Establishing a space of dialogue and possibilities: Student experience and meaning at the University of the Witwatersrand

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Abstract

The article explores student responses to institutional changes to accommodate increasingly diverse students into a cohesive community. It deals with student perceptions of current campus practices, social interaction, their interpretations of these, and how these relate to their experiences. It argues that, while the university has excelled in implementing strategies to improve student satisfaction, and while many students have responded positively to these, a sense of discontent persists for a large sector. This discontent has less to do with the degree of institutional change than with the different ways in which students experience these changes and the meanings they attach to them. It suggests that changes in campus life go beyond policies and structural changes to include mediation strategies that facilitate negotiation of shared spaces and meanings about campus experiences.

INTRODUCTION

The University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) has come a long away in exploring institutional changes needed to successfully educate diverse students to live and excel in a complex and pluralistic environment. To this end, Wits has conducted diversity-training workshops for senior managers, institutional culture audits, and introduced friendly student services and policies to address equity issues. This article addresses two interrelated questions: How do students respond to Wits efforts

to alter the campus environment to accommodate an increasingly diverse student population into a cohesive and interconnected community? How do these affect their experiences? What possibilities exist for the University to enhance its mediation strategies? It shows that, while many students have responded positively to these efforts, a sense of discontent persists for a large sector. This discontent is largely due to the fact that students from different backgrounds experience campus life differently and attach different meanings to institutional changes. It points to the need for mediation strategies that facilitate dialogue, negotiation of shared social spaces and meanings about campus experience.

DIVERSITY AND CAMPUS CLIMATE REVISITED

Campus climate is the formal and informal environment within a university in which we learn, teach, work, and live. For an institution to reach its highest potential, it is necessary to know the environmental conditions that contribute to or detract from that institution's mission. Campus environments that produce feelings of alienation, hostility, social isolation, and invisibility, can hinder the recruitment of new students, their social adjustment and retention as well as satisfaction levels and graduation rates. We concede however that the weather metaphor may not be adequate for describing the complexity of campus life. Universities are not a pattern of weather or change of season to which people must adapt. Campus life entails dialectic between the environment and the university community – staff, students and other internal stakeholders – as agents of change. In this sense, we use 'campus climate' in a dynamic sense that presupposes conditioning, negotiation, contradiction, change or disruption by and between individuals that shape it and experience it. This means that campus climate is subject to change, as new waves of students and staff join or leave the institution.

Research exploring institutional efforts to enhance campus climate is young, limited and in a formative stage internationally (Appel, Cartwright, Smith and Wolf 1996; Smith and Associates 1997), and almost unknown in South Africa (Cross and Harper 1999; Cross et al. 1999). This article adds to this body of literature and sets new parameters for the analysis of campus climate and the diversity challenge. The topic has gained momentum in recent years in response to the increasing diversification of the student population and the need to deal with social justice issues on campus (see for example Cross et al. 1999; Hurtado 1992, 1994; Appel et al. 1996; Bensimon 1995; Cross 2002; Goduka 1996(a); Goduka 1996(b); Goduka 1998; Goduka 1999).

Traditionally diversity has been associated with race, gender and culture differences (Cross 2000). Recent literature has widened its scope to embrace characteristics such as age, physical traits, sexual orientation, ethnic and religious background, socio-economic status, place of origin, social and political affiliations, seniority and experience, education and training, and so forth. As such, diversity represents a mix of characteristics that makes a person or group unique, or gives them an identity.

In this sense, diversity initiatives can be conceptualised as activities and practices aimed at *embracing*, *accommodating* or *engaging* differences (Cross et al. 1999). Schneider (1997, 128) suggests that, in addition to the input of diversity into new curricular content, developing capacities for 'engaging difference' is essential to the success of a diverse democracy.

Some authors challenge perceived overemphasis on culture in conceptions of diversity (e.g. Fraser 1997; Cross et al. 1999; Beckham 2000). Particularly contentious is the emphasis on cultural recognition at the expense of equity issues as if the problematic of cultural difference has nothing to do with social equality. Against this background, we argue that the effectiveness of any diversity initiative will certainly depend on its ability to integrate a theory of cultural recognition with a theory of social justice; or, more precisely: 'We should see ourselves as presented with a new intellectual and practical task: that of developing a critical theory of recognition, one that identifies and defends only those versions of the cultural politics of difference that can be coherently combined with the social politics of equality' (Fraser 1997, 12). Recognition politics that fail to respect human rights are unacceptable, even if they ultimately promote social equality.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

We refer to the integration of students into campus as *campus membership.* In our view, this entails much more than mere physical presence within a university's geographical space (the 'campus lodge' approach). *Campus membership* is a result of individual and collective struggles. It provides a sense of belonging or not-belonging to a particular group or community, within specific geographical and social boundaries, occupying a *shared space* under particular social relations, and being regulated by a specific ethos, norms and rules. Membership requires the mastery of a particular institutional language. As Coulon (1987, 44–45) put it:

> Becoming member is to gain affiliation to a group, an institution, which requires progressive mastery of the common institutional language. This affiliation depends on each one's particularity, the individual manner each one encounters the world …. Once affiliated, members do not need to interrogate themselves about what they do. They know what is implicit in their behaviour and they accept their routinized social practices. A member is not therefore a person who just breathes and thinks. It is a person blessed with a range of procedures, methods, activities, know-how, which make them capable of inventing means of adaptation to give meaning to the surrounding world [Our translation from French].

The mastery of the institutional language presupposes a sort of 'cognitive consensus' about the institutional normative paradigm or more specifically the dominant set of values, rules, norms and beliefs that must be internalised or learnt, with reference to which agreement is reached about the meaning of social situations and practices (Coulon 1993, 28).

Based on Bernstein's analysis of 'intellectual fields' and 'pedagogical identities' (1990, 2000), we consider three important domains of social mediation concerning the complex ways through which students engage with and negotiate campus membership: (i) the official domain; (ii) the domain of pedagogy; and (iii) the social domain. The *official field* encompasses aspects related to the shaping or reproduction of the dominant institutional culture (e.g. vision or mission, policies, rules and guidelines that regulate academic and social life on campus). The *pedagogic field* includes discourses, strategies, inputs and processes connected to the university's curriculum, teaching and learning activities (i.e. academic culture and practices). We also look at *students' agency/positionality* in campus everyday life that we refer to as *social domain*, which is the focus of this article. The relations between these domains, which may be compatible or conflicting, give rise to specific student experiences and identities. We add to these, external pressures related to popular culture or global culture that spread through the mass media and other means.

To explore the social domain, we make use of the concepts of 'background' and student 'positionality or agency'. Background is a concept that is usually taken for granted. Background consists of 'skills, abilities, pre-intentional assumptions, attitudes, practices, capacities, stances, perceptions and actions' (Broekman and Pendlebury 2002, 291; Searle 1995) that we carry from one milieu to another. It facilitates certain kinds of readiness and disposes one to certain sorts of behaviour (Searle 1995, 136). In this sense, background enables and constraints what we intend, how we interpret our actions and the world around us, and how we are interpreted or socially constructed by and within our interactions with other people. It may be an asset or resource that is individually and socially produced or owned, but it may also be a liability. This lies at the heart of our major contention in this article; that is, students from different social *backgrounds* (race, gender, ethnicity, nationality, etc.) experience, and negotiate membership of, campus life differently. We use the concept of *positionality/agency* to map out the dialectic that occurs between individual choices and actions on the one hand, and institutional and external pressures on the other. *Positionality* in this context refers to openness to being challenged, or to having enough self-confidence to challenge or defend one's view and actions.

Regarding the official domain we draw on what Searle refers to as *institutional facts* and *constitutive rules*. By *institutional facts* we refer to those aspects of institutional life against which we conduct our daily lives on campus, and whose use we collectively agree on – even if we do not think about them (e.g. wearing a gown for graduation). As Broekman and Pendlebury (2002, 289) put it, 'institutional facts assume collective agreement on function, status and meaning'. *Constitutive rules* refer to the normative framework, not always explicit, that creates the very possibility of a particular form of practice (what students at university should do, how they should behave or spend their leisure time, etc.). Whether and how students interpret or attach meaning to these facts and rules depends on their background of capacities, know-how and dispositions – in other words, a sort of pre-intentional knowledge about how the institution works, and a set of abilities for coping in

and with the institution. In brief, *background* frames the pace and mode of how students gain *campus membership* by promoting or constraining awareness of what constitutes *institutional facts,* and what *constitutive rules* may be used as guiding or warning signs.

In addition, popular culture, as expressed in new recreation patterns (e.g. the *gumba* or *bash,* a party with loud music), music (e.g. *kwaito, a* South African township music genre), social functions (e.g. pageants and modelling), and hobbies (e.g. film, music and readings interests), also mediate campus experiences in complex ways. An encounter with the pressures of global culture through student/faculty mobility, the mass media, consumerism, fast-food, body and sex politics, dress and so forth, also form part of the social medium in which students negotiate 'a home' and academic success.

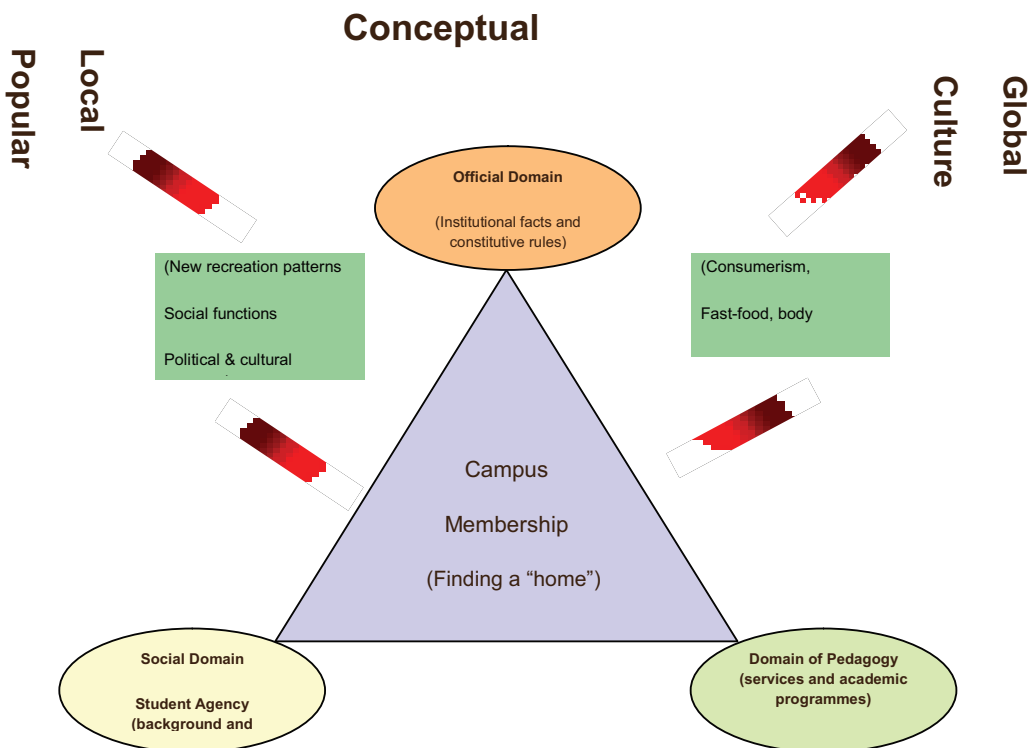Figure 1 summarises the main features of our conceptual framework.

Conceptual

Popular Local

Global Culture

Official Domain

(Institutional facts and constitutive rules)

(New recreation patterns

Social functions

Political & cultural

(Consumerism,

Fast-food, body

Campus

Membership

(Finding a "home")

Social Domain

Student Agency
(background and

Domain of Pedagogy
(services and academic programmes)

Figure 1:   Main features of our conceptual framework

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METHOD

The study was based on a survey to map out current student experiences and perceptions about student life on campus, and on in-depth interviews with key administrators and faculty and more than 100 postgraduate students. The survey provided a basis for mapping out key trends with regard to the following dimensions of student participation in: (i) associations and initiatives related to student politics, academic enrichment and socio-cultural enrichment; (ii) diversity-related activities with some bearing on attitudes, openness to difference, and commitment to social justice; and (iii) diversity education and its impact on individual satisfaction, academic success and cognitive development. It covered a total of 495 students, with the following racial composition: 380 African, 54 White, 43 Indian, 13 Coloured and 5 other. We targeted mainly students who reside on campus (351 in catering university residences; 135 in self-catering residences; and only 16 students not living in university residences). The majority of the respondents belong to the 15 to 25 year age group (total 450). One hundred and fifty-five students are male and 346 female. In terms of place of origin, 123 are from Gauteng, 323 from the rest of South Africa, and 46 are international students.

However, current research on campus climate and diversity issues poses fundamental *conceptual difficulties*. Constructs such as campus climate, campus life, campus diversity, campus experience, historical disadvantage, background, under preparedness, and education for diversity, are difficult to define in ways that are amenable to measurement. It also poses *methodological difficulties*. It is difficult to make generalisations about what constitutes positive campus climate for diversity, without being very specific about what type of diversity is being addressed.

CONTEXT: CHANGING DEMOGRAPHICS, DIVERSITY CHALLENGE AND INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSES

The University of the Witwatersrand , together with the University of Cape Town, the University of Natal and Rhodes University, committed itself to the liberal ideals of the 'Open Universities' as outlined in their manifesto in 1954 (Wits 1957). This 'common purpose' of being an 'open' and non-racial university required a significant change in staff and student composition in terms of class, race, gender and ethnicity, which was never implemented (Munro quoted in Johnson 2005, 88). Only in the late 1990s and early 2000s, with the provision of financial aid and the introduction of flexible admissions and selection criteria, the student composition at Wits began to change considerably. The number of students grew from 17,884 in 1994 to 23,232 in 2005, which was a sharp increase given that student numbers had remained relatively static during most of the 1990s. In 2005, Wits had a total of 23,232 students, of whom 14,960 were black (10,884 African, 3,455 Indian and 621 coloured) and only 8,269 were white. Additionally, the end of apartheid led to an influx of international students, particularly from the Southern African Development Community (SADC).

From 1997 to 2005, the number of international students increased from 701 to 2072. The number of students from working class backgrounds began to increase, which has meant that more students enrolled who did not possess the necessary social and cultural capital to meet the challenges of a typically elitist academic and institutional culture. Wits has had to face the challenge of adapting its environment, learning and teaching practices, and mediation strategies to students who do not come from middle-class backgrounds and, more broadly, of transforming the social relations between lecturers and students and among students.

In response, campus services – residence life, libraries, food facilities, sports and recreation services, etcetera, have been the object of improvements to increase life satisfaction. Several strategies have been implemented to address students' needs. These include: (i) the introduction of relevant policies on student access and campus life; (ii) student representation at all levels of university governance, (iii) a privileged role of students in the University Forum; (iv) the restructuring of student services (e.g. admissions and careers and counselling services, and the International Office) and residence life to make them more responsive to student needs; (v) an improved provision of campus services (e.g. the Matrix complex for food, banking and shopping) and so forth. The article concentrates on how students *experience* the context in which these initiatives are expected to make an impact, and the degree of awareness about or understanding of their significance. Thus the dialectic expectation/experience vis-à-vis awareness and understanding represents a key dimension in our analysis. An important question concerns the way students attach meaning to their experiences. In our view, this depends on their degree of awareness, that is, their situatedness or way of being in relation to the surrounding environment. It also depends on their positionality, that is, their expressed choices and stances concerning this relationship.

BECOMING A 'WITSIE': CHALLENGES AND PATHWAYS TO CAMPUS MEMBERSHIP

A university campus represents a peculiar location in social life where individuals experience emotional upheavals regarding place, location, identity and desire. Claiming campus membership or becoming a 'Witsie' entails individual (epistemological and cultural contestation) and social battles through which social spaces are negotiated. This is evident in the complex pathways and processes through which students negotiate campus membership at Wits. Actual student experiences range from pride to desperation, alienation and marginalization, depending on their perceptions about the university, their expectations and the individual resources they carry with them or are made available on campus.

Students come to Wits with their own constructs embedded in their expectations about what it is like to live at Wits already formed. Such constructs have some bearing on the ease or difficulty with which they experience initiation and integration into campus life. This may be facilitated or complicated by initial student orientation.

Once on campus, these constructs become an object of fierce contestation centred on meaning and difference. We explored some of the constructs through open-ended interviews taking into account mediation factors such as race, ethnicity, gender, religion and nationality or citizenship. The results are revealing. There are essentially three categories of constructs: (i) constructs about the nature of the institution; (ii) constructs about the perceived path to success and coping strategies; and (iii) constructs about what is expected from them on campus.

A striking aspect was the emphasis of Wits as a *high standing* institution, when students gave reasons for choosing to study at Wits vis-à-vis the emphasis on its *assimilationist nature*, when referring to the adjustment and integration difficulties they face. The high standing of the university was articulated through a variety of descriptors based on information from their parents, friends, media, and the voices of loyal alumni, proud staff members and fellow students. Here are some examples: 'Wits offers a high standard of education'; 'Wits is world-recognised and the standard of education is very high'; 'I will be getting a good quality of education'; 'An internationally recognised university'; 'I will be highly marketable'; 'It has a very good reputation, more than other universities in South Africa'; 'Wits is a university with a lot of heritage and that is what is appealing to me'; 'The qualifications of Wits are top-notch'; 'One of the leading universities in South Africa'; 'A centre of intellectual thought'; and 'I always thought it was a cool university ... you know when kids say it's cool, it's something they want to get into ... probably because it's in Joburg and Joburg is the thing'; and so forth. Many students considered themselves 'lucky' or 'honoured' to be at Wits and said that it made them feel like they were 'top students' in the country.

Related to these constructs is the expectation of a profound acculturation and assimilation into an established institutional culture, which can be individually taxing. This process may require a radical change in language, values, attitude and behaviour, depending on one's biography. Constructs about expectations are generally geared at aligning ambitions; that is, setting goals and devising strategies for meeting them. More specifically, these constructs are about recognizing and interpreting the specific constitutive rules, adjusting to established living standards, and coping with the challenges of campus life.

> You see, it is very much important to begin to have a demarcation line, when you come into an institution such as Wits you realise that you coming into contact with a number of people who are coming from all walks of life and in that situation it becomes necessary to begin to have principles that will guide you. It is important somehow that morals are built in ... it's not easy, we have to strive towards doing that.

In this respect, many students, particularly those from a disadvantaged background, express feelings of cultural displacement: 'You are either in or out but to be in you have to be like them [the Witsies].' As indicated by a graduate from a township

school: 'Well I had to change my appearance first and the way I behaved; so three years later I am a different person from the initial start … I think I am no longer an outcast'. Some, not willing to undergo this metamorphosis, stress the value of difference and diversity: 'People should be original and represent where they come from; so originality is within you and you have to portray it'.

Surprisingly, once on campus and familiar with its institutional rules, many students tend to interpret the tension between their own identities and the institutional environment as a battle between student subcultures. They do not make the connection between these battles and the displacement they feel due to the nature of the institutional culture. This tends to be perceived as an *institutional fact*, as such an object of little contestation. The most cited example is the presence of 'the model C school phenomenon' on campus, expressed in language, group identities, materialistic values and lifestyles. This is how it is portrayed:

> There is a lot of people on this campus that come from model C schools … they think that their English is better and they behave that way … a lot of them are stubborn … have their own set of values and … don't understand that we [are] coming from the hood and grew up in a different way, but it doesn't necessarily mean that our English is bad [A student from Queenstown].

As stated earlier, some students have been forced to drop their mother tongue to privilege English: 'No, I haven't changed anything …. In terms of language, yes, you know when I was at school the main languages used were vernacular languages [like] Tswana, which are mostly African languages, but here at Wits it is mostly English ….' Another student expressed similar feelings:

… This is very difficult. So you live like you are leftovers so to speak, like you speak a "nigger" type of English … my English is not very good. I'm not speaking that American "lingo". So I feel left out but now I'm able to cope with that.

To stress that the position of English as *lingua franca* that provides important cultural capital creates a contradiction that Lodge (1997) has labelled 'the access paradox'. If you provide students with access to the dominant language, you contribute to perpetuating and increasing its dominance. If, instead, you deny students access, 'you perpetuate their marginalisation in a society that continues to recognise this language as a mark of distinction' and 'you also deny them access to the extensive resources available in that language; resources which have developed as a consequence of the language's dominance' (Janks 2004, 33).

The boundaries of race and ethnicity are certainly thinning and becoming more porous. As a result, many students interviewed do not see manifestations of racism in their interaction with peers but rather in relation to the University administration and some staff. However, in real life, group identities on campus still reflect the apartheid legacy, which constitutes a surprising puzzle for many South African and foreign students. They attach a different meaning to race and ethnic grouping, which is justified through affinity arguments. Many students come to Wits expecting to

enjoy the pleasures of a 'rainbow nation': a perfect non-racial harmony, the company of 'blonde white girl friends', 'hanging around with my friends from Soweto', and so forth. The reality is that: 'There isn't … really this sort of rainbow nation theme here.' In the contrary: 'There is a lot of groups: Chinese people with Chinese people, Blacks with Blacks, Whites with Whites; there are a few [groups] of Blacks and Whites, and Indians and Coloureds but basically they are separate [groups] of Indians with Indians, Chinese with Chinese and Blacks with Blacks and Whites with Whites.' This is very disconcerting for international students who have not been exposed to apartheid:

> When you look at the way students move; they move according to their colour or according to their backgrounds. So I don't really think that they are united in that sense. If you sit, Blacks sit with Blacks, Asians with Asians and Africans with Africans. If you look at it in that perspective, Wits is a community that has many people but it is not one big community to me [student from Kenya].

Group identities also follow ethnic lines: 'I encounter an academic problem … I know Wits authorities will always help me, but socially I know I can only socialise with people from Lesotho'. Very often this generates anger: 'There is this guy who always reminds me that I am a Zulu girl and everything I do is because I am a Zulu girl and I will never be civilised'; or 'I am Zulu speaking person … there are some guys from Lesotho who call me Zulu boy … so really I don't like being called like that; I want to be called by my name'.

Xenophobia is another issue that has had significant repercussions. According to one international student, xenophobia is something that makes South Africa a 'very intimidating' society. Is Xenophobia a problem at Wits?

> Xenophobia? Yes … especially with South African students. The first time I came here, people were like "why did you come here? To take our studies?" They always feel like you are using their money to maybe develop yourself. They don't really like that. They still don't understand the concept of foreigners coming into their country; I don't think they really welcome that in good faith. So they are very [xenophobic] in terms of perspective. Most students who are South African are still very much xenophobic.

Finally, some students have concerns with an individualistic campus ethos that many students bring to campus: 'It is very care-free; everybody just goes about their own business, not really caring about what's happening around other people'. A student from Queenstown added: '… they all think that they have got money and they are better than the next person, so the people don't really worry about each other'.

Overall, student accounts point to a multilayered and hierarchical structure of membership among Wits students. Three main categories can be identified. The first category of responses involves those who are open to the rules, codes, norms and standards, including rituals that characterize Wits institutional life, have adapted to

them, have the resources to negotiate their social and learning spaces, have developed a sense of identity with the campus community –that is, have become 'Witsies'. This sense of identity sets boundaries very often expressed with some pride: 'This is how we do things at Wits', or, in reaction to what is perceived as unacceptable by their standards, 'Certainly not at Wits!' Generally, they have easily adapted to campus life. They can say with certainty: 'Yah. I feel like I belong here. I'm part of Wits.' 'I feel that I belong to Wits because I adapted well and I understand the situation now'.

By virtue of their previous socialisation, the environment matches their habits, their un-thinkingness in actions, their dispositions and pre-dispositions, that is, their *habitus* (Grenfell and James 1998, 14). Students encounter the university 'as a meaningful world, a world endowed with sense and value, in which it is worth investing one's practice' (Bourdieu 1989, 44). In this case, *habitus* minimises social displacement. This is not to deny, however, the choices and consequent actions made by some students as active agents of their own lives; in other words, the role of agency. In contrast, when graduates from rural and township schools come to campus, their *habitus* encounters a social world which does not match and has little to contribute to it. As a result, they encounter an environment that has little meaning and value to them.

The second category – *the survivors* – includes those who have found the institutional facts or constitutive rules of the university community alienating, a threat to their identities – and, as such, contestable; and who have opted to negotiate membership in their own terms, through struggles of different sorts. They associate themselves with campus life but resist any form of assimilation and fundamental change in identity and personality or, not willing to undergo this metamorphosis, they stress the value of difference and diversity. They struggle for asserting or re-negotiating their identities in their own terms or within a framework of mutual compromises. This is how a graduate from a private school described her experience:

> At the convent, before I came here, they are sort of relaxed; there isn't too much competition; here I had to change everything, I had to adjust … you know, the dressing, the way you walk; I had to start moving faster, to start learning too fast, to sort of, you know, … adjust to being my own, and trying to find my way in the world …. Initially I didn't feel as if I belong here, but … now I sort of made friends, I'm even a class rep[resentative], so I've evolved …. So ya, I do feel a bit like that.

The third category comprises those who lack the resources to negotiate their identities in either way, either in their own terms or in terms already established on campus. They may develop feelings of cultural displacement, alienation, withdrawal, isolation or marginalisation: 'I do not belong here'. Or, as highlighted by another student:

> Belong? No! I don't feel like I belong, I just feel I'm still meddling, I'm still trying to find my way. I'm still trying to find my place so I don't really feel like I belong, yet! Maybe I will over time but now I don't. I'm still trying to find my way around.

Within this category, besides those who feel excluded, there are also those who choose to remain on the margins. They concentrate on their studies and very often have their social life outside campus. We should not however underestimate the radical possibilities of the discourse of marginality articulated by this group. As Hooks has indicated (1999, 147), sometimes there is a need 'to create spaces where one is able to redeem and reclaim the past, legacies of pain, suffering, and triumph in ways that transform present reality'. The margins very often offer the conditions that make such action possible. This is, in our view, the rationale behind the establishment of gender-specific or race-specific student associations, a declining phenomenon on campus.

Pertinent questions to ask are: what happens to students in the last category? Are their chances of academic success compromised or diminished? There is certainly a perception among students that participation in the Wits community enhances the chances of epistemic success, though it is not a condition *sine qua non* one succeeds. According to student accounts, full participation in campus life and initiatives provides opportunities for leadership development, social and cultural awareness, and replacement of family or institutional support by providing common spaces or resource networks and channels for reaching out to communities. There are instances where students resort to resources outside campus.

Overall, we argue that what is at stake is the question of meaning and meaning construction. Given their diversity and the legacies they carry at subjective level, students have different expectations about campus life and attach different meanings to the different aspects of campus life. The limited presence – or complete absence – of shared meanings within common or wider shared spaces creates a sense of displacement as illustrated in their accounts.

COMING TO GRIPS WITH DIFFERENCE AND MEANING: THE ROLE OF STUDENT ACTIVISM, RELIGIOUS, ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT

We use Tierney's (1993) notion of *communities of difference* to refer to the range of campus organisations, forums and social groups through which students find spaces for mutual engagement, joint enterprise, construction and expression of group identity, affirmation of difference, and the development of awareness and learning. Students also use these groups to negotiate meaning over social issues of interest to them. Such communities represent constellations of competing – and in some cases, conflicting – interests and values. The communities of difference include social, academic, and religious organisations. In this regard, the survey points to a highly fragmented and diverse student body, constituted around different interests and socio-cultural activities, leisure and recreation activities and sports. Table 1 illustrates the spread of the students surveyed, by organisational affiliation.

Table 1: Spread of students surveyed – by organisational affiliation

SOCIAL		POLITICAL		ACADEMIC		Students' Teaching & Education Programme (STEP)	7
Ballroom Dancing Club	24	ANC Youth League	21	Wits Students	22	Wits Economic Society	11
Debating Society	9	Democratic Students' Association	2	Archaeology Student Society	1	Other	57
Disabled Student Movement	2	South African Students' Congress (SASCO)	5	Arts Student Council	4	**RELIGIOUS**	
Fine Arts Students' Association	1	Other	18	Builders and Quantity Surveyors	6	Adventist Christian Fellowship	9
Hip Hop	5	**INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS**		Dental Students' Council	3	Anglican Society	7
Mail & Guardian Society	1	Wits International Student Association	14	Geography and Archaeological Society	8	Association of Catholic Tertiary Students	7
HIV/AIDS Action Group	10	Botswana Student Association	1	History Society	1	Catholic Student Society	10
Photo Club	2	Italian Student Association	1	Wits Pharmacy Students' Association	3	Christian Action Fellowship	40
RAG (Remember and Give)	12	Lesotho Student Association	4	Medical Students	26	Church of Christ	11
ROCSOC	13	Swaziland Student Association	5	Mining Engineers Society	5	Ministry of Jesters	3
Wits Wine Society	3	Zimbabwe Student Association	3	MS SHAC	2	Hindu Students Society	2

Silly Buggers	10	Other	14	Nursing Students' Council	1	Muslim Students Association	2
Voice of Wits	4			Politics Society	1	Muslim Students Society	2
Wits Debating Union	8			Social Work Student Association	2	Student Christian Association	1
Wits Emergency Medical Society	1			Postgraduate Students' Association	9	The Navigators	5
Drama Students Association	8			Psychology Students Society	2	Zion Christian Fellowship	7
Other	57			Engineering Students	20	Other	58

The survey highlights three patterns in student behaviour. The first pattern concerns changes in form and content of student politics. There has been a shift from traditional predominance of student affiliation to political organisations to a preference for social, cultural, academic and religious organisations. Of all students surveyed, 191 belong to academic organisations, 170 to social organisations, and 164 to religious organisations; only 46 were members of a political organisation. Forty-two (42) were affiliated to international students' associations. This finding was confirmed throughout the interviews. Major political organisations at Wits are limited to the South African Students' Congress (SASCO), the African National Congress Youth League (ANCYL) and the Independent Student Association (ISA).

Traditional student political concerns – with emphasis on wider national issues – represented by SASCO and ANCYL have been outplayed by new middle-class concerns focusing on students issues, represented by ISA, which won the SRC elections in 2002, 2003, 2004 and 2005. There is enough evidence to argue that the dominance of ISA may prevail for years to come. Interest in academic organisations has also gained significance, particularly among medical, science and engineering students. In terms of religious organisations, 398 students have indicated their allegiance to Christianity. Note that students from minority denominations have expressed sentiments of being discriminated against on religious grounds.

In our view, the constellation of interests and practices as represented in the table is not weakness but strength. The social energy that they are able to mobilise must not be underestimated. Current student organisations do operate as – or in some cases have the potential to become – effective 'communities of practice' (Wenger 1999; Tierney 1993; Bellah et al. 1991). This is particularly true for those groups

focusing on intellectual and academic engagement. As a locus of engagement in action, interpersonal relations, shared knowledge, and negotiation of enterprises, 'such communities hold the key to real transformation – the kind that has real effects on people's lives' (Wenger 1999, 85).

The second important pattern in student behaviour concerns the incubating and nurturing role of student organisations. Student organisations form a parameter for 'understanding the "other"' in the midst of and across multiple socially-constructed realities (Rowe 2003). Most students see student organisations as providing *common spaces* and *resource networks* within a community at loggerheads or in confrontation with itself on racial, religious, ethnic and cultural issues and in confrontation with a somewhat strange or unfriendly institutional environment. They provide spaces where once-isolated individuals may now live in communities or as some have indicated in adopted 'families'. The 'impersonal' and carefree environment on campus, and the intimate and relatively closed communities of these organisations, force students to live with one another and 'to come to terms with the meaning of citizenship, social responsibility, conflict and how to resolve it, and intellectual freedom' (Tierney 1993, 43), very often constrained by the codes and norms of academia.

The third important pattern in student behaviour, which remains largely unexplored by both the institution and the students, is about the interface and interplay between student activities and institutional life or culture. There seems to be a degree of institutional uncertainty about what strategies should be put in place to facilitate constructive engagement between current student organizations and the university, a task that cannot be played effectively by the SRC under the circumstances. If student engagement in institutional life is understood as being mediated by the communities in which meanings are negotiated in practice, then student organisations – as critical nodal points in the creation and recreation of institutional culture – should be taken very seriously. Such organisations can form part of the social fabric of learning and enrichment. Student academic associations, for example, have an important role to play as agencies for learning, skills development and academic citizenship. A student from Kenya gave the following general account of the similarities between student organisations:

> They try to help people. They try to do more than just bookwork. They try to organise you around having fun and getting to know other people. They all encourage students to have a broader perspective about the University life …. That's the main thing they have in common. They try to bring students to benefit more than just bookwork and to [realise] that there is more to offer on campus.

Briefly, student organisations as *communities of difference* serve different purposes; they are spaces for identity formation, intellectual engagement, imagination, spiritual healing and affirmation of power. As networks of civic engagement, student organisations serve several useful purposes: (i) to foster sturdy norms of mutual trust and generalised reciprocity within the group or organisation; (ii) to

facilitate coordination and communication; (iii) to amplify information about the trustworthiness of individual members; and (iv) to lower transaction costs and speed up information transfer and innovation. They embody past success at collaboration, which can serve as a cultural template for future collaboration. As such, student organisations can promote the development and sharing of social capital as a vital ingredient in meeting the challenges of campus life. A matter of concern is that these fragmented communities seem to demonstrate little effort towards promoting politics of articulation, beyond individual or group boundaries. Students tend to accept dispersion and fragmentation as part of the construction of a new social order that reveals fully where they are and what they can become, and which does not demand that they forget (Hooks 1990, 148) or consciously unlearn certain forms of behaviour.

NEGOTIATING A SHARED SPACE AND MEANING: THE NEED FOR INSTITUTIONAL AND SOCIAL REINVENTION

The challenge facing Wits University is about how to find and foster a sense of community among diverse individuals, and how to offer integrity in a highly disintegrated society and in an environment with strong centrifugal tendencies. Within a university campus, where students from different backgrounds are brought together with an assumed common purpose, the challenge is to recognise difference and consider its consequences in accomplishing that common purpose. This task may require recognising 'the educative value of understanding different constructions of social reality and the possibilities of establishing new, shared meanings and practices' (Broekman and Pendlebury 2002, 291). It may also require problematising the nature of the expectations that the university holds for the students and the institution's approach to its own *institutional facts* and constitutive *rules,* which it often takes for granted.

We argue that *institutional facts* and constitutive *rules* of the university are dynamic aspects of institutional life. Collective agreement about their function, status and meaning is not immune to disruption, contestation and change as the university community changes with new currents of people and ideas. Without recognising this dynamic nature of institutional life, one cannot justify or attach meaning to the recent introduction of some African ceremonial music during the graduation procession, in addition to the traditional *Alma Mater* and *Geadamus* –let alone the short-lived experience of the *African Praiser*. We certainly agree with Broekman and Pendlebury (2002, 293) that 'impossible though it seems to make the rules explicit, it may be worth the attempt because the very exercise of trying to specify institutional facts and their constitutive rules …' may help the institution to 'decentre', and so come to reflect on and refine its own institutional rules and procedures. Institutional reinvention is a fact in the same sense that students reinvent themselves, whether through negotiation or contestation.

NEGOTIATING A SHARED SPACE AND MEANING: THE ROLE OF MEDIATION

As Durkheim has indicated, social order could deteriorate into a fragmented anomic culture if moral 'glue' does not arise spontaneously for persons when they realise their fundamental interdependence with one another (Durkheim 1984, 85). The university is undoubtedly an institution *par excellence* where people intelligently become individuals as they realise this interdependence, and thus it is 'an indispensable source from which character is formed' (Bellah et al. 1991, 6). From this point of view, universities are not instruments of repression and social control, or simply loci of power that reproduce culture. They are agents of social change that empower individuals to open up to new possibilities of citizenship and interrelatedness. Such processes should certainly provide leverage for tackling the taken-for-granted elements of institutional life, and for negotiating and building a dynamic institutional 'culture that is more dependent on process than stasis and an understanding of education oriented toward social change rather than social reproduction' (Rowe 2003, 3).

Some of the tensions that persist on campus result from the fact that students from different backgrounds experience campus life differently. Against this background, the challenge is to enable students to live on campus guided by the rules of a dynamic academic environment, by establishing a space of dialogue and possibilities that allows for regeneration, innovation and enrichment. The notion of *mediation* is central to our argument in this regard. Establishing a space of dialogue and possibilities necessitates facilitation of meaning construction around the experiences that students have of campus life, regardless of their diverse backgrounds. In our view, Woolcock and Narayan's (2002, 230) concepts of 'bonding', 'linking' and 'bridging' provide insights that could prove useful in devising mediation strategies.

'Bonding' means building connections to people who are 'like you'; or 'getting by', which is mostly a survival strategy. Bonding explains how students with similar backgrounds build connections among themselves that can culminate in student organisations around politics (e.g. Independent Students' Association), religion (e.g. Muslim Students' Association), or music and dance (e.g. Ballroom Dancing Club) and other forms of recreation. 'Bridging' refers to building connections to people 'not like you'. It provides a channel for mobility or 'getting ahead'. 'Linking' is about building of connections to people in positions of power, which can provide access to new and ample resources. This could be translated into vertical links; tying students from historically disadvantaged to people with historically advantaged backgrounds. With few exceptions, strategies that reflect this dynamic seem to be lacking in student organisational life and in campus life in general. A widespread pattern is that students are open to, and cooperate with, those who have something in common; who share similar biographies or backgrounds; and who share the goals of the organisation, its norms, values and principles, and who share its traditions.

CONCLUSION

As indicated in the title, the article pays particular attention to the politics of space, location and dialogue. Students, as key agents in the formation of counter-hegemonic cultural practices, need spaces of dialogue where the revision or reframing of current campus practices should begin. This may mean moving out of one's comfortable niche and pushing against oppressive boundaries set by race, sex, ethnicity and class domination. Here students confront a dilemma of choice and location: either to position themselves on the side of perceived oppressive and alienating cultural practices; or to stand in political resistance, ready to offer innovative ways of seeing and theorising, of shaping culture via a progressive project to create 'a space where there is unlimited access to the pleasure and power of knowing, where transformation is possible' (Hooks 1990, 145).

The article has argued that, while the university has come a long way in developing and implementing strategies designed to improve student satisfaction on campus and while many students have responded positively to these efforts, a sense of discontent persists for a large section of the student population. Most importantly, the study has also shown that this discontent and related tensions have less to do with the degree and content of institutional changes undertaken by the university than with the meanings those students attach to their experiences of these changes. The argument poses a serious challenge to an institution such as Wits University, with its diverse student population, since it is being suggested that strategies for improvement of campus climate and institutional culture should go beyond policy initiatives and structural dimensions of change. Such strategies must also facilitate mediation and negotiation of a shared space on campus, and *shared meanings* about campus experience, by the students themselves.

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