to the acquisition

metaphor and deep approaches to learning as adhering to the participation metaphor. If surface and deep approaches to learning are considered to be underpinned by student motivation, one must acknowledge motivation as a complex construct that could, to some degree, be influenced by external factors such as course design. However, there will always be limits to the impact a course designer can have on student motivation. But it can be argued that a course that is underpinned purely by the acquisition metaphor is more likely to encourage surface approaches to learning—whereas a course that is designed and structured around a combination of the two metaphors (thus, drawing on both acquisition as well as participation) is more likely to require students to draw on deep approaches to learning to successfully engage with knowledge and be able to transfer it to a variety of contexts. Having to extend knowledge to different contexts (i.e., the participation metaphor) might well cause discomfort in students (cf. Vygotsky's, 1967, zone of proximal development) but it is often in these spaces of discomfort where students learn. What is important is that students are not constantly made to feel inadequate. There should be times where students feel confident in what they are doing and times where they are pushed to new ways of learning, thus achieving a balance between challenge and success, or knowing, doing, and transferring. Mann's (2001) concept of alienation, discussed in the following section, brings another layer of complexity to the discussion of effective learning.

Alienation

Mann's (2001) discussion of alienation is a useful lens through which to consider how course curricula can contribute to environments that encourage either surface or deep approaches to learning. She argued that surface approaches to learning could be considered "expressing an alienation from the subject and the process of study itself" (Mann, 2001, p. 7); thus, students adopt surface approaches to learning *because* they feel alienated. As this paper will argue, structuring the course around a combination of the acquisition and participation metaphors might work towards reducing alienation, thus creating a learning environment that encourages deep approaches to learning. Mann discussed seven perspectives on alienation, which I summarise below.

The first perspective considers the postmodern sociocultural context in which humans operate. In this perspective, higher education has become functional rather than humanistic, with truth and justice being secondary concerns; thus, Mill's (1874, as quoted in the introduction of this article) fears have become fully embodied in the postmodern higher education environment. Education becomes an act of consumption that is mainly performative in nature.

The second perspective considers the positioning as subject/object, and focuses on the primacy of discourse. In this perspective, students are alienated because they enter preexisting discourses, cultures, and practices (cf. Boughey & McKenna, 2016; Gee, 2008). These position "students and lecturers in such a way that constrains how they may behave in relation to each other and the discourses they may engage in" (Mann, 2001, p. 10). Mann (2001, p. 11) further argued that "this has the potential to provoke [a] sense of estrangement and disorientation, of invisibility, voicelessness, and ineffectualness." As I argue later, however, I also think that alienation resulting from this new environment can have advantages in psychologically opening students up to the possibility of change, and to transformative learning (cf. Illeris, 2018).

The third perspective considers the student as outsider and is most relevant to students who could be considered "nontraditional." In the South African landscape, first-generation students and students from socially disadvantaged groups would typically make up the bulk of students considered nontraditional; what is more, these students also form the majority of student enrolments in South Africa (February, 2016). In this perspective, the student is compared to people having to cross borders to a foreign country, and to colonised peoples who not only have very little power themselves, but where those in power can impose their world views on the colonised. By not only validating but also

truly valuing the life experiences of students (especially those of nontraditional students whose life experiences are so often disregarded), and drawing on the knowledges and abilities they bring to the university (Yosso, 2005), students become subjects in their own learning, capable of enacting agency on the learning process.

The fourth perspective focuses on a loss of creativity, and juxtaposes a creative life to a compliant life. Mann (2001, p. 12) stated that “being in a situation where one’s self is not validated in good enough relationships and contexts leads to a loss of a sense of self, and of agency and desire.” She argued that students should be allowed a “formless experience” (Mann, 2001, p. 12) where neither too little nor too much support should be provided—to form a true, autonomous, and creative sense of self as opposed to what she termed a “false self,” which would likely lead to surface approaches to learning. Although higher education can be rigid in its expectations and conventions, there is a level of creativity that academics typically have access to, and which we can give students access to, through our curricula in that we can allow students at least some freedom in choosing research topics and in the ways they interact with these topics—being allowed to “play” within the confines of disciplinary demands.

The fifth perspective considers alienation as a result of a loss of ownership of the learning process. Mann (2001) considered assessed work produced by students as part of a system of exchange in which they lose ownership of the work in the process of exchange for a mark. Outcomes become the focus of education, rather than the process itself. Course designers should consider how a curriculum could facilitate and scaffold a learning experience that instills in students a sense of ownership in their work, and over the process of achieving outcomes.

The sixth perspective considers alienation due to assessment practices. Mann (2001) stated that examinations appoint values to students in relation to other students. When this is linked to failure, students may feel a poignant sense of alienation “from the product and processes of one’s work, from one’s sense of self and from others” (Mann, 2001, p. 15).

The seventh, and last, perspective on alienation considers alienation as a strategy for self-preservation. This is the only form of alienation that Mann (2001) considered to potentially be positive:

Learning has the potential to trouble, to offer a glimpse into chaos and disorder, and into the unknown. In many ways, it is much safer not to engage in it at all but to stay in the ordered world in which desire is repressed. (p. 15)

By not engaging in new learning, “the sense of self is not threatened, safety is maintained and unity is preserved” (Mann, 2001, p. 15). This sense of safety, unity, wholeness, however, is an illusion and thus, alienation as part of a growth and learning process becomes inevitable. Surface approaches to learning, however, can help in maintaining this illusion by causing minimal disruption to the student’s sense of self.

I want to expand on this seventh perspective. Not only is some sense of alienation in learning inevitable, but it could also be of great value for learning. As we enter new environments, alien to everything we knew and understood before, we are primed to change our ways of doing, believing, and being. We anticipate the unprecedented and consequently, we open ourselves up to learning and to reorganising our sense of self. This can be the case when moving to a new city or country, when undergoing a major health scare, when being forced into new domains (as we have all recently been forced into the domain of online learning), or when entering higher education or the workplace for the first time. I believe that these “points of entry” into new worlds are valuable learning opportunities

and that the extreme alienation that occurs during these periods open us up to radical jumps in learning, and in reconceptions of ourselves—what Illeris (2018) termed “transformative learning,” where “personality changes, or changes [occur] in the organisation of the self,” and which are

characterised by simultaneous restructuring of a whole cluster of schemes and patterns . . . a break of orientation that typically occurs as the result of a crisis-like situation caused by challenges experienced as urgent and unavoidable, making it necessary to change oneself in order to get any further. (p. 14)

This seventh perspective on alienation can also be linked to Meyer and Land’s (2005) conception of threshold concepts, if becoming a student or even becoming a novice teacher is viewed as a larger threshold. If students are guided towards this new sense of self into a new conceptual space at a point where they are primed to change, learning opportunities can be structured that have great potential to be “*transformative* (occasioning a significant shift in the perception of a subject), *irreversible* (unlikely to be forgotten, or unlearned only through considerable effort), and *integrative* (exposing the previously hidden interrelatedness of something),” while also being “troublesome” to students’ previous conceptions of themselves (Meyer & Land, 2005, pp. 373–374). Meyer and Land (2005, p. 374) argued that “as students acquire threshold concepts, and extend their use of language in relation to these concepts, there occurs also a shift in the learner’s subjectivity, a repositioning of the self.”

The ultimate aim of the project that will form the basis of the reconceptualised course is to create a carefully structured and scaffolded course that will prime students for a shift in subjectivity, “a repositioning of the self” (Meyer & Land, 2005, p. 374), while finding ways of mitigating the adverse effects of alienation through the process of action learning. Through this process of both mitigating and using alienation as part of the building blocks of the curriculum, drawing on both acquisition and participation (Sfard, 1998), the aim of the reconceptualised course is to create a learning environment that will encourage deep approaches to learning that will more likely result in students crossing the threshold (cf. Meyer & Land, 2005), and lead to students making identity shifts in terms of their conceptions of themselves as novice teachers.

A Description of the Original Course

The academic literacies course under discussion aims to equip first-year students with the literacy-related knowledge and skills they will need to navigate their own studies and their emerging identities as future teachers. This course considers the various literacies people can possess in various contexts. As the course progresses, it starts narrowing in on the use of academic literacies as well as subject-specific literacies. The outcomes of this course are 1) to analyse and evaluate the links between language, literacy, culture, and identity in the South African context, and 2) to read and write for academic purposes across the relevant disciplines in the BEd senior phase and FET phase (thus, high school) teaching curriculum, analysing and writing academic and nonacademic texts.

In its current format, the course focuses on various theoretical concepts related to literacy. The course attempts to link theory to students’ lived realities by continually asking students to relate these concepts to their own lives. It draws on sound pedagogical tools such as the use of portfolios and some group work. Despite efforts to make the course relevant to students’ lives, student feedback indicates that this is not sufficiently happening. In a recent course evaluation,² student feedback can clearly be linked to the themes of alienation and surface approaches to learning.

² Ethical clearance was obtained to use this student feedback for research purposes. As part of a larger research project titled “Developing engaged citizens in higher education through subject-integration and

Much of the feedback is indicative of a surface approach to learning, for example that the lecturer should teach “exam type questions” and “provide us with past paper[s] so that we may understand what is expected when writing exam[s]”—even though the subject currently relies on portfolios and not exam questions, and students are aware of this, indicating a longing for the safety of familiar traditional assessments. Students also requested that “the lecturer must provide slides” and “make weekly workshits [sic] easily understandable.” Several students requested that the lecturer uses “more quizzes and cancel the discussion forum”—thus, the one place where students were able to deeply engage with content, and discuss concepts with peers in the mode of online learning. This might be because some students felt that they “hardly receive any constructive criticism” in the discussion forums from peers, again indicating a lack of deep engagement from students.

Alienation, as discussed by Mann (2001), can be sensed from students in that many qualitative comments speak of “getting lost” and experiencing content as “a bit disjointed.” There is also a clear sense that students feel overwhelmed by the workload, dislike the assessment methods, feel the need for more handholding by the lecturer, and do not understand the purpose or value of the course. Several comments speak directly to the perspectives of alienation as proposed by Mann (2001).

The students’ apparent approaches to surface learning, as described above, speak to the first perspective of the postmodern sociocultural context in which higher education operates—that it has become entirely functional at the expense of humanistic elements, and that it is considered an act of consumption. Students want to tick boxes, prepare for answers, and produce “expected” and predictable work in a bartering process. The second perspective of alienation, highlighting the primacy of discourse in higher education, also emerges from student comments. Students indicated that content “was extremely confusing and unclear,” that they “COULDN’T UNDERSTAND SOME CONCEPTS,”³ and that the “content knowledge of this course was very challenging for me because I was struggling to understand it.” There were requests that the lecturer “should try to not use more complex concept,” indicating how alienated students felt by the new discourses we expect them to enter and acquire.

This is linked to the third perspective of students as outsiders when entering their higher education studies and their disciplines in general. The general feeling of being displaced is indicated by this student stating about the course that “most of its aspects [are challenging] and even *I cannot grasp everything that challenges me but im struggling* [emphasis added].” A feeling related to the fourth perspective, namely the loss of creativity, also emerges. The structures of academic writing are seen as alien, for example “writing the summative essay, as I struggle to piece the work together.” The lack of agency encompassed under this perspective also emerges in students stating that they “do not see how this will help me as a teacher or even building me towards becoming one.” This lack of agency emerges even more strongly in this student, who distances themselves from their own agency in saying that “I think everything was valuable saying that something was not valuable would be disrespecting the lecturer hard work of preparing the lessons.” This exaggerated respect for hierarchical structures robs students from their own agency, their sense of self, and their own creativity.

This again links strongly with the next perspective of alienation, namely the loss of ownership of the learning process. Students said of the course that it does not link “learning to my experience,” that

community-based learning” (under the NRF Thuthuka grant), students were asked to provide qualitative feedback by means of an online questionnaire on their experience of this iteration of the course at the end of 2021. Informed consent, indicating that responses could be anonymously reported on for research purposes, was obtained from each student.

³ It is unclear whether the capital letters are due to lack of computer literacy or due to the strength of this student’s feelings, but their use seems fitting in this context.

“the lecturer [should] use daily life experiences as examples to some topics,” and that aspects of the course “are not linked with how we can use them to our advantage in the classroom as future teachers.” One student said that “I still don’t understand how I can teach this course,” and another, poignantly, that “the lectures should stop bombarding students with a lot of work that we don’t even need, things should not be difficult for us because we are now studying to be in our profession.”

Several students indicated the sixth perspective, which is alienation due to assessment practices. One student felt that “fair marks” were not given, while another was frustrated because “though the instructions were easy, it was difficult for most of us to meet the requirements of the assessments.” Another student noted that “the weekly discussions did not feel relevant as while the lecturers were enforcing students to participate, only a few ever did participate and it felt like it was not needed,” while yet another felt that “the lecture must try to comment on everyone’s work during the discussion forum”—an impossible task in a massified education system with over 400 students in one course. Interestingly, several students positively linked to the final perspective of alienation, namely, that of a strategy for self-preservation, as these two students indicated: “Writing in an academic way or manner was the first challenge that I had with this course as it requires a lot of writing. However, I managed to try and adapt” and “The content was intellectually challenging which I believe is the whole point of a university module.”

The proposed reconceptualised course would rely on the principles of action learning to counter the approaches to surface learning that the course (as with many university courses) seems to engender. In addition, action learning will be proposed as a method of countering some of the perspectives of alienation discussed by Mann (2001), while fostering conditions in which these could be used for more engaged learning.

The Principles of Action Learning

Action learning underlies the proposed course discussed in this paper. Zuber-Skerritt (2011) defined action learning as

learning from and with each other in small groups or “sets” from action and concrete experience in the workplace or community situation. It involves critical reflection on this experience, as well as taking action as a result of this learning. It is a process by which groups of people address actual workplace issues or major real-life problems in complex situations or conditions. (pp. 5–6)

Action learning, as first conceived of by Reg Revans in the 1950s, is based on several core principles:

True empowerment of learners; minimum interference in the process by external expert facilitators; use of real problems that are of genuine difficulty and urgency; getting people out of their comfort zones by having them operate in unfamiliar settings and deal with unfamiliar problems; and reflecting throughout on these experiences and the assumptions behind their actions, including their implementation of solutions to the real problem addressed. (as cited by Dilworth, 2010, p. 3)

Zuber-Skerritt (2018) added that action learning, as it is conceived of today, is both individual and collaborative. Further principles of action learning as proposed by Zuber-Skerritt et al. (2020), are as follows. *Communication* between participants is key because this facilitates relationship building. Participants must be *committed* to the project, and take personal responsibility for the aims of the project. *Competence* is seen as gradually emerging from the learning process, and “building confidence involves helping people to identify their learning needs and finding ways to help them develop new

skills and competences, using talent within the learning set or bringing in expert help” (Zuber-Skerritt et al., 2020, p. 36). *Compromise* and *collaboration* are needed when working in small groups; negotiation and teamwork are inevitable to ensure a harmonious small-group environment. *Critical self-reflection* is key for participants to become aware of their own learning (thus enabling lifelong learning), and of how they as individuals influence the group process. *Coaching*, particularly among small-group members, allows participants to share expertise and experience (cf. Bourdieu’s, 2018, discussion of cultural capital and Yosso’s, 2005, conception of community cultural wealth).

Action learning, for the purpose of this course, is considered a more appropriate pedagogy than alternatives for various reasons. Figure 2, based on a review of problem-based learning and action learning literature by Scott (2017) and comparisons between problem-based learning and traditional learning by Hasna (2008) and Abdullah et al. (2019), provides a simplified comparison of three learning pedagogies, namely, traditional learning, problem-based learning, and action learning.

Figure 2

Three Types of Learning



As indicated by Scott (2017), although there are strong similarities between problem-based learning and action learning specifically, the main differences lie in the type of problem presented to students, the authenticity of the research problem, and the focus on reflection in each type of learning. Although both action learning and problem-based learning are centred around a problem, the problems posed in action learning tend to be more ill-structured; thus, they are typically not carefully constructed to

perfectly fit formal instruction. Further, the problems presented in action learning are always a real-life, workplace situated problem, instead of a hypothetical problem learners need to solve. Finally, reflection takes on a particularly important role in action learning. Not only do learners reflect on feedback received, they also reflect, both as individuals and as groups, on all aspects of the authentic learning experience to help them make sense of this experience. The affordance of authenticity, and the space for agential development that are inherent in action learning, were considered integral to this course to encourage students to take deeper approaches to learning, and to counter the negative types of alienation that students encounter in a higher education context that is often far removed from their lived realities. Scott (2017, p.11) further showed that action learning likely “improves motivation to learn and learning transfer because it uses real work problems.” Transfer is of vital importance in the field of academic literacy because, if students are unable to transfer what they learn in academic literacy classrooms to other contexts, there is arguably little value in academic literacy courses.

The term *action research* is closely related to action learning, in the same way that learning and research are related, and refers to the “systematic, rigorous, scrutinisable” acts of employing research methods to collect, analyse and verify data gathered from the learning process (Zuber-Skerritt, 2011, p. 6). This conceptional paper, as a first step in an action research process, focuses on how action learning could be harnessed towards encouraging students to engage in deep approaches to learning, as well as in countering adverse effects of alienation.

Reconceptualising the Academic Literacies Course To Foster Deep Approaches to Learning, and Counter Alienation

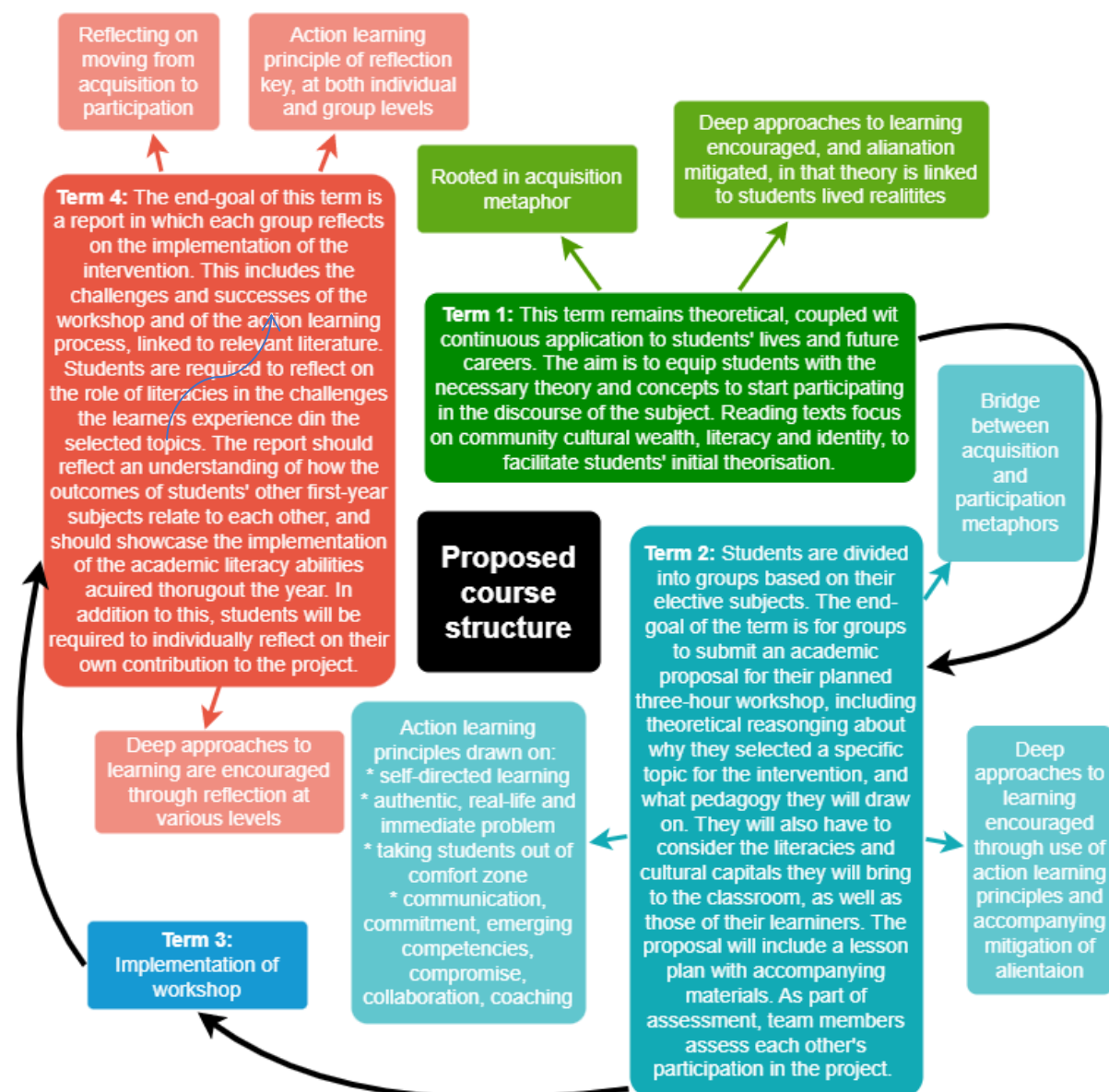
My aim over the next year, is to reconceive the course to be centred around project-based, socially embedded experiential learning, underpinned by action learning. The project will require first-year BEd students, in groups of four to five, to develop and implement a small-scale educational intervention in their respective major elective subjects for 13- to 17-year-old learners in resource-poor communities. Each group of students will, in the subject they plan to teach at high-school level, design a 3-hour workshop on a topic learners typically struggle with. To successfully implement this project, students will have to draw on the theory and academic literacy skills acquired in this course, a range of cultural capitals (cf. Yosso, 2005), as well as the learning outcomes of a variety of first-year education subjects. My plan for the reconceptualised course is indicated in Figure 3.⁴

Because students are likely to be resistant to a pedagogy they are unfamiliar with, it will be important to lay the groundwork in Term 1. The concept of action learning will be introduced to students, and discussions will be held about how action learning is different from the group work students were likely exposed to at school level. The course lecturer will present weekly lectures covering important theory, and will be supported by tutors who, in tutorial groups of 50 students each, will guide students as they develop their proposals and plan for their projects, as well as through the reflection process in Term 4. Peer questioning and reflection will be built into weekly tutorial sessions.

⁴ The course runs over the first, second, and fourth terms. In the third term, all BEd students participate in teaching experience. However, at first-year level students mainly participate in an on-campus theoretical component, in combination with observation of classes in schools.

Figure 3

Proposed Course Structure



The course structure indicated in Figure 3 allows students to move from the acquisition metaphor to the participation metaphor (cf. Sfard, 1998). It draws on the principles of action learning (cf. Zuber-Skerritt et al., 2020) in that small groups will work towards a communal tangible goal of implementing a workshop in a real-world setting that directly relates to their chosen careers as teachers. Competence will gradually emerge through a process of theorising, planning, implementing, and reflecting. Communication, collaboration, and compromise between group members will be essential in achieving this goal, and commitment will be encouraged through the personal accountability that will be weaved into the assessment procedure. Activities will be structured to facilitate in-group coaching (as well as coaching from lecturers and outside experts, as is needed). Finally, the project will culminate in a report that will centre around critical self-reflection. Group work will be employed to "practise and live by common values, such as inclusion, participation, collaboration, team/relationship building,

openness to new ideas, and trust to enhance mutual understanding through communication, debate, discussion, conversation, story-telling, and other participatory methods” (Zuber-Skerritt et al., 2020, p. 35).

The envisioned course has the potential of providing a disruptive space that will use the alienation experienced by students in their new environment to push them towards achieving learning outcomes that would otherwise be difficult to achieve. This will be done by changing the focus of the course to doing knowledge, rather than just having knowledge (Sfard, 1998). The aim is to encourage and facilitate deep approaches to learning at the transformative learning level (Illeris, 2018). I would like this project to be a catalyst that will lead to a change in the “organisation of the self” (Illeris, 2018, p. 14) in that students, from their first year of studies, will be able to view themselves as actors with agency who can already use a wide variety of resources including community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005), peers, and subject knowledge, to effect change in society—specifically in under-resourced settings. They are no longer high school learners who one day want to become teachers; instead, right from the start of their university careers, they become teachers who are studying towards more effective ways of teaching.

Approaches to deep learning will be promoted in several ways. Firstly, carefully planned group work will make students accountable to peers, and will allow them to share their strengths within the group while learning from others in areas where they experience challenges (cf. Zuber-Skerritt et al., 2020) because approaches to deep learning ideally happen socioculturally, and not in isolation (Hatano, 2013). Secondly, students will have to not only apply the outcomes of this course, but also the outcomes of their other first-year courses, both in relation to each other and in a novel socially embedded context—encouraging them to transfer knowledge and skills across both subject boundaries and the boundaries of the university itself (cf. Hatano’s, 2013, discussion of target knowledge being constructed and reconstructed, and used across domains). Thirdly, in their final report, students will have to critically reflect on how theory helped inform their practice, where the gaps were, and why challenges occurred. Thus, emerging knowledge is investigated, questioned, and critiqued, and students are encouraged to form new opinions based on new evidence (cf. Biggs, 1999). Students will be guided towards these outcomes in a carefully scaffolded manner that will elicit and demand increasingly critical responses from students (moving from acquiring knowledge to performing knowledge, as discussed by Illeris, 2018).

The proposed reconceptualised course further both draws on the potentially disruptive aspects of alienation, as discussed by Mann (2001), and mitigates the levels of alienation experienced. I have already addressed how I will draw on the disruptive aspects of alienation, related to the seventh perspective on alienation, to promote deep approaches to learning by using learning to cause discomfort, to “trouble, to offer a glimpse into chaos and disorder, and into the unknown” (Mann, 2001, p. 15). The first perspective on alienation discussed by Mann (2001) would be mitigated in that education becomes more humanistic. Students use their knowledge and resources to effect change in resource-poor communities. Education is no longer purely performative, but aims to achieve social cohesion and justice. The second perspective is mitigated in that, although students still move into preexisting structures with preexisting discourses, cultures, and practices, the preexisting role of passive student is challenged by allowing students to become teachers themselves, thus claiming agency. The third perspective, which considers the students as outsider, is mitigated in that their knowledges, life-experiences, and other types of community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) are drawn on and valued in the execution of this project in under-resourced contexts. In fact, many nontraditional students have first-hand knowledge of these contexts, and are thus able to add particular value in the conceptualisation of the project. The fourth perspective of the loss of creativity is mitigated by allowing students to play with, and experiment with, teaching and being teachers—and in how they choose to approach their respective projects. The fifth perspective on alienation, namely the loss of ownership

of the learning process, is mitigated in that at least one part of the product of students' learning, namely, the implementation of the intervention, happens and exists outside of the domain of the university. Students take ownership of their projects, and of their growing identities as teachers while contributing to social justice. The sixth perspective is mitigated in that assessment practices veer away from traditional examinations and essays, and that groups of students take collective responsibility for the outcomes of their assessment and partially assess each other. By creating connections between students themselves, between students' content knowledge in various subjects, between theory and practice, and between the university and the community, students' agency is foregrounded and alienation is countered.

With a project of this nature, there are of course several anticipated risks. Community work specifically is always risky. High school learners might not show up to sessions, or might not respond positively to sessions. Conflict between group members is likely to arise. Students might find it challenging to identify appropriate places and groups of learners for their workshops. With large groups such as this, it becomes difficult for the lecturer or tutor to micromanage and, of course, that would also go against the principles of action learning. Several unanticipated challenges are also likely to emerge. Through a process of action research, these will be addressed as they come up to ultimately work towards a sustainable project.

Conclusion

Sathorar and Geduld (2021, p. 100) suggested that researchers "must ask themselves *why* they want to" embark on community engagement projects before doing so. This conceptual paper aimed to partly answer this question: I want to present a subject to students that will make a difference; in which they will truly be engaged, and which will help them to link together their past selves (their lived experiences, their cultural community-wealth), their current selves (as first-year university students entering a new and alienating world), and their future selves (as aspirant teachers who will have the capacity of collectively impacting on multitudes of high school learners' lives). Zuber-Skerritt (2011: back cover) stated: "Learning does not mean to fill a barrel but rather to ignite a flame." Ironically, this ideal is arguably not that far from what Mill (1874, p. 334) believed universities should achieve, namely, "capable and cultivated human beings." Yet, as researchers in the field have indicated, it is entirely possible to work towards creating both "skillful" (cf. Mill, 1874, p. 334) professionals and capable humans who will work towards the greater good of society.

This article has contributed to the broader field of educational research as social change by indicating how one example of action learning could be harnessed to encourage deep approaches to learning and to mitigate the effects of alienation that students experience when they enter higher education. An advantage of the proposed reconceptualised course is that it does not require more resources than its more theoretical counterpart required. Furthermore, the project work will positively impact on surrounding under-resourced communities while igniting in students an understanding that they can be agents of change in the world beyond the boundaries of the university.

This project is ambitious, but ambition might be needed to change the status quo. It has the potential to guide students over the threshold of becoming teachers while addressing the historical challenges they have experienced in the course. The course has the potential to be "*transformative* (occasioning a significant shift in the perception of a subject), *irreversible* (unlikely to be forgotten, or unlearned only through considerable effort), and *integrative* (exposing the previously hidden interrelatedness of something)," while also being "troublesome" to students' previous conceptions of themselves (Meyer & Land, 2005, pp. 373–374). And this, ultimately, is what good teaching should enable.

Acknowledgement

This work was supported by the National Research Foundation of South Africa (Grant number 138300) as well as the University of the Witwatersrand's Teaching Development and Research Grant, under the project entitled "Developing Engaged Citizens in Higher Education Through Subject Integration and Community-Based Learning."

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