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Shifting from disorientation to orientation: Reading student discourses of success

Abstract

Academic success in higher education is generally evaluated by means of concrete and measurable criteria that function as an institutional discourse of success. However, a parallel discourse of success that is far less evident is the languaging and identification of success or failure that students hold and circulate. This paper investigates what counts as success from students' perspectives using a critical lens informed by Stuart Hall's discursive analysis and James Gee's inclusive articulation of discourse. We argue that students tend to describe and evaluate their success in a consistent way, making it more than a highly individualised set of statements. Being well versed in terms of "what counts" for the institution, we consider "what counts" for the students: what do they endorse, contest or negotiate as markers of success?

We subsequently tease out the similarities and distinctions in these two discourses that function in parallel and read the recurring themes and nuances of (dis)orientation that come through in the interviews as markers for an alternative discourse of success or failure that stands alongside of (and occasionally in opposition to) the institutional discourse.

Keywords: *Student-centred, discourses of success, legitimization, higher education, orientation, disorientation.*

1. Introduction

Academic success in higher education is generally evaluated by means of concrete and measurable criteria. As lecturers, much of our work is bound up in regulating and assessing students against the requirements of the institution. The markers of the discipline, the level of study and the institutional standards operate as an explicit set of criteria and are manifest as a student passing or failing and eventually, graduating or not. As we explain, these criteria function as an institutional discourse of success. However, a parallel discourse of success that is far less evident is the languaging and identification of success or failure that students hold and circulate.

In this paper, we investigate what counts as success from students' perspectives. This is read against the backdrop of current tensions and fractures within South African higher education and in particular, the need for transformation of campuses to feel inclusive and allow

for an experience of belonging. To this end we use a critical lens informed by Stuart Hall's discursive analysis and James Gee's inclusive articulation of discourse that sees it as "ways of being, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, and often reading and writing that are accepted as instantiations of particular roles" (Gee, 1996: viii) to read students' perspectives of success. Discourses of success are acts of legitimation that regulate what is said, done and what counts in a given system. University success and failure exist within a system bounded by rules of hierarchy and distinction, which have implicit and explicit power relations. These rules set up what is an allowable activity for any given actor as well as who determines what constitutes legitimate performances.

In the case of our research, the institutional discourse functions with the full weight of legitimation whereas the students' discourse is less well understood, explicit or the object of study. Nevertheless, we argue that students tend to describe and evaluate their success in a consistent way, making it more than a highly individualised set of statements. Being well versed in terms of "what counts" for the institution, we wanted to discover "what counts" for the students, what do they endorse, contest or negotiate as markers of success? In addition, we wanted, to tease out the similarities and distinctions in these two discourses that function in parallel.

Our enquiry is based on a series of interviews with students just before graduating from their four-year professional arts degree. We framed the interviews as an opportunity for the participants to reflect on their successes and struggles. We found that their descriptions and characterisations of success revealed a shift from initial disorientation towards a growing sense of orientation within the institution. At first glance it seems unremarkable that students would become increasingly knowledgeable about and familiar with the institution after four years of study, however, what we find significant is that this quality of becoming orientated registers as *equally* or *more* significant than the institutional ways of measuring success. We read the recurring themes and nuances of (dis)orientation that came through in the interviews as markers for an alternative discourse of success or failure that stands alongside of (and occasionally in opposition to) the institutional discourses.

2. Orientation and legitimation

Traditionally, success and orientation are strongly associated in the institution's own logic. A student's introduction to higher education is usually through a formal orientation process. A useful orientation programme facilitates efficient adoption of and adaption to the institutional practices and processes. Orientation programmes recognise that the codes of the institution are not self-evident and essential, although they may be normalised and naturalised to the point of invisibility. Furthermore, orientation is tied to legitimation. The intent and practices of an orientation programme make visible those practices and conventions of social and academic behaviour that the institution considers legitimate. Generally, orientation programmes last for approximately a week before the start of term. The focus is on survival skills such as finding venues, accessing resources, troubleshooting administrative problems and plenty of socialising. The institutional frame of reference for orientation is functional, instrumentalised and geared towards efficiency.

Despite the overlap in terminology, this is not how we use the concept of orientation. For our participants, the project of finding orientation took considerably longer than a week, was imbricated in their sense of identity and was often a painful one. Its opposite state,

disorientation, is personally and socially distressing. Given how critical the idea of orientation is from a student's perspective, we will argue that finding orientation is in many ways analogous with success and we find this productive for understanding student success in ways more broadly imagined than from the institutional point of reference. We found that the example of successful practices and identities expressed by the participants as "finding their way" or "finding their feet" aligned closely with Leibowitz, van der Merwe and van Schalkwyk's (2009: 4-5) idea of the successful student as one who "whilst responsive to others and society, takes responsibility for his or her own development. Success is characterised by a combination of disposition, attitude and strength, in order to learn *how* to learn".

We must caution however, that as consistent and plausible as we have found the links between orientation and success to be in student discourse, this initial study was conducted with a small sample group from a narrowly scoped cohort of performing arts students. For our conclusions to be valid more generally, they would need to be tested with a more carefully constituted sample.

3. A pilot for in-depth orientation

In 2009, we piloted a first-year orientation programme. In this project, we invited all incoming first year students in the department to participate in a programme that ran across the 14 weeks of the first and second semesters. This programme was structured as an orientation for the students towards each other (by means of sharing biographies and backgrounds and group discussions of values and anxieties) and an orientation towards the university and its resources (library, writing support centre, student health and counselling services). The sessions also focused on the soft skills for coping with university life (time management, goal setting) as well as the basics of academic skills such as referencing, essay topic analysis, basic planning and writing techniques to help with their first assignments.

As part of the monitoring and evaluation requirements of the funding, we conducted various evaluations, including a feedback and reflection debriefing session conducted via a focus group.¹ On the one hand, the anonymous data from the focus groups reported that participants regarded the programme as valuable, as having given them an advantage in their studies and as something they would recommend as having contributed to their success. However, analysis from the evaluations at the middle and end of the year found no significant differences in pass rates or submission rates for this group in comparison to the rest of the first-year student cohort from which they were drawn.

We took students at their word and accepted their constructions of self as successful, whilst reading this in juxtaposition with the academic records, which showed a rather different picture of success. With this as a starting point, it became clear that we had two discourses in operation, not incompatible or incommensurate, but nevertheless operating under different terms and values of legitimation. We remained curious as to what this tension between discourses was premised on and, as a follow up, at the end of 2012 we invited students who had been involved in the pilot research project to participate in one-on-one semi-structured interviews. With some students on the verge of completing their degrees, we asked them to reflect on their degree journey thus far in light of their perceptions of success, identity and relations to knowledge and the discipline.

¹ The focus group was facilitated by members of the humanities faculty teaching and learning unit who were unknown to the participants and had no involvement in the project. Their responses were de-identified before being passed along to us as the coordinators of the programme.

In the end, we had six usable interviews. Not all of the participants who responded positively to the request for an interview were completing their studies in the minimum time of four years. However, we did note that of the students asked to participate, positive responses came from those who had been, by the institutional quantitative measure, more successful in their studies. We used discourse analysis to explore the students' own constructions and discourses of legitimacy. We traced how these differed from and adhered to the institutional logic of success that is manifest in the discourses of "passing", "failing", "mark scores", "time to graduation", "top of the class" and so on.

4. Hall and discourse

Hall's (1996) use of discourse within the broader cultural studies context refers to ways of representing and constructing knowledge about topics as well as ways of producing knowledge that have the potential to prescribe or limit how knowledge is produced. In our study, we used Hall's ideas on discourse to examine the ways in which students identified and used language to produce meaning and knowledge about what it means to be successful within the academic institution. As such, the statements students utter, the resultant positions they take up and the ongoing ways in which they offer reflections on their experience in the institution are all reviewed from the interviews conducted with students.

It is our contention that in identifying the various thematic locations students occupy in terms of the overall ideas of orientation and disorientation, we are able to infer that the various markers of success identified by students are not always those identified by the university but they certainly are parallel and in certain instances, complementary.

Hall (1996: 201) suggests that discourse does not merely consist of one statement but rather several working together implying a relation to each other and as such, discourse is about the "production of knowledge through language". What students say reflects how they are situating themselves as students who have passed through and met the criteria of the institution and, as a result see themselves as successful and having achieved orientation. For Foucault, as Hall describes, discourses can be produced by many individuals in different institutional settings (1996: 202) and these discourses construct positions from which they alone make sense (*ibid*). In our analysis, we consider the discursive formations constructed by students regarding disorientation and orientation and the manner in which they contribute to or differ from the parallel markers of success within the academic institution.

Hall (1996: 202) also recognises that discourses are not closed systems – they operate as networks of meaning in which traces of past discourses remain embedded in ones that are more recent. For our study, it became clear that even though students are developing parallel markers of success within the institution, there is often an overlap with the institutional criteria for success. The discourses are therefore associated and appear to be in the process of developing.

Statements within discursive formations need not all be the same, although the relationships and differences between them "must all be regular and systematic, not random" (Hall 1996: 202). In our reading of the interview transcripts, it was not unusual to have students express seemingly contradictory statements about their own perceptions of how successful they had been. These "contradictions", however, appeared to be in keeping with the self-reflexivity students engaged in when considering their experiences.

5. Surfacing legitimization through discourse

Our coding of the interview transcripts revealed three thematic areas related to our interest in legitimization and discourses of success. Broadly, we were able to identify a number of discourses related to types of orientation, types of disorientation and the shifts that occurred for students between these two states. We also identified a number of metaphors that students used to articulate some of their perceptions of the shifts that they had undergone.

These uses of language guided our thematic analysis of the transcriptions with our overall thematic interest being on aspects of success, legitimacy and perception in relation to traditional markers of academic success.

6. Discourses of (dis)orientation

Spatial disorientation and metaphors

In each of the interviews, students described what we term 'initial discourses of disorientation' – whether in terms of resources, shared experiences, diverse people or environments. This was largely evidenced in the use of marked language where students were explicitly recalling uncertainty and anxiety as first years. Their disorientation occurred in terms of the spatial, temporal, academic and social experiences students underwent.

Students articulated their disorientation in terms of the difficulties they experienced in getting around campus, finding their classes and fitting into new social groups. However, beyond the prosaic questions of where and when classes were held and whether students were able to navigate these spaces, our participants employed metaphoric language to express their sense of disorientation. Many of these metaphors were based on ideas of spatiality and place, as though the experience of being at university was demarcated as another country for which they did not have maps and which they did not know how to traverse. For example, phrases such as "I shouldn't be here", "I remember being lost", "you needed to find your feet", "it was such a big leap", "there were so many gaps" speak of a treacherous landscape. What is more, phrases such as "being left behind" and "everyone had already started" suggest participants perceived that others in their cohort were not disorientated and that in this new landscape the rest of the group was managing the journey. Some of the participants recalled their experience of disorientation as profoundly distressing and used the language of survival and dissociation, "it was just like an out of the body experience for me", "you needed to survive".

When probed for more information about what underpinned this disorientation, students again used metaphors related to missing "foundations" and "grounding", with the allied feelings of being untethered and precarious. In particular, this disorientation stemmed from not knowing what counts, what was central and what was required,

In first year the leap was just ... it was such a big leap because obviously ... it just felt like this big gap I just felt like my grounding was not enough, I didn't feel like there was support enough for that transition from high school to here and now studying so I did feel a huge gap but then my marks were good but like in terms of my perception of it I didn't feel like the courses were going well.

Thus despite obtaining good marks (the institutional marker of success), this student's own experience was one of disorientation and uncertainty. This recurred a number of times, with participants itemising a cacophony of disorientation in relation to systematic requirements of the institution, administration processes and systems, how the institutional system measures

and assesses course work, what the expectations and assumptions of professional degrees and training are and overall what higher education contexts were like and required, as the statements below attest.

... you learn through the marks but you don't understand where the marks come from...

I really didn't understand the context was different, and the content I didn't understand and a lot of the films I didn't understand...

I was so scared, I didn't want to speak to anybody, I had no idea what was going on...

Participants characterised a major contributing factor to this disorientation as the affective experiences of having to modify the perception of oneself radically and sometimes abruptly, as evidenced in this quote:

When you come from high school you think "I am the cream of where I am" and then you come here and the competition is crazy and you, ... you just feel "Oh my goodness I feel so worthless! I shouldn't be here..."

Some students experienced further shifts from naivety and overconfidence to being overwhelmed, especially by a sense of being overtaken by a new environment such as the city.

It feels like you came here as this naive girl in the big city and OK I am big where I come from and you come here and everybody is just rolling on with life ...

A number of the participants identified plagiarism as a specific manifestation of this academic disorientation. Often formulated as remembered anxiety and bewilderment, students seemed to feel that their failures to be academically literate or to understand academic expectations resulted in plagiarism and its consequences: "Oh! I had anxieties because we didn't know much especially because we were used to essays without referencing ..."

Another student noted, "[I] didn't understand, didn't understand, didn't understand – I was just like Googling ..." in her attempt to find [academic] orientation. Here we see how the student tries to solve the problem of understanding the required material by finding online sources and in so doing creates another problem. Her particular use of language is also noteworthy – Google becomes the antidote to her disorientation. Using a similar metaphor of place or home that recurs in a number of our participants' comments, Angéllil-Carter (2014) describes the student's first frustrated and overwhelmed encounter with the expectations and practices of academia as squatting. Students are forced "to live in the discourses of academia without owning them" (Angéllil-Carter, 2014: 29) and the tension of working in an academic language that is marked by "its very *embeddedness* in a context, and the lack of embeddedness of the novice writer" (*ibid*: 26). We interpret these ideas of a precarious sense of place, a lack of embeddedness in the practices and language of the institution and the perception that one's foundations are as insecure as characteristics of disorientation.

7. Finding orientation

In the second part of the interview, participants were asked how they would describe themselves in terms of what they did well and what they were still struggling with at the end of their four years of study. Some explicitly described themselves as successful, in terms of meeting university expectations and by their own standards. Statements such as these indicate some of the ways in which students said they had been able to achieve what we term

“successful orientation” where this is marked by expressions of self-confidence in knowing “what counts” and being able to rationalise their own performance in relation to these personal criteria and values. There were also instances where students employed metaphors and analogies to explain their experience of success and legitimation.

We were able to identify numerous types of orientation that pertained to the spatial and temporal orientation students were able to achieve. Some students also expressed orientation in terms of being able to identify and understand how to be strategic and negotiate different demands of academic life. Students identified themselves as being successful when they were able to be strategic about their work and were able to prioritise, plan and manage their workloads. This we note intersects with the institutional markers of success.

Students further identified orientation as taking place parallel to, and not just via, the formal curriculum as seen in this example, below:

[A]t the time it looks like there is no support but actually there is a lot of support. There is a lot of consultations that we never really use and the more you get back marks the more you think: “you robbed me of my marks”. Then you realise more and more through consultations and just talking and just making friends. I think having the right people who are doing the course has really been helpful, you find people who are really passionate about what they are doing...

Here the participant reflects on how success emerged through engagement with the formal channels of feedback and legitimation but perhaps more significantly by modelling, observing and participating in a group with which she shares associations and aspirations. Also significant is the participant’s insight that part of the disorientation of being new to a system means failing to recognise the support resources that exist. Part of the daze the participants describe included the struggle to distinguish between requirements of their various courses (tutorials and lectures for example) and support systems (voluntary reading groups or writing support services).

This particular observation went some way into explaining how, as lecturers and to our ongoing frustration, we have watched the very students most in need of support and additional resources fail to access or derive benefit from them. Our participants describe a scenario where it is precisely the level of disorientation they experienced that inhibits finding and using resources to assist with gaining the traction necessary to “find one’s feet” or “leap the gap” in this new terrain. While the institutional response is often to provide more resources and more information about accessing these resources across more platforms, our findings would tend to suggest that disorientated students quickly reach information saturation and these interventions are often invisible to the student who is encountering the university as an “out of body experience”. On the other hand, the participants were quick to recall individual interactions and responses from this period, especially those that had been helpful. This would suggest that when it comes to learning to navigate the university, sustained engagement with staff and administrators is far more crucial than the circulation of information and provision of supplementary resources.

Students reported making the link between agency and learning but reported this realisation as coming late in the degree process. Orientation, for this one student, was the eventual result of taking responsibility for utilising existing support structures in order to successfully navigate her learning experience,

I don’t think anybody can teach you how to be at varsity – it is something that you learn. So I think that is what I learned; you do it yourself and you go out and you need to be

proactive from going to the writing centre and the library, going to [the student counselling and support unit] and saying I am not crazy I just have no idea of what is happening. I think those structures that the university has put in place – you never see them until you go “I am really going to get out of this place and I won’t understand a single thing and then you reach out and I think that is what happens”.

Finally, one of the ways students deal with the move from disorientation to orientation can be framed as the realisation that finding orientation sometimes entails a reorientation or shift in your own identity in terms of who you thought you were going to be and who you end up being,

You actually come here wanting to be a performer but when you leave you are more of an academic and you really interested in academia. I am doing gender and performance and I feel like there is so much, so much to explore because the subject is so broad and you think maybe I don’t want to be a performer maybe I actually want to write papers maybe I want to write a thesis.

8. Negotiating different discourses of success

In conjunction with a more fundamental aspect of successful orientation, participants referred to a higher order of finding their bearings that they read as a marker of success.

This was explicitly framed in terms of the ability to think critically, express their own ideas and find their own voice. What was noteworthy was how the participants framed this induction into a scholarly identity in contrast with the earlier expressions of disorientation and anxieties with attribution and plagiarism. The following participant’s discourse of her success made specific reference to knowing where ideas came from and how they differed from or intersected with her own,

Now I can say I know I am actively taking material from this person and I am paraphrasing and I know I am paraphrasing ... I should be sure this is what they are actually saying. In first year like you quote three lines, then in second year it is two lines and in third year it is one and in fourth year you are like two words are enough to say your point...

Here finding one’s own voice is a marker of the student’s version of success, which as teachers and academics in the arts and humanities we likewise read as one of the most important qualitative measures of success. Again, we are reminded of Angélie-Carter’s (2014) argument that what is often read as plagiarism in higher education is a manifestation of a profound disorientation in relation to the institutional discourses of what is legitimate participation. The shift described by the participant above is the same shift Angélie-Carter (2014: 92) describes as a move towards an

understanding of the construction of knowledge [that] can move the learner from a position of seeing knowledge as an indeterminate mass of information, to a position where he or she is able to locate authors within debates, and throw one perspective up against another in a critical manner.

In so doing, students also experienced orientation towards a political positionality in terms of a scholarly identity and language. Students were able to identify theorists and scholars and cite them as significant to their own work. Those names came to stand as an important part of a successful scholarly identity and allowed students to position themselves as part of a larger conversation of ideas.

One participant expressed a variation on this view,

...it becomes more about you [than about the marks] and it becomes "follow your instinct", that is the only thing – that is what university helps you do – it helps you develop your own ideas. Now I look back and I see that is what this university makes you do. More than anything I heard from teachers I can think for myself, I can create ideas for myself, I can argue for myself.

This next participant also expresses sentiments that again bring institutional discourses of success into their own personal discourses of success. However, unlike in the comment above, the legitimisation of meeting the explicit institutional terms of success was the point at which she found orientation. Achieving a particular marker of excellence was critical in this participant's representation of success.

I started getting A's. I started really understanding and believing in myself. I think that it is also important to have confidence and believe in yourself and never look down on yourself because if someone else can do it you can do it as well.

In the next comment, we see a third variation on how students respond to and negotiate the institutional discourses of success with their own.

So now you are not just a performing student, you are a fine arts student, you are a marketing student, you are this researcher. So you are constantly having to remind yourself that you know a lot and that "I might not be an engineering student but you know I am good at a lot of things". So that is what I am trying to do. Just accept that I am learning and I am constantly growing and not to measure myself in quantity ... things that actually don't matter, well they matter but not so much because at the end of the day I can stand up and have a proper conversation. For me that is very important ...

The participant provides a description of multiple identities that she experiences and the need to "remind herself" that there is value and legitimisation in them as they represent a particular set of knowledge and skill sets. The metaphor around learning, growth and quantity of knowledge illustrates a different set of values for success, not ones usually explicitly acknowledged by the academic institution. The student's acknowledgement of the importance she confers on being "able to stand up and have a proper conversation" is a further indication of a different set of criteria for identifying as a successful and legitimate student in the academic institution.

Tellingly, the participant notices the value placed on certain kinds of disciplines and in particular, what she reads as the valorising of engineering over any of the other skills and achievements she cites. The implied denigration of her achievements and her own heartfelt attempt to be defiant in the face of this discourse is neatly summed up in her statement, "I might not be an engineering student but you know I am good at a lot of things". Perhaps this is the moment to consider how some of the implicit discourses of what counts in the university are conveyed and construed.

9. Telling absences in discourses of success

It is difficult to know whether particular silences or gaps in the students' discourses of success or orientation are significant. We are mindful that the fact that students did not raise or refer to particular aspects of their experience or definitions of success does not necessarily point to findings worth noting. These may be the result of our relatively small sample group but we raise them as potentially productive avenues for future research.

There were a number of absences in the interviews in terms of how the participants recounted their finding of orientation or in their discussions of success, that we found telling. For instance, there were no mentions of family support or long-term intimate or important relationships. Likewise, there was no mention of strategies of solidarity, mentorship or networking amongst the students that success could be attributed to. This is despite our observations that students group together, support each other and do this in particular in a professional programme such as the performing arts, where the success of the individual frequently and directly relates to the success of the group. We noted that the students' discourses were highly individualised and atomised; for students, discourses and narratives of orientation and disorientation were entirely individualised.

Likewise, we noted that despite representing themselves as successful, this discourse of success did not include a sense of how these graduating students were starting to orient themselves towards a future profession. It may well be that in this instance the institutional discourse of success and that of the students are quite similar. Unlike other professional programmes, the creative and performing arts do not have the equivalent focus on professional life after graduation and consequently there appears to be a gap that does not provide a way to translate a successful student identity into a "future orientated" sense of self for students, whereby they can consider their future professional identities.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have worked from the premise that students produce their own definition of success and that in certain circumstances, there is also evidence that students' discourse is not entirely separate, different or removed from the institutional discourse of success and legitimacy. Ultimately many students enforced the discipline of the institution's regulative discourse in terms of their own constructions of success – references to being a "good student" and "successful scholar" all tended to a greater or lesser extent to reinforce traditional markers of the perception of academic success and legitimisation.

For the students we spoke to, the markers of a successful identity versus an unsuccessful identity could productively be understood as orientated versus disorientated. In other words, the better orientated one is as a student, the more successful one is. We found this in students' discourses even when the institutional markers of excellent grades or minimum degree completion times were absent, which suggests that helping students make the move from disorientated to orientated within the institution would be beneficial. However, this concept of orientation is a complex and multifaceted one and goes quite far beyond how "orientation" is construed in institutional practices.

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