

The UKZN Griot

Of illiteracy and illiterates



Students wanted. No experience necessary

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On the route from Tollgate to campus I pass a B&B sporting the sign: 'Guests wanted. No experience necessary'. This catchy blurb could well be a metaphor for UKZN admission policies.

While we all know that many undergraduates are near illiterate, the new strategic plan that imposes 'targets' on already straining new schools, has now ensured that many of our Honours students are just as underprepared. The sign that could accompany the ever-tattier entrance to Howard College might well read: 'Students wanted. No experience necessary'.

While talking about this gate, the frayed, flapping, red and white crowd control tape that herds students to the turnstile flaps in clear contrast to the new security guards who are smart, alert and who now check licence discs against number plates. Got caught on that one a few weeks ago!

While the appalling lack of experience of so many contemporary students is not of the academy's own making as an exasperated Jonathan Jansen reminds us weekly in The Times, it does speak volumes for the state of education in this country, even as UKZN valiantly pushes towards research status. Now, I am one of

those unrehabilitated Marxists who accept that universities are elitist social institutions. Only the obviously literate should be admitted. How else would we do research and reproduce ourselves through new generations? Illiterates can't read Marx, but they certainly can get the wrong end of his stick, possibly wrecking entire nations as a result.

Teaching graduate students to reference, read, write and structure an essay gets in the way of us maintaining our top-500 status. The illiterates on our campuses should be made literate by other, better equipped technical colleges that confer upon their students the impression of a pass, a pretence of literacy, and a certificate written with disappearing ink. After all, most students just want the certificate. Let them have them, I say. The barbarian illiterates should be kept outside of our august tape-protected gates. They should be beating at some other college's gates. We've got Shanghai rankings to maintain.

The target-tactic simply means that more and more students on our campuses need more and more remedial teaching, more and more attention and more and more counselling. This creates more and more administration and results in less and less research time. We all know that it is the academics and

lower-level support staff who are plugging the dyke as systemic operational meltdown occurred during the reconfiguration period. The 'Targets' located to Schools twinned with this process are little more than the filling up of lifeboats with the bewildered who don't know how to steer them, let alone find stable ground. Until we find our bearings there is nowhere to go except to contemplate what to do with the deckchairs on the Costa Concordia. Some who show initiative are swimming for their lives.

So, now that the campus is tilting with all the illiterates huddled near the lifeboats, what is the solution? While Saunders' First Law of Educational Innovation holds that 'Faculty opposition will stifle innovation and developments' - like dealing with illiterates in our classrooms - the university's remedy is to ensure that at least its senior staff are literate. It is doing this by insisting that all seniors have PhDs. By this means, all staff must now prove that they can read and write by requiring them to publish and supervise. But, then, I could tell you about some external PhD theses that I have assessed, which should be cast out past the tape beyond the front gate, so illiterate are they.

The overall effect of the reconfiguration is a variation of the

Weber-Fechner Law. This Law is manifested in the You-Have-To-Run-Faster-To-Stand-Still Syndrome. What this means is that thanks to top management action, to produce another perceptible change it is necessary to produce a force that is stronger than any already present. At UKZN, this means that senior appointments with PhDs will outweigh the many illiterates who occupy our classrooms. The question now is how to ensure that the PhDs held by staff are evidence of literacy? This is a history that UKZN has commendably addressed in trying to keep an even keel.

But when I read HR's often incomprehensible communiqués on when accumulative and other forms of leave apply, I feel totally illiterate. Making sense of instrumentalism in an educational environment unsuited to the endless categorisation of our activities, time and courses renders us all illiterate, subjected as we are to management assumptions that don't easily match what it is that academics actually do. Perhaps, this is the postmodern condition? The categories that govern academics reassure the bureaucrats in Pretoria while strangling academics in white and red tape. Problem is, how else to get all academics to do their jobs? A few still give truth to the myth that all academics only work at their own

leisure. Often, this minority is the reason why management-by-numbers is now the norm.

Writing and reading postmodern theory requires a sophisticated literacy, but when students opportunistically claim postmodernism, in some cases, no experience is required by some supervisors. Such students who are failed by other, literate, professors, then complain that their erratic expression and presentation, confused grammar and sms speak, and idiotic referencing is actually encouraged by (postmodern) lecturers. No wonder the bureaucrats are bureaucratic. Theirs is the only way to make sense of a world waddling in its own waddle. Gotta learn the lingo!

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Disclaimer: The views expressed in this column are the author's own.

Final year Law student cycling up a storm



The dream of UKZN Law student Mr Mxolisi Ncube (left) to visit Cape Town came true recently when he won a 5FM competition to participate in the Cape Argus with three time former Cyclo-cross World Champion, Mike Kluge (right). They are seen here with 5FM's DJ Fresh.

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