

The potential of students' narrative data to inform institutional improvement

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SAAIR Conference
16 September 2014



BACKGROUND

- Institutional research (IR) tends to focus almost exclusively on quantitative institutional data (Harper & Museus, 2007)
- 2007 edition of New Directions in Institutional Research focused specifically on qualitative research and called for greater embrace of qualitative approaches by IR offices
- Sethna (2011)
 - Only half of the 40 IR respondents made use of qualitative methods, and mostly document analysis
 - Qual better for developmental education
 - Major barrier to use was time constraints
 - “the institutional researchers surveyed indicated that qualitative analysis takes too much time and cognitive effort to summarise and extract actionable information from which decisions can be made” (Sethna, 2011, p. 80)

- Ducharme (2014)
 - Sent survey to 573 members of AIR, 174 responses
 - Institutional researchers with doctorates more likely to use qualitative methods, as were graduates of social sciences
 - Researchers at smaller institutions more likely to use qualitative methods
 - Researchers at larger institutions preferred broader, generalizable findings
 - Barriers included: lack of time, lack of staff and funding, lack of familiarity with qualitative methods as well as institutional cultures biased towards quantitative data

- Taking IR forward – Calderon & Mathies (2013) argued for excellence in professional practice and increasing role of IR in strategic planning
- Emphasised need for programming skills in line with growth in accountability and performance management
- But, no mention made of any role for qualitative research.
- Argue in this paper that quantitative methods are essential, but are not sufficient to adequately understand our students and so to inform institutional improvement
- “if we need to know why scores or other performances differ or how we might improve performance over time, we must look beneath the scores by using qualitative approaches” (Chism & Banter, 2007, p. 26)

THE STUDY

- 3-year longitudinal project, students lives – enablers and constraints on success as undergraduate students
- Started with volunteer group of 40 1st year students (now 39)
- Qualitative study, narrative methods
 - Drawings of experiences of coming to university
 - Individual life history interviews
 - Participatory research workshop – river of life drawings and group discussions of enablers and constraints on success.
- Quantitative institutional data – demographics, school performance, AP scores, NBT scores, enrolment data (qualification, credits & modules enrolled), and performance in first semester

QUANTITATIVE PROFILE (DEMOGRAPHICS)

- 20 female, 19 male
- Fields of study: EMS (5), EDU (6), HUM (8), LAW (13), NAS (7)
- 20 enrolled in extended degrees
- 21 first generation students
- Average age is 20 (range from 18-29)
- 4 live in campus residences
- All attended township high schools
- Students come from 8 of the 9 provinces in SA
- Most common home language – Sesotho (43.6%), Setswana (17.9%)
- Only 5.1% have English as home language – all are studying in English

QUANTITATIVE PROFILE (SCHOOL AND UNIVERSITY PERFORMANCE)

- Average AP score – 29 (range 21 – 37)
- Average NBT Academic Literacy (AL) score – 52% (range 35-61%)
- Average NBT Quantitative Literacy (QL) score – 42% (range 30-57%)
- No students that wrote NBTs (n=21) scored in proficient range
- Small and non-significant correlation between AP, AL, & QL with % 1st semester credits passed
- No relationship between % credits passed and extended/mainstream
- Ranking to determine risk in terms of low AP, AL and QL scores – different rankings each time
- 7 students passed less than 50% credits:
 - AP ranged from 21-30
 - 2 students in extended, 5 mainstream
 - Faculties: EDU, LAW, HUM, NAS
 - No pattern or explanatory variable is apparent

QUALITATIVE DATA SNIPPETS

- Qualitative analysis ongoing, too early to present final analysis of enablers and constraints
- Snippets to show how narrative data can enrich our understanding and interpretations of quantitative data
- **Snippet 1: gap between school and university**
- Lots of data available – NBTs, Grade 12 performance, analysis of marking patterns etc
- These numbers do not tell us the impact of this gap on students sense of agency in higher education
- Andrew (B.Ed Intermediate phase, AP score of 30, did not write NBTs)

Merridy: Overall, how well do you think your high school prepared you for what you've been dealing with at university?

Andrew: I think my school prepared me very, not very well, but just averagely, 50% I would say. 50% I would say, and, ja. And there are things that I didn't learn at school, and then when you get here you get to meet, like, when you in class you meet, maybe, children who are from maybe Grey College, or from [inaudible] and then when you put yourself on the level, and then you get to weigh yourself you can see that, no, the education that I have, and when you look at their education it's totally different. There are many things that they know that I don't know, and the way they think, the way they reason, the way they talk you can see that ja. So I think our teachers, township schools they are not, like, doing this the way they should do it.

Merridy: And how have you been dealing with that now that you're at university? If you see that there are some students that are finding it easier, in a sense.

Andrew: I've been trying to bring myself up. Like, to be honest, there's when, like, in the class, sometimes it's not like we don't know the answers, but sometimes the problem is the language. And it's not only me, most of the students who are from township schools, English is a problem. English is a problem, and you know the answers, but because of the language we cannot pass them, and then we get maybe scared to raise up a hand, and answer. Maybe, you will speak a bad English and then they will laugh at you, and then you get... those kind of things.

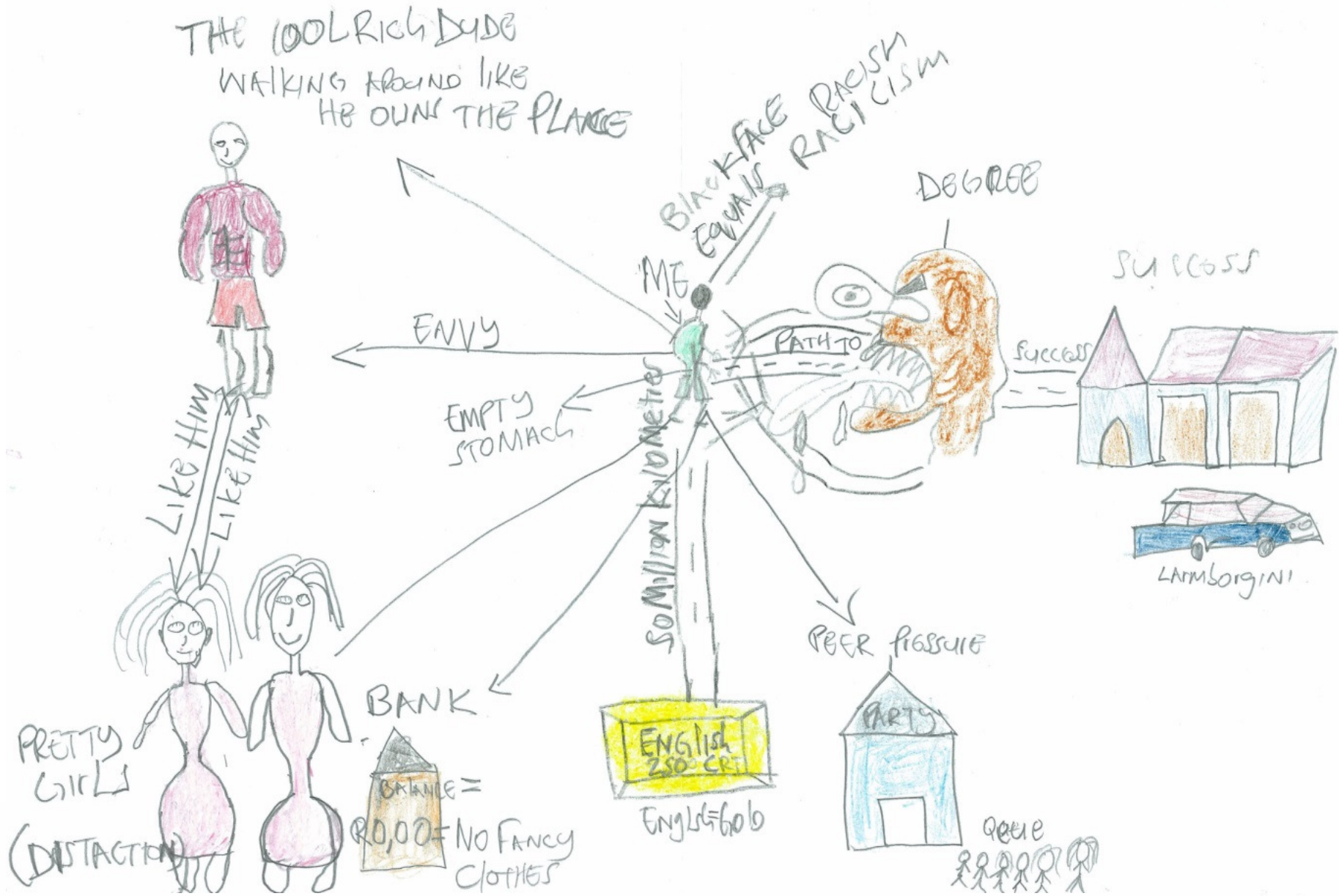
Merridy: And do the students laugh, the other students? Do they laugh if you speak bad English?

Andrew: No, they don't laugh. But you can see that how do they think of you and all that stuff, you can see, even if they don't laugh you can just see.

- **Snippet 2: Transition to university**
- Drawing done by RXI-007
- RXI-007 has AP score of 33, enrolled in B.Com Investment Management and banking, passed all 1st semester credits

RX1007

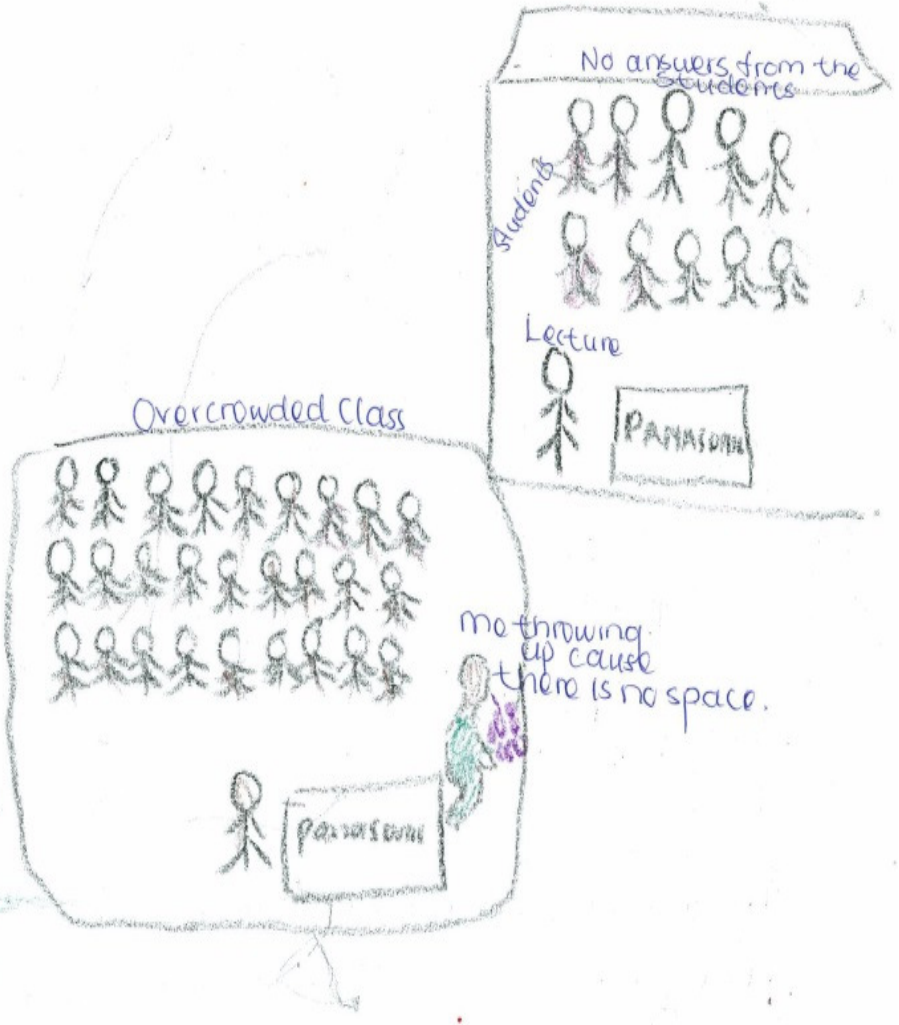
UNIVERSITY LIFE



- **Snippet 3: Large/overcrowded classes**
- Complexity of large classes in context of carrying capacity calculations and timetabling is well known
- Research also documents difficulty of students making transition from small classes at school to large lecturers at university
- But, do we know what impact large and overcrowded classrooms have on students' well-being?
- Jessica – AP score of 32, B Juris in Financial Planning Law, passed 56% of 1st semester credits)



1st day
alone in the
rain.



Overcrowded class

no throwing
up cause
there is no space.

No answers from the
students

Students

Lecture

PARASITIC

PARASITIC

Jessica

- **Snippet 4: Barriers to students' engagement with teaching and learning approaches**
- Importance of projects, 'real-life' and authentic learning activities well documented
- Academic planning offices rightly encourage inclusion of such activities
- But, do we know anything about how this impacts on poor students?
- TT (AP of 26, B.Ed Foundation Phase, passed 93% of 1st semester credits)

EXTRACT FROM TT'S JOURNAL

“I am so stressed about my school. I don't have money to buy my materials, eish, really education is costing!!! Having doubts about choosing this career. I love it, but I don't have money to support my career...What am I going to do, oh God help me. I so wish that lecturers will stop giving us projects that needs money...and again I have to buy a book, how will I study without a book. So sad.”

Later in the term:

“I am so stressed. I now have to paint my clock and I am submitting it next week when we reopen. What am I going to do? I don't have money to buy the paint, but I have to paint it whether I have money or not.”

CONCLUSIONS AND LESSONS

- What can we learn from this juxtaposition?
- IR emphasis on quantitative analyses is a given, this does not provide full picture and is not enough to inform institutional improvement
- Many researchers conducting qualitative studies in HE, but often not seen in IR/planning offices
- ‘Tomorrow’ of institutional research should include partnerships with researchers doing more in-depth qualitative studies

“Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted” (Albert Einstein)

Thank you

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