

**BLACK STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON LEARNING ASSETS AT A
FORMER WHITE UNIVERSITY**

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ABSTRACT

In view of the challenge which higher education constitutes for most black South African students, this study focuses on study elements and aspects which black students regard as helpful and supportive. Our research question was: What do Black students view as assets in their studies at tertiary institutions, specifically at the University of Pretoria? Chickering and Reisser (1993) in their model on student development identified seven vectors which represent the main aspects of student development, as well as seven institutional influences on student development. We used this model to investigate how the learning assets which our participants identified, could provide distinct guidelines for the provision of institutional support to students from disadvantaged backgrounds. A qualitative approach was followed where the “photo voice” method (Olivier, Wood & De Lange 2009), combined with focus group discussions and narratives were used to collect the data. Three themes transpired from our data. Students viewed their own study inspiration, the encouragement from within the university and from families and community, as well as a sense of physical security as their main learning assets.

Key words: black students, student support, assets, student development, white universities.

INTRODUCTION

Educational reform which followed political transformation in South Africa after 1994 attempted to “provide a system of education that builds

democracy, human dignity, equality and social justice” (Department of Education, 2001:4). Fraser and Killen (2005) assert that the primary aim of educational reform was to broaden participation in higher education so as to reduce the highly stratified race and class structure of the country.

Tertiary institutions also experienced an impressive growth in student numbers (Gbadamosi & De Jager, 2009) and former White universities experienced a dramatic shift in demographics. When considering the tertiary landscape in South Africa, Black students now account for over 72% of enrolments in higher education (Brüssow 2007:4). Research also indicates that these students, to a great extent, are prone to failure (Botha, Du Plessis and Menkveld, 2007; Fraser and Killen, 2005). In part this may be due to social, cultural and economic backgrounds of students that give them very different life experiences manifested in students’ unequal levels of readiness for studies in higher education. In a previous study done by us, we focused on the barriers that black students face when studying at a higher institution, in view of the South African history, characterised by segregation and the favouring of white people at the expense of other population groups. The conclusion that we reached reads as follows: “Although black students comply with the prescribed m-score, there still remain remnants of a past characterized by social deprivation and mediocrity in the provision of education. These barriers, such as lack of finances to purchase study materials, language barriers and being exposed to inner-city conditions, hamper achievement on tertiary level, thus continuing the social inequity and educational imbalances from the past” (Kamper and Steyn, 2009).

Harris and Steyn (2010) argue that another reason for the low completion rates can be attributed to institutional factors that may unintentionally or overtly exclude these students due to the prevailing ideologies and westernized expectations of the student population. Sedlacek (1999) indicates that Black students' self-concepts are closely related to their adjustment and success at predominantly White institutions and further asserts that identification with an institution is a more important correlate of retention for Blacks than for other students. In this regard Davis, Dias-Bowie, Greenberg, Klukken, Pollio, Thomas and Thompson (2004) report that institutional alienation is the most significant characteristic experience of Black students attending predominantly White universities and that the inability to connect with some aspect of the university will generally result in failure. Because institutions reflect the societies that develop them (Smith, 2008) this consequently calls for a reassessment of the needs of current students in higher education.

In this study, we decided to use the asset-based approach as point of departure. According to Eloff and Ebersöhn (2001:148), professionals often "differ greatly in the approach they take when addressing a challenging situation. On the one hand there is the needs-driven approach that has a strong focus on problems, deficiencies and needs.on the other hand there is the capacity-focused approach, also known as the asset-based approach. This method is based on the belief that every person or situation has assets, and that these could be mobilised in order to address challenging circumstances". (See also Ebersohn and Eloff 2007.) We wanted to learn what black students, who are often socially and academically deprived, identify as assets in their learning environment. In

view of the formidable challenge which higher education constitutes for most black students, we regarded it as opportune to focus research attention on study elements and aspects which black students regard as really helpful and supportive. This knowledge is crucial in reaching optimum efficiency in student support to previously disadvantaged students. Basically, our research question was: What do Black students view as assets in their studies at tertiary institutions, specifically at the University of Pretoria?

We located our research within Chickering and Reisser's (1993) theoretical framework on student development.

TOWARDS A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK ON STUDENT DEVELOPMENT

The axiomatic requirement for higher education (HE) is that it should foster the development of human talent and potential in terms of cognition, attitudes and values. In contemplating student development, two self-evident questions usually dictate the direction of theory building and theory verification regarding the impact of the higher education (HE) environment on students: 1 What should happen **in** the student? 2 What should happen **around** the student? As will be indicated, theorists on student development usually focus on one, or both of these questions.

A major contribution to student development research was provided by Pascarella and Terenzini's (1991) research. They undertook a meta-investigation of student development research done in the preceding 20 years, and came up with a meaningful categorization of theories about student development. The four main categories of theories identified were

psychosocial, cognitive, typology, and person-environment interaction theories. They (ibid.) subsequently developed a model which claims that the background of the student, as well as school leaving features, combined with particular structural and organizational characteristics of institutions influence the quality of student effort and therefore academic success (c.f. Chickering and Reisser 1993, 455).

Following on Pascarella and Terenzini's (1991) work, Chickering and Reisser (1993) developed a framework for conceptualising and planning student development. They anchored this in both Erikson's (1959) premise that identity formation is the main challenge for adolescents and young adults, and Pascarella and Terenzini's (1991) model. The advantage of Chickering and Reisser's (1993) framework is that it overcomes some shortcomings which earlier, or other, theories and models on student development (e.g. Erikson 1959; Loevinger 1976; Kegan 1982; Kohlberg 1984; Baxter Magolda 1992 - c.f. Chickering and Reiser 1993) had, mainly in insufficient attention to student variables (e.g. gender and socio-economic status).

As constituting elements in their framework, Chickering and Reisser (1993) identified seven "vectors" which represent the main aspects of student development. These vectors can be seen "...as maps to help us determine where students are and which way they are heading" (Chickering and Reisser 1993:34). The vectors are not seen as steps, and students can move along them either at different rates or concurrently. Each vector represents a "higher" level of functioning and "...brings more awareness, skill, confidence, complexity, stability and integration" (ibid.). These vectors are: 1. developing competence; 2. managing emotions; 3. moving through autonomy toward interdependence; 4. developing mature interpersonal

relationships; 5. establishing identity; 6. developing purpose and 7. developing integrity. In addition to these vectors, Chickering and Reisser (1993) also paid attention to the context of student development, and identified seven institutional “key influences” which affect student development. These are: 1 institutional objectives; 2 institutional size; 3 student-faculty relationships; 4 curriculum; 5 teaching; 6 friendships and student communities; 7 student development programmes and services (Chickering and Reisser 1993:265).

We intended to investigate how the learning assets which our participants identified, assimilated with the seven student development vectors, as well as the seven key institutional influences, with a view of possibly rationalising the 14 factors mentioned to some proverbial “golden treads” in the provision of student support to students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION

Mode of investigation

Since our research aimed at deep understanding of learning assets experienced by socially deprived higher education students, we opted for the qualitative research approach. We prefer to work in the interpretive paradigm (Terre Blanche, Durrheim & Painter, 2006:275-276) which provides the perfect conceptual domain for us to deal with in-depth investigation and ‘verstehen’ of participants’ life worlds, as experienced on a day-to-day basis. This paradigm accommodates optimally our interest in

the pragmatic aspects of participants' lives in coping with existential challenges.

As mode of investigation, we opted for the "photo voice" method (also known as "reflexive photography"), due to *inter alia* its strengths in gaining optimal commitment in participants' involvement in the research project (Olivier, Wood & De Lange, 2009). The method involves that participants are issued with cameras, and prompted to take pictures of people or things which have, for the participant, an intimate connotation with regard to the research topic. In itself, the method is not new. Paulo Freire used visual ethnography ("coded situations", depicted by sketches or photographs) to stimulate communities in critically analysing their own situations (Schulze, 2007:537). Photographs in particular set off a "chain reaction" that causes people to remember, reflect and to gain new perspectives (Banks, 2001).

Schulze (2007:538) indicates that, theoretically, reflexive photography is embedded in the theory of symbolic interactionism, a sociological perspective that places emphasis on micro-scale social interaction. Blumer (1969:2) was the first to use the term *symbolic interactionism* and set out three basic premises on which it is based: 1. Humans act toward things on the basis of meanings they ascribe to those things. 2. The meanings of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with others and society. 3. These meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he/she encounters. Basically, symbolic interactionist researchers investigate the meanings which individuals ascribe to symbols and things through, and as a consequence of, their social interactions. In the university context, for example, the student is almost constantly in a

mode of social interaction with other people and their actions, which are viewed and treated as symbolic objects. In this vein, a professor is not merely a person, and the professor's car is not merely a car, but become symbols to which students attach various meanings.

Reflexive photography gives participants the opportunity to literary "zoom in" on these symbols, and is almost guaranteed to elicit rich descriptions of the meanings attached to those symbols (cf. Banks, 2001; Pink, 2001). For this reason, the opportunity to present a "photo voice" ensures an optimum level of participant involvement in, and dedication and commitment to the research project. We thus decided to use this method, combined with focus group discussions and narratives in order to effectively capture the meanings attached to the photographs.

In setting up our research, we used a step by step guide to facilitating a photo voice project, as compiled by Olivier, Wood and De Lange (2009). Applied to our research, the steps were incorporated in three sessions as follows:

Session 1: Orientation

Eight black students (four female and four male) from non-affluent backgrounds were purposively selected and requested to participate in the project. The selection was primarily guided by one of the author's intimate knowledge of the students' home background, and her judgment on the selected participants' capacity to provide rich information. We explained and motivated our research project on assets to learning in higher education, and emphasised their critical role as participants. The photo voice method was subsequently introduced to the participants, emphasising

that visual investigation is a powerful mode of learning and creative work. Together with the participants, we decided on the following prompt for taking the pictures: *Take pictures of anybody/anything that you regard as an asset to your learning at the university.* The students were encouraged to have a free hand, and to take pictures of anybody or anything they associated with an asset to their learning. The session ended with a practical exercise. We had acquired disposable cameras (each of which could take 27 pictures) and asked the participants to team up in pairs to share a camera. Each participant then had the opportunity to practice with the camera by taking a picture of their partner. A week was given for taking the pictures, and arrangements were made for the next session. Cameras were handed in as arranged, and the films were developed prior to the next session.

Session 2: Exhibition

The second session involved that the students exhibited their pictures by putting them up (participant by participant) in a lecture room. Each participant then had the opportunity to discuss his or her pictures as depicting assets to their learning. During these discussions, we took preliminary field notes. The pictures covered an array of artefacts and people. It was clear that each participant was really involved in the project. All group members enthusiastically took part in the ensuing discussions. At the closure of this session, each participant was asked to pick the one picture which depicted the most significant asset to his/her learning, and to write a narrative of about 300 words about that picture. The participants were asked to submit the narratives within one week.

Session 3: Wrap-up

The participants gathered again in the same lecture room and were given the opportunity to briefly present their narratives to the group. Not all participants did this, but all narratives were received, with the theme picture attached. The session closed with snacks, and the assurance to the participants that they would be involved in scrutinising the data interpretation.

We subsequently analysed and interpreted the pictures and narratives.

Data analysis and interpretation

Background information on participants

Of the eight students which took part in the study, four were male and four female. Five students stayed in hostels on the campus while two students rented rooms in various suburbs. One student lived with his little sister in a township. Three students had attended former model C schools - that is former White schools, while the other five students had attended schools in rural areas. The fact that the latter schools are generally known to be under-achieving was reflected in the participants' academic achievement at university: The three students who had attended former model C schools, scored higher marks than their counterparts who had attended rural schools.

Themes and categories

The participants' narratives rendered rich and valuable data. A surprising aspect of their feedback was that the extent of overlap was minimal - the eight participants had varying foci in their discussion of the chosen pictures.

In what follows, we firstly provide a brief synopsis of each participant's narrative, followed by a brief account of the themes and categories which emerged concerning learning assets as experienced by this selected group of socially deprived black university students.

1 "Academic literacy" (Female participant 1)

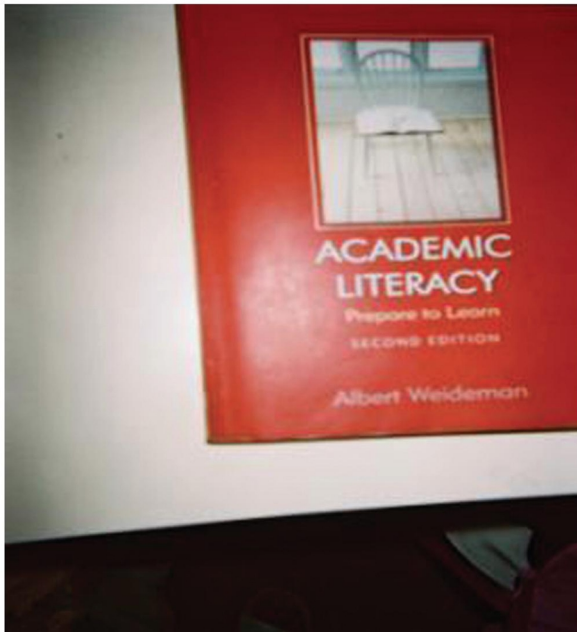


Figure 1 Academic literacy

The picture shows the cover of a book on academic literacy, with the subtitle "prepare to learn".

The participant commented that academic literacy is one of the modules which she regards as very important and helpful. The module is compulsory for those who failed the exemption test at the beginning of the year. She explains:

It helps us a lot, because most of us we are from public schools where English is done as second language. It deals with construction sentences, grammar usage, spelling and writing an essay. Black students have a very limited vocabulary since English is not our mother tongue.

Accordingly, we chose “academic literacy” as appropriate topic for this student’s contribution.

2 “Inspiration” (Female participant 2)



Figure 2. Inspiration

The picture shows a collage of photos, some indicating an aspect of achievement (a kid with a graduation gown and diploma, a luxury car, an athlete), and others family members and friends.

The participant explained that she created her “vision board” as “ an inspiration for me to work harder towards getting my degree.” The board is composed of the things she wants to achieve in life, and it also indicates her “support systems”. She describes the scope and value of this support system thus:

I am away from home when I am here in university but I still receive that support from church, friends and birth family. Even though they are far but they still call to check up on me every now and then. Through the support I get from church I am able to resist most temptations of the world and stay true and faithful to the blessings that God has given me (including being in varsity). My family is also my motivation because they are so proud of me as the first grandchild to go to university. I need to honour them and leave a legacy that will inspire the next generation to reach their goals in life.

She mentions that the other elements of her vision board are dreams she has for her life. These dreams keep her going. Whenever she is unwilling to study, she looks at her vision board and realises that if she fails to achieve one dream, the others will be affected.

In view of the key issues raised, we opted for “inspiration” as topic for the student’s views on learning assets.

3 “Sport facilities” (Male participant 1)



Figure 3. Sport facilities

The picture is of a student standing alongside a basket ball field.

The participant explained that one’s mind cannot function well if the physical body is not in shape:

This picture shows the best way to keep the physical parts in shape by using the sports facilities provided to us we can keep in shape. A physically healthy person is assured to be mentally healthy and if that person is mentally healthy it means the mind is able to function well, concentration and better studying is guaranteed.

“Sports facilities” seemed to be the most appropriate caption for this contribution.

4 “Role model” (Male participant 2)



Figure 4. Role model

The (staged) photo shows a youngster standing on a crate, with two others looking up at her in admiration.

The participant describes how he grew up in a village community where one normally looks for employment after having completed school. But many people have now realised that Grade 12 is not sufficient to equip one with the necessary skills for the working environment. People who manage to go to university are admired.

The old people admire me because they could not get to university for a variety of reasons, the young one admire because they have now learned that grade 12 on its own is not enough for one to acquire a good job.

The participant points out that setting a good example is important. The youngsters do not like school - the boys start using drugs from an early age, whilst some girls have babies at the age of fifteen or younger. When these young people eventually finish school, they already have to care for families, and tertiary study is out of the question.

Fortunately, the participant had the privilege of having a supportive parent who encouraged him to get educated.

Some if not most of the people don't have that privilege of being encouraged to do things which no one in their family has done, I have seen that education is one of the weapons which we can use to fight poverty. We regarded the description "role model" as the most appropriate in this case.

5 "Perspective" (Male participant 3)



Figure 5. Perspective

The participant submitted a photo of a telecommunications tower adjacent to the university campus.

In his submission, the participant stated that being at university gives the opportunity to mingle with different people from different backgrounds, and to gain wider perspectives:

The diversity on our campuses enables us to learn to look at things from different perspectives. The diversity also enables us to know that all of us as people have a lot in common despite our different cultural beliefs or different economic status.

In addition, the participant pointed out that being at varsity is like being in a completely different world because of exposure to computers, the internet and other media.

“Perspective” seemed to be the best topic for this submission.

6 “Peace” (Female participant 3)



Figure 6 Peace

The photo shows part of the campus garden.

The participant explained that she experiences the campus as a quiet and peaceful environment where learning can take place. The campus is never overcrowded, and people know one another.

It's more of home, we don't feel left out as the place is so welcoming. It home away home!

It is a safe place to be, we are provided with security services. Around campus there are security guards. We feel safe around campus; we not even scared of walking around campus at night.

Contributing to the positive campus experience are the study resources (e.g. the library, IT lab and photo copying room) which are freely available, and ensure that "learning takes place peacefully".

Accordingly, "peace" encapsulates the essence of this contribution.

7 "Safety" (Male participant 4)

The participant opted for a photo of a security guard.



Figure 7 Safety

He explained as follows:

This photo explains in further details on the assets that are experienced by us as students of the University of Pretoria in terms of security, as first year student I find it easy to study in the environment that is well taken of due to securing. Since I come from secondary level I find that in higher education security is the first priority concern to the student.

He finds assurance in the fact that the campus is under surveillance of security cameras and that security guards monitor every corner of the campus, day and night.

“Safety” was clearly the most appropriate choice as topic for this submission.

8 “Studying together” (Female participant 4)



Figure 8 Studying together

The photo depicts two white and one black student, working together on a study task in the library. The participant viewed studying together and also socialising with white students as an asset, as she never had contact with other cultural groups in the rural area where she lived.

In analyzing the narratives through reading, re-reading and cross-reading, we found that three broad learning asset themes emerged, namely **inspiration**, **encouragement** and **security**. Accordingly, we categorized the topics as follows (see Table 1):

Table 1. Themes and categories

Themes	Categories
Inspiration	Achievement vision Role modelling Broadened perspectives
Encouragement	Religion Language Facilities (sport) Resources (library, ICT)
Security	Fellow students, family, friends, church Peace Safety

Summative remarks

In our view, the participants' feedback was thorough and enlightening. The three premises of symbolic interactionism (as alluded to earlier) were reconfirmed: It was clear from the students' involvement in reflexive photography that the derived meanings were "handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he/she encounters" (Blumer, 1969:2).

Concerning the identified learning assets, it is clear that students from socially deprived backgrounds derive **inspiration** from having opportunities to broaden their knowledge and perspectives, and heed a strong sense of responsibility towards personal achievement, but also towards motivating and inspiring the less privileged in their communities to do the same. This finding tallies with research done by Griffin (2006) who mentions that black students were driven by their goals to be positive examples of Blacks and their abilities, address the underrepresentation of Black professionals and reach out to underserved members of their community. Religion also plays a role in maintaining the inspiration to study. **Encouragement** is appreciated highly as a learning asset, and understandably so in view of the stark contrast with the learning environments to which the participants had been exposed during their primary and secondary school years. Also in the case of this theme, we found no sign of alienation from the home and community environments, but rather a strong emphasis on the value of the support of family members, friends and the home church in the participants' tertiary studies. In this regard Smith (2008) points out that encouragement is a critical part of familial support in the black culture, especially as higher

education “represented a step up for their families and helped them to exceed their parents’ level of education” (Smith, 2008:151).

We confess that the third theme, **security**, was unexpected and came as a bit of a surprise to us. We, together with students from affluent backgrounds, are not inclined to view security and safety on campus as study assets, but from the life experiences of our disadvantaged participants, this makes perfect sense. This finding underscores once more how insecure, unsafe and destabilised the civil and schooling situations in South African disadvantaged communities are. In this regard Sennett, Finchilescu, Gibson and Strauss (2003:108) observe as follows: “Particularly significant within the current South African context is that many black African students come from traumatised communities that are still subject to very high levels of violence and poverty”.

Noticeably, two themes (encouragement and security) are extrinsic to the participants, and seem to reveal an acceptable institutional standard in the provision of a constructive study environment to disadvantaged students. The first theme, however, being intrinsic to the participants, constitutes the most important one, and immediately raises questions about the extent to which universities take effort to capitalise on the disadvantaged students’ inspiration to succeed by keeping their dreams alive and assisting them in supporting others in their communities.

CONCLUSIONS

We have already drawn attention to the seven vectors in student development, as well as the seven key institutional influences, as identified by Chickering and Reisser (1993). We could meaningfully link these

vectors and influences with our empirical findings, as shown in the following matrix (see Table 2):

Table 2. Matrix for student development and support

LEARNING ASSETS OF DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS (Kamper and Steyn)	↔	STUDENT DEVELOPMENT VECTORS (Chickering and Reisser, 1993)	↔	KEY INSTITUTIONAL INFLUENCES (Chickering and Reiser, 1993)
Inspiration	↔	Establishing identity Developing purpose Developing integrity	↔	Institutional objectives Curriculum Teaching
Encouragement	↔	Developing competence Managing emotions Autonomy–interdependence Interpersonal relationships	↔	Institutional size Student–faculty relationship Friendship and communities Student development programme
Security		All vectors		All influences

As indicated in Table 2, the main themes which came to the fore as learning assets (inspiration, encouragement, safety) are *conceptually* linked to the student development vectors, as well as being *contextually* linked to the key institutional influences. For example, the students' level of inspiration for their studies has to do with their sense of identity, purpose and integrity, and these should be built up and stimulated by the institution's objectives, curriculum and teaching. In the same way, the factors in learner encouragement, as well as learners' sense of security, can be worked out. For us, the crucial finding was that, essentially, the key, all-encompassing learning asset, especially for socio-economic challenged students, is security (see the matrix – Table 2), that is security not only in the physical sense, but also in the cognitive and emotional sense.

Because it is based on inherent learning assets, we trust that this student development and support matrix could be a valuable tool in conceptualising, researching, planning and executing student advancement

and study support at HE institutions, especially for students from deprived and challenged backgrounds.

We concede that our study was done on a small scale, and that final conclusions would be presumptuous. Yet we regard the themes inspiration, encouragement, and safety as legitimate building blocks for a far more extensive empirical study, in which each of these themes is explored in more depth, in order to arrive at a comprehensive set of learning assets which act as drivers in previously disadvantaged students' study success. These data will be invaluable in improving and refining study support to these students, with all the implied individual, HE institutional and national benefits.

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