The Challenge of Diversity: Participation Rates in a Flexible Learner Support Programme

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Abstract

The present study reports the results of an investigation into the rates of participation among English first and second-language students in the different components of learner support system in the first-year Psychology programme at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, which has been designed to provide a hybrid mixed-mode offering, in which tutors play a crucial mediational role interacting with students to combine the flexibility of open learning and the essential learner support structures more typical of face-to-face delivery systems. The research results show that the differentiation of learner support offerings in an open system has been substantially effective in response to the challenge of diversity, that students who would ordinarily perhaps have remained anonymous in a large class or even in workshop sessions, developed strong relationships with tutors, and that it is imperative that the focus remains on developing students' autonomous academic engagement as opposed to setting up relationships of dependency between tutors and students.

Introduction

The challenge for post-apartheid South African higher education institutions *is to deliver* quality education for all students. However, the manifest

inequities under the apartheid system and continuing resource limitations in the provision of schooling, means that entrants to universities have had very diverse preparation for higher education study and, hence, have wide-ranging learning needs and expectations. The task, therefore, is to create learning opportunities that will both benefit and challenge this highly heterogeneous student body, facilitating optimal learning for all students. In this process, it is imperative to radically re-evaluate our existing conventional educational operations. 'South Africa's transition from apartheid and minority rule to democracy requires that all existing practices, institutions and values are viewed anew and rethought in terms of their fitness for the new era' (Higher Education White Paper 3 1997: 3).

Although the impetus for curriculum transformation is particularly urgent in response to the extreme inequalities of South Africa's educational history, similar demands are emerging throughout the higher education sector globally in the 21st century (e.g., Dill & Sporn 1995; Hannan, English & Silver 1999; Northedge 2003a; Radford 1997). Increasing access for nontraditional students (Biggs 1999; Matiru 1987; Northedge 2003a) and the changing terrain of intellectual and vocational work (Biggs 1999; Dill & Sporn 1995) mean that "business as usual" in higher education is simply no longer a tenable option. The traditional teaching approach with an emphasis on the transmission of information in the lecture format and reliance on independent reading by students seems starkly inappropriate for meeting these contextual demands. On the one hand, this conventional approach homogenizes the learning process by assuming adequate preparation for independent study. In reality, the paucity of previous learning opportunities for many students means that they lack the appropriate critical frameworks and skills for autonomous task engagement. On the other hand, the lecture mode negates the express aim of university study to develop critical, active learners by (ostensibly) positioning students in a passive role. Conventional face-to-face classroom-based education assumes the presence of a teacher as the necessary link between students and knowledge with teaching conceptualised as the transfer of knowledge 'from one vessel to another' (Fox 1983: 151). This view of students as passive recipients of imparted knowledge is at odds with both national development priorities and epistemological imperatives (Northedge 2003b; Williams 2005) in the context of the rapidly changing demands of the global economy.

The development of an "open learning" system utilizing mixed modes of delivery offers one possibility for addressing such wide-ranging demands in tertiary education. In conceptualizing a new framework for curriculum development, it is instructive to distinguish between the terms "open learning" and "distance education" that are often used interchangeably. "Distance education" refers to the process of studying by correspondence and reflects its origins as a non-contiguous method of educational communication in which proximal contact between teacher and learner is restricted (Hodgkinson 1994; Rumble 1992; Holmberg 1989). On the other hand, "open learning" primarily refers to issues of educational access. The focus is on unimpeded access to education that aims to surmount past conventional barriers such as pre-qualifications, age limits, geographic isolation, financial constraints and work timetables (Clark 1995; Jevons 1990; Rumble 1992; SAIDE 1995, 1999). Although the delivery systems of traditional correspondence courses may be said to address some of these open learning imperatives (notably the problems of geographic isolation or the time problems associated with studying while working), some aspects of a distance mode may, in fact, *limit* rather than facilitate open access. In particular, the isolation and lack of support afforded distance students may make the learning process extremely difficult.

Open learning programmes are first and foremost, student-centred, emphasizing individual flexibility with respect to the time, place and pace of learning (Holmberg 1989; Rumble 1992; Telford 1995) but also providing a range of learner support offerings. Because the approach incorporates various delivery systems (in particular, utilizing those modes most often associated with distance education, such as print and other media), it allows for the massification of learning opportunities that is imperative in a democratizing context. However, the simultaneous emphasis on creating a learner support infrastructure recognizes the value of interaction with other learners (perhaps even simply for very important motivational support, Cartney & Rouse 2006) and the particular mediational role of a teacher who may direct learners' engagement in ways that may not easily be discoverable independently. As Biggs argues, 'Good teaching is getting most students to use the higher cognitive level processes that the more academic students use spontaneously' (1999: 4). The emphasis on learner initiative in utilizing

these support offerings ensures that students who require help have access to it, without hindering the progress of those that do not require the same amount of assistance.

The development of a curriculum for the first-year Psychology programme at the University of KwaZulu-Natal was designed to provide a hybrid mixed-mode (Garrison & Shale 1990; Smith 1987; Telford 1995) offering, combining the flexibility of open learning and the essential learner support structures that are perhaps more typical of face-to-face delivery systems. The development of text-based learning materials ensures that the course is open and accessible for a very large group of students (usually approximately 500 students in any given cohort). However, the central role afforded these materials means that the quality of textual design becomes paramount. Rather than providing the usual introduction to the discipline typical of first-year textbooks, these texts have been written by the module teachers with the learning needs of students (and especially underprepared students) in mind. The materials attempt not only to introduce students to the content of the discipline but, also, through tasks and written feedback to initiate them into appropriate forms of academic engagement (Bradbury & Griesel 1994). In this way, the texts function as second-order mediators of the learning process (Miller 2003), their structured design making the usually concealed characteristics of textuality overt and initiating readers into new ways of constructing understandings. However, despite the educational possibilities of such purposeful materials development, the provision of responsive learner support is viewed by many (including teachers and learners) as crucial to the success of an open learning system (Rumble 1992; SAIDE 1995, 1999; Telford 1995). In the initial phase (1995 – 1998) of implementation, the Psychology I programme was heavily reliant on delivery of the materials through a compulsory weekly workshop system and the results of this process have been extensively documented (see Miller et al. 1997, 1998, 1999a, 1999b, 2000, & 2001).

Perhaps the greatest challenge facing tutors in the implementation of this process lay in addressing highly heterogeneous learning needs in the group sessions. It became evident that the provision of a homogenous compulsory support system was unnecessary for those students who were confident in working independently with the materials and, conversely, was insufficient for those students struggling most with the task demands. In

response, the programme was adapted, increasing and differentiating the support offerings, and emphasizing student initiative in elective participation. In this restructured form, the programme provides a range of voluntary learner support offerings; structured group workshops on each module and less structured individualized daily help sessions addressing both academic and non-academic issues. It was considered particularly important to include opportunities for support and assistance with issues not strictly course-related, as there is a widely accepted view that broader psychological concerns, including various kinds of personal problems, may substantially impinge on the development of students' learning potential. The present study aims to investigate the rates of participation in the different components of learner support system, for English first and second-language students and across student academic performance levels.

Method

Participants

The participants in the study were the entire enrolled class of 502 students in Psychology I at then University of Natal, Durban in 1999, of whom 385 were English first-language speakers (L1) and 117 were English second-language speakers (L2). The mother tongue of the second language speakers was one of the official African languages. Whether or not students were mother tongue speakers of English in South Africa in the nineties was a relatively accurate indicator of the level of schooling preparation they had been afforded under the apartheid system, in which Black African L2 speakers of English were severely discriminated against.

Design

The provision of learner support was considered pivotal to the success of the programme and, therefore, structured group workshops were conducted dealing with material for each of the four modules of the course (Introduction to Psychology, Evolution, Intelligence, and Personality). In addition, daily help sessions during the lunch hour ensured that students could obtain ongoing individual attention. These help sessions provided

differentiated forms of assistance: tutoring dealing with issues directly related to the course, (for example, specific conceptual difficulties or the requirements of tasks, assignments and examinations) and consultation about more general academic issues of adjustment to university demands (for example, reading academic texts, time management, note-taking in lectures) and personal problems that might be impinging on students' academic performance. Attendance at both workshops and help sessions was recorded along with some descriptive information; students' identification details, problems presented, the tutor's response or strategy to overcome the problem and an assessment of the student's engagement and progress. Attendance at help sessions was categorized as low for 1-4 sessions; medium for 5-9 sessions; and high for 10 sessions or more.

Attendance rates were analysed in combination with performance data derived from official university records. Categories of academic performance were defined as follows: F = 0%-49%; PIII = 50%-59%; PII = 60%-67; PI = 68%-100%. Comparisons were made between L1 and L2 students across categories of performance, workshop attendance, and help session attendance.

Results

Rates of participation in the various components of the learner support for English first-language students (L1) and English second-language students (L2) were examined in relation to student performance. The performance profile of the whole class is presented in Figure 1. The figure reflects the proportion of L1 (N = 385) and L2 students (N = 117) who obtain final grades in each of the following categories: <50% (F), 50-59% (PIII), 60-67% (PII), >67% (PI). The patterns of performance for L1 and L2 students are similar but vary at the extreme ends of performance, with a failure rate of 35% for L2 and 19% for L1 students. Conversely, only 15% of L2 compared with 27% of L1 students obtain marks in the high (PI) category. In the two intermediate categories (PIII & PII) the performance of the L1 and L2 students is very similar as can be seen on Figure 1:

**Figure 1: Performance of L1 & L2 students**
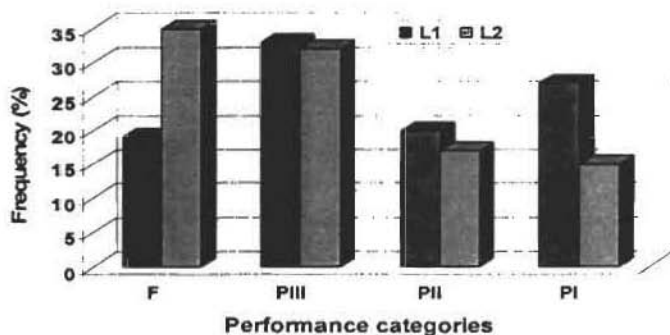
The uneven success rate of L1 and L2 students, reflected in Figure 1, is clearly indicative of heterogeneous learning needs among the students. It was in response to these needs that the various components of learner support, such as workshops and individual help sessions, were offered. Figure 2 presents the proportion of L1 (N =3 85) and L2 (N = 117) students who participated in one, two, three, four, or none of the 4 workshops offered.

Figure 2: Profile of student participation in workshops
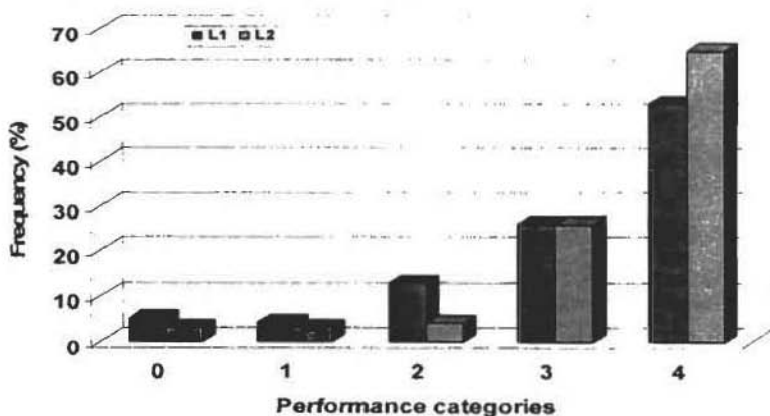
From Figure 2 it is evident that only a small proportion of the students in both groups failed to attend any of the workshops (L1 = 5%; L2 = 3%) and an equally small number attended only one workshop (L1 = 4%; L2 = 3%). The large majority of students did make good use of the workshops and attended either three (L1 = 26%; L2 = 26%) or four (L1 = 53%; L2 = 65%) sessions. Focusing on variation in final performance, rather than language group, in relation to workshop attendance produces a more differentiated picture. In Figure 3 the proportions of all the students (L1 and L2 combined), within each of the levels of workshop attendance (0, 1, 2, 3, 4), are presented across the performance categories (F, PIII, PII, PI).

Figure 3: Student performance in relation to workshop attendance
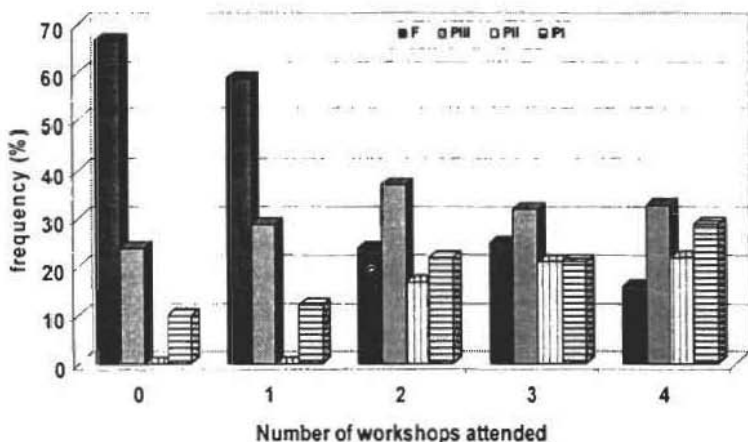
The failure rates are substantially different between the students who attended all four workshops (16%) and those who did not attend any workshops (67%). Although not as high, the failure rate for students who attended only one workshop is also substantially higher (59%) than for students attending more than one workshop. Given the drop in the failure rate for attendance at more than one workshop (2 = 24%; 3 = 25%; 4 = 16%) the indication is that at least minimal engagement with the course, as expressed in workshop participation, has a notable impact on possibilities for

success. Furthermore, high performance appears to be related to levels of workshop attendance, with 29% of students who attend all 4 workshops achieving marks in the upper second or first class range (PI) with only 10% of students who never attended any workshops attaining this same level of performance. However, this small group of students who attended no workshops yet still obtained high grades overall, is indicative of a group of bright students who can move swiftly and independently through their work and who may in fact be hindered by other students who require assistance. It is in these instances that the beneficial mechanisms of an 'open-learning' system can be seen in operation. However, these results do seem to indicate that participation in this structured learner support programme is of benefit to the majority of students.

Figure 4 presents the participation rates for the less structured daily help sessions. For each performance category, the proportions of L1, and L2 students, and L1 and L2 combined (ALL), who attended at least one of the help sessions (ATD) as well those who did not attend any sessions (NATD), are presented in Figure 4.

FIGURE 4: Student attendance at help sessions
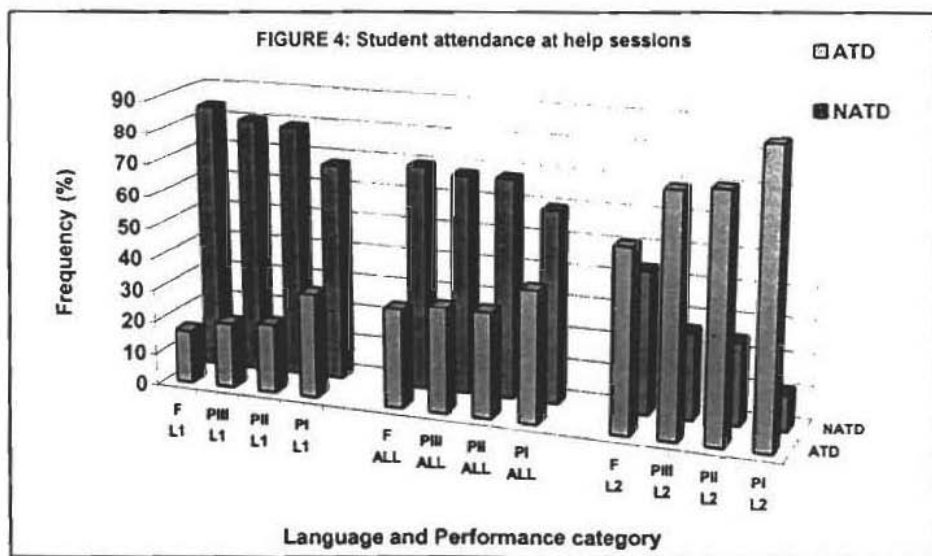
Participation rates in this form of learner support were generally lower than in the more structured workshop sessions with only 34% of the students (N = 169) in the class (N = 502) attending help sessions at all. However, as is evident from Figure 4, the participation rates for the class as a whole (ALL) masks the striking difference between the participation rates of L1 and L2 students. Across all performance categories, Figure 4 clearly illustrates that the participation rates for L2 students is far higher than for L1 students. Whereas participation rates for L2 students range from 56% for failing (F) students to 89% for the high achieving (PI) L2 students, participation in the help sessions by L1 students ranges from 16% for failing students to 32% for the high performers.

Although the participation rates are very different between the two groups, there is a similar tendency for higher levels of participation to be associated with higher performance. In addition, it is worth noting that for L2 students the participation of failing students (56%) is considerably lower than the high level of participation for L2 students in all of the passing categories (PIII = 74%, PII = 75% and PI = 89%).

In Figure 5 this general pattern of participation in the help sessions is further differentiated in terms of low, medium, and high attendance. Low refers to attendance at 1-4 sessions, medium to attendance at 5-7 sessions, and high to attendance at 8 or more sessions. Figure 5 presents the frequency of help session attendance by L1 and L2 students within the different performance categories.

FIGURE 5: Frequency of help session attendance within language and performance categories
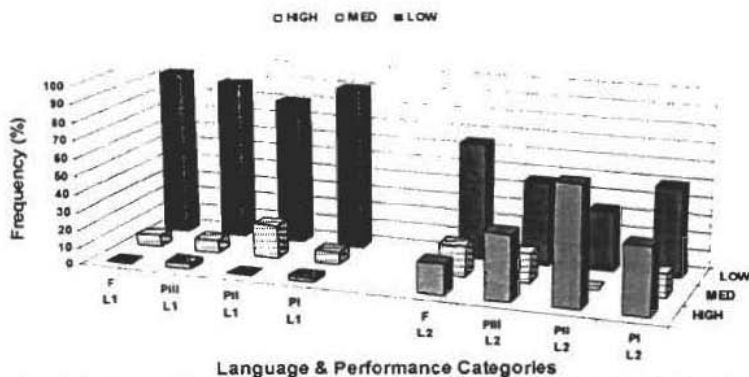
Figure 5 illustrates a major difference in the frequency of attendance between L1 and L2 students. Of the small number of L1 students who utilised the help sessions at all, attendance was low for the vast majority in all the performance categories, and very few made frequent use of the facility. Further, for L1 students, attendance at the help sessions does not appear to have any bearing on performance. For the L2 students the attendance pattern varies and frequency of attendance does appear to be related to performance. High frequency of attendance was recorded for 17% of L2F whereas across the other performance categories, there was a substantial increase in high levels of attendance (37% of L2 PIII; 67% of L2 PII; 38% of L2 PI). In particular, the high attendance (67%) recorded among L2PII students is noteworthy.

Discussion

The analysis of these data suggests that an open learning support system offers innovative possibilities for differentiating the learning-teaching experience in response to heterogeneous students' needs. Discrepancies in the performance of L1 and L2 students in Psychology I indicate that the effects of apartheid schooling continue to be felt in the higher education sector. The various components of the learner support system were utilized more highly by L2 students and the higher the level of participation, the better the performance for this group of students.

The majority of all students attended the structured workshop sessions, although participation of L2 students was slightly higher than L1 students. Structured group interactions may be a familiar and accessible learning format for students making the transition between school and university. Participation in the workshop system is clearly associated with performance, with the majority of students who attended no workshops or only one workshop, failing the course. In contrast, the majority of those who participated more regularly in the workshops passed the course, with the highest pass rate among those who attended all four workshops. Although it is not possible to establish a direct causal connection between the learning-teaching that occurred in the workshops and students' performance, these results strongly suggest that participation is linked with successful

engagement. The workshops were highly structured and run by tutors who had been effectively trained to work with the course materials and, particularly, to mediate the task demands of university study. While this mediation is sure to have had direct benefits for learners, it is also likely that students who make the effort to attend workshops are more diligent in working with the materials independently and, therefore, attendance may be an indicator of general engagement with the course. Interestingly, there is a small group of students (10% of the class) who attend no workshops at all and yet achieve high marks. This indicates the value of a flexible system; these students are clearly able to work independently through the text-based tasks and have no need of further direct mediation.

Participation in the more flexible daily help sessions was far lower than in the more structured workshops with only a third of the students attending help sessions at all. However, while this may initially seem to indicate that this form of learner support is less appropriate than the workshop system, focusing on the participation of the class as a whole obscures the very different patterns of participation of L1 and L2 students. Across all performance categories, the majority of L2 students utilized the help sessions at some point during the course. Further, while the minimal use that L1 students did make of the help sessions bears little relation to final performance, this is not the case with L2 students. Higher performance for L2 students is associated with frequent use of the help sessions. In particular, the most frequent use of the help session system was recorded for L2PII students. This result is encouraging in that it suggests that the system seems to benefit those students who need it most. Further, more than simply passing, these students are obtaining solid second class passes indicating that a firm academic foundation has been laid.

To conclude, the differentiation of learner support offerings in an open system has been substantially effective in response to the challenge of diversity. However, some qualification of this assessment is necessary. There is a need for further qualitative work to assess the quality of learning-teaching interactions that occur in both workshops and individual help sessions. Informal feedback from students themselves indicates that they find the workshops very helpful, think they should be offered more often and, surprisingly, that they should be compulsory! It is possible that a more extensive structured workshop system would negate the necessity for the

more resource intensive help session system. However, where L2 students made frequent use of the help sessions, the benefits of this highly flexible and responsive format are evident in their performance. There were other less measurable but nonetheless, tangible, benefits. While the original intention in the design of support offerings was to address personal problems in specific sessions, this separation of personal and academic issues proved artificial. However, students who would ordinarily perhaps have remained anonymous in a large class or even in workshop sessions, developed strong relationships with tutors, gaining an almost personal introduction to the academy. Whatever the form of support offered, it is imperative that the focus is on developing students' autonomous academic engagement as opposed to setting up relationships of dependency.

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