MBA STUDENTS' ENGAGEMENT WITH THE PROPOSAL PROCESS: IMPLICATIONS FOR ACCESS

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VLLGAD001

A minor dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Master of Education in Higher Education Studies.

School of Education

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University of Cape Town

2019

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DECLARATION

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people, has been attributed and has been cited and referenced.

Signature: | Signed by candidate | Date: August 2019

ABSTRACT

The research component of the Master of Business Administration (MBA) is often cited by MBA students and graduates as the most daunting and challenging part of the MBA programme. This thesis draws on the tools of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 1989, 1992, 1993, 1995, 2009) and insights from Academic Literacies to understand how novice researchers on the MBA programme at a South African Business School experience the proposal process which aims to prepare them for the writing of the research proposal and, by extension, the dissertation. The CDA assists in highlighting how students, as novice researchers, are positioned and expected to engage as researchers within a key document, the Dissertation Outline, which outlines the rules that govern the research process at the school. Discourse at the level of text shows how the undertaking of research, as well as assuming a specific researcher identity, is foregrounded through the use of textual features that reflect the values and dominant discourses within the programme and the School. The interview data illustrate how students' actual experiences of the proposal process sit alongside these valued ways of doing and being that are foregrounded in the official documentation and the ways in which the students' cultural capital impact their engagement with the process.

The students' interview data indicate how they experienced the proposal process as "challenging", "anxiety-inducing" and "overwhelming". This is evident in three main factors which shaped their experiences of the research process: the interlinked process of selecting a topic and securing a suitable supervisor; reconciling professional development goals with the valued types of research which are prioritised within the Research Methods course which forms part of the proposal process; and the impact of forms of cultural capital on their experiences of the proposal process. This results in a situation where the researcher identity which is explicitly foregrounded in the Dissertation Outline is questioned.

This study illustrates the ways in which the data problematise the School's assumptions about students' levels of preparedness for the research process and, more specifically, for the writing of the proposal. The data highlight the importance of recognising that students' experiences of the proposal process and challenges therein

are not only influenced by academic literacy factors that are directly linked to the writing of the proposal, but also by non-textual factors which precede or happen alongside the writing of the proposal. The data further demonstrate how institutional practices impact on the students' agency and power in the proposal process. This is due to the fact that while some forms of research are foregrounded as valued types of research in the Dissertation Outline, students' experiences point to limited support in terms of available instruction and supervision for this type of research. The study's findings highlight the importance of the nature of support provided to students navigating the transition from workplaces and different disciplinary contexts into the research component of the MBA. Based on the study's findings, it is important that this support take the form of an ongoing dialogue between stakeholders such as supervisors, lecturers, Academic Support, and the Writing Centre. This would serve to address students' access at various levels, from the nature of pedagogical practices on key courses such as the Research Methods course and how these function to prepare students, to the extent to which students are able to access and enact the valued ways that come with conducting research on the MBA programme.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

All glory be to God. Through Him who makes all things possible, I am finally here. I will devote my life to paying it forward.

To all the participants of this study, thank you for your openness and trust in allowing me to tell your stories.

My deepest gratitude goes to my supervisor Associate Professor Bongi Bangeni. Bongi, thank you for your mentorship, guidance, support, and most of all for making the experience enjoyable and valuable. I wish every student could experience the kind of care and support you provided to me through this dissertation journey.

My love and appreciation go to my girlfriends, family and colleagues, who provided the necessary support, interest, encouragement and kind words that often sustained me during challenging times. Mary and Claire, thank you for your kindness and assistance with the referencing and editing. Katherine, you have been a pillar of support and strength throughout this journey. Thank you for your unwavering support and much appreciated counsel. I would not be here without your belief in me Linda, a long time ago you presented a 'bridge' to me, I crossed it into a path which you continue to skilfully guide me through, thank you with all my heart. Ailsa, anything I write has to be done thanking you. Thank you for your valuable feedback, generous friendship and for being such an integral part of my life's journey.

To Allan, Chloe and Luca, this dissertation is dedicated to you. Thank you for supporting me to reach this dream. I know that you had to settle for a lot less than you deserve from me during this time, I promise to make it up to you. To my beloved Allan, you are my biggest fan, you believe in me even when I find it hard to believe in myself. I hope to make you proud.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AL   Academic Literacies

CDA   Critical Discourse Analysis

MBA   Master of Business Administration

RMS   Research Management System

RM   Research Methods Course

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background

It is with the MBA proposal that you know whether a research project will sink or swim."
(Personal communication, 24 February 2015)

The above statement, made by a faculty member, formed part of an academic discussion about the elements that constitute a successful Master of Business Administration (MBA) dissertation proposal. More importantly, the statement points to the perceived power and significance of the MBA dissertation proposal as a predictor of success for students' research projects. This study adopts an Academic Literacies approach to gain insight into how novice researchers experience the research component of the MBA programme at a South African School of Business (SoB). The research proposal marks their entry into this aspect of their studies, where they are expected to take on the identity of researcher and the values which this identity entails.

This is a research study about research studies. As an Academic Development (AD) practitioner at the SoB, I am concerned with understanding how the school can better support students' entry into this aspect of their studies. I am interested in exploring how the practices that constitute a key process termed the 'proposal process' are experienced by novice researchers who are negotiating the transition from work contexts or other disciplines into the MBA. The proposal process prepares MBA students for the writing of their research proposals and by extension, their dissertations (see section 1.2.1. for a detailed description of the proposal process).

The notion of access is an important one for this study. Within the study's context, access relates to the knowledges and identities that students bring to the MBA programme and the extent to which these (dis)enable an effective engagement with the proposal process. An article written by the current Acting Director of the SoB in 2019 published in Fin24 about the need to keep the MBA relevant is instructive. In

outlining how the school can achieve this objective Associate Professor Kosheek Sewchurran foregrounds the need to widen access to the MBA by "increasing student diversity across race, gender, age and educational background…" (Sewchurran, 2019). While the SoB has, in the recent past, made strides in transforming the student body from a racial perspective (Graduate School of Business, 2018a), the article by Sewchurran (2019) points to the need to acknowledge the diverse disciplinary and educational backgrounds of the students admitted on the MBA programme and the implications for their varied and individual access to the various components of the MBA.

1.1. Research problem: Accessing the research component of the MBA

The MBA selection criteria privilege work experience in addition to academic experience. While this does create an inclusive, diverse and relevant applicant pool, it also results in students having equally diverse experience with the Business Administration discipline in terms of their ability to engage with its practices. Students enter the MBA programme from diverse disciplinary and educational backgrounds. Many students transition from disciplines such as Engineering and Medicine and are therefore new to the Business Management discipline. Moreover, some MBA students may not have completed an undergraduate degree programme and are thus admitted via the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) mechanism. Of equal significance is the fact that a majority of the students admitted onto the programme are returning to study after a number of years of being in the workplace. In my AD practitioner role, I have seen how the dissertation component of the MBA programme is a daunting experience for many of these students mainly due to their anxieties around the production of the proposal. They typically struggle to reconcile the practices within the school with those of their prior disciplinary and workplace contexts and thus seek guidance from me regarding the related practical considerations of the proposal and dissertation process. While most studies on equity and access from a critical perspective consider students' linguistic and racial backgrounds and how these impact their access to disciplinary practices (Boughey, 2005; Clarence, 2017; Hyland, 2017; Kapp & Bangeni, 2009; Le Roux, 2008), this study considers access from the perspective of the impact of prior disciplines and professional experiences on a key process within the MBA. As my AD

role has shown over the years, this implies that students enter their MBA studies with differing levels of preparedness for writing in general and, more specifically, for engaging effectively with the research component and the practices that constitute the proposal process. It is therefore important to understand how students from diverse educational and disciplinary backgrounds experience the practices that constitute the proposal process and how these shape their approaches and experiences of writing the proposal.

Business schools are under pressure to increase MBA enrolments at a time when there has been a general decline in enrolment in MBA programmes internationally (Graduate Management Admission Council, 2018). The SoB has experienced a significant decline in MBA student enrolments in the past 2 years; the full-time MBA class enrolment decreased from 80 students in 2016 to class enrolments of 49 in 2017, 45 in 2018, and 33 in 2019. In explaining this rapid drop in enrolment, the SoB would need to consider, in addition to other factors, the relevance of the MBA programme curriculum in terms of meeting the needs of management education (Datar, Garvin, & Cullen, 2011; Hordern, 2014; Louw, Bosch, & Venter, 2001; Nkomo, 2015; Ruth, 2017; Singh, Lange, & Naidoo, 2005).

Literature on student participation within the MBA has shown how the place and relevance of the research dissertation within the MBA is heavily debated by both students and academics alike (Denscombe, 2013; Huang, 2009). Denscombe (2013) states that academic research has a "well-established place within business and management education" (p. 142) and has positive effects for business schools, faculty and students. Others, however, have questioned the relevance of research within the MBA, pointing to how, "critics have argued that emphasising research is misguided and may only serve the faculty's interests at the expense of students and the firms that employ them" (Mitra & Golder, 2008, p. 31). As the review of literature illustrates (see Chapter 3), studies are sparse on how students experience the support that is available to them as they embark on research within the MBA programme within a South African context. An exploration of students' experiences of the proposal process which shapes the eventual outcome of the dissertation thus becomes important in understanding not only how students experience the proposal process but also in addressing broader issues around access and participation on the MBA

programme. In exploring students' experiences of the proposal process, the extent to which the valued ways of doing and being therein include or exclude individuals thus becomes an important consideration. This then speaks to the forms of support that these students need to enable them to acquire and manage a researcher identity.

In the next section, I introduce the study's context: the Master of Business Administration (MBA) programme. The MBA structure is described and within that the proposal process around which the writing of the proposal is framed.

1.2. Context

According to Fairclough (1995), providing a description of the context in which individuals engage helps in explaining the nature of its practices. It is, therefore, necessary to understand the socio-political landscape within which the SoB functions.

The SoB has been ranked the best business school in Africa ("The 10 best business schools in South Africa," 2017). It is one of only 86 (Ramaboa, 2018) schools in the world to be a "triple-crowned" school, i.e. accredited by all three of the main international accreditation bodies namely, the Association of MBAs (AMBA), the European Quality Improvement System (EQUIS) and the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB). The SoB's full-time MBA has also been ranked in the Financial Times Global Top 100 MBAs for 12 consecutive years (GSB, 2018b), with the SoB being the only African business school to feature in this ranking. This makes the SoB a powerful and influential institution from this point of view. Accreditations and international rankings influence public opinion about business schools and the programmes they offer. Both those within and outside of the business school environment use these accreditations, categorisations and rankings as a form of quality assurance. The Council on Higher Education (CHE) is the Quality Council (QC) for Higher Education in South Africa and is responsible for the quality assurance of all South African higher education qualifications. The CHE (2015) has outlined the following as the standard for the MBA degree in terms of its purpose:

> The purpose of the qualification is to develop the capabilities and skills of current and potential managers and professionals to deal effectively with the

challenges of managing and leading organisations in a national and international competitive business environment, by means of the development of professional business administration knowledge at an advanced level, underpinned by the conceptual, theoretical and contextual understanding of leadership and core management functions and principles (p.8).

The above quote from the CHE illustrates that, while the research component of the MBA might be significant, the strong emphasis on research in this context, as evident in a key document which is analysed for the purposes of this study, does not align to the capabilities highlighted in the CHE document. In the next section, I describe the proposal process and the aspects that constitute it.

1.2.1. The proposal process

It is important to outline the MBA proposal process in order to illustrate the various kinds of support available to MBA students. The proposal process starts in the second term of the students' academic programme, in April. It is referred to as such because it is made up of various stages which commence when the student embarks on the Research Methods (RM) course. The RM course materials are meant to guide and prepare students for writing the proposal and for conducting research. The next stage of the process is finding a supervisor and deciding on a topic that works for both the supervisor and student. Once there is agreement on the topic, the student and supervisor sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). The submission of the proposal and ethics applications are done online via the SoB's Research Management Site (RMS). The proposal process concludes with the student receiving feedback from the supervisor via the RMS. While the administrative aspect which includes registration, online submissions of MOU forms, proposal documents and ethics applications is distinct from the academic process, from what I have observed, the two processes are intertwined in students' experience of them (see page 4 of Appendix 1, which provides a useful timeline in respect of the MBA research deadlines). These research deadlines, which are non-negotiable and enforced by heavy penalties, provide a useful map of what is required of MBA students for the proposal process.

1.2.1.1.   The Research Methods course within the proposal process

The MBA curriculum comprises fifteen core courses, which are intended to educate students in the fundamentals of business management and improve their business acumen. The sixteenth core course is the Research Methods (RM) course.

The overarching objective of the RM course is to prepare students for the dissertation and is offered before they write the proposal which forms the major assessment within the course. The proposal is a high stakes assessment as it constitutes 40% of the final overall RM course grade. Success in writing the proposal has further implications for students' performance in that if they perform poorly in the proposal then that is reflected in their final dissertation grade, for which the proposal constitutes 30%. Furthermore, if students fail the proposal, they are required to resubmit within two weeks and are awarded a grade of 50% and no more, due to it being a resubmission. While this process may seem to be mainly procedural, it indicates the way the proposal serves as a gatekeeper (Cadman, 2002) within the research process.

It is important to highlight that the MBA curriculum changed at the start of 2016. The changes included the re-weighting of the Research Methods course to a non-credit bearing course in the MBA. However, in 2017 the rules were once again adapted to assign credits to the Research Methods course. These changes speak not only to the contentious nature of the assessment of the proposal within the structures of the SOB but to the contentious nature of the role of and place for research within the MBA. Bringing these contextual considerations together led to my interest in understanding how students experience this process and the ways of engaging therein. In this study, I focus on students' experiences of the various aspects of the proposal process and I consider these experiences in terms of how they impact students' approaches to the writing of the proposal. Next, I will briefly introduce the study's research participants.

1.3. The research participants

Even though I interviewed nine MBA students, the study focusses on the experiences of six of these students (I explain the reason behind my focus on these six students in chapter 4, section 4.4.2). They are representative of the full sample in their diversity in

terms of educational and disciplinary backgrounds. All the participants in this study were in the MBA graduating class of 2017. In adhering to institutional research ethical practices as fully discussed in the methodology chapter, pseudonyms are used to refer to the participants. Aziz, a 35-year-old African student from Eritrea entered the programme with a BTech degree. Dianne, a 49-year-old, White, South African female had no formal tertiary qualification and gained access to the MBA via the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) route. Graham, a 31-year-old, White, South African male, had been practising as a medical doctor for 6 years and came from an affluent middle class and private schooling background. Khetiwe, a 32-year-old South African, African student held a Bachelor of Commerce Honours degree. Leonard, a 37-year-old, White, Polish student was in possession of two Master's degrees, one in Psychology and a Master of Arts in Governance, and Mark, a 31-year-old White, Zimbabwean student entered the programme with a Master's degree in Mechanical Engineering. Further biographical details of the participants are highlighted in Chapter 4, Section 4.4.2 and throughout Chapter 6. The study describes how these participants' personal, disciplinary and professional identities shaped their access to the proposal process.

1.4. Aims and objectives of the study

Based on the research problem outlined at the start of the chapter, the objectives of this study are twofold. The starting point of this study is to understand the dominant discourses that shape the research component of the MBA, i.e. the ways of thinking, believing, feeling and valuing (Gee, 1990) as evident in the documentation that students receive as part of the proposal process. The second objective is to understand how students' experiences of the proposal process speak to these prescribed ways of doing and being and the extent to which prior work and educational experiences shape their various engagements. Gaining insight into these challenges then requires a consideration of the support needed for the research component of the MBA. The study draws on the tools of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 1989, 1992d, 1993, 1995, 2009) to understand how an official document, the Dissertation Outline, reflects valued practices within the SoB such as how students are expected to engage as researchers. CDA is a form of discourse analysis that is concerned with the power relationships in society as expressed at the level of text

through language and situated practices (I discuss the features of CDA and its relevance for my study fully in Chapter 4, Section 4.5.2.). Students' experiences of the proposal process and valued practices therein are obtained via semi-structured interviews which were conducted after the submission of the proposal.

1.5. The relevance of an Academic Literacies approach for the study

There are many socially situated research approaches to understanding student engagement, for example Parks and Raymond (2004) within the context of business management. However, as Lillis and Scott (2007) point out, "what marks out those which can be characterised as adopting an 'academic literacies' approach, is the extent to which practice is privileged above text" (p. 10). This implies a valuing of the student voice which foregrounds participants' perspectives and meaning-making as they produce key disciplinary texts. Furthermore, these authors highlight the growing interest in "shifting the lens away from students' writing towards the disciplinary and institutional practices in which writing – and other communication practices – are generated and sustained" (p. 18). This quote is key in shaping my research objective. While the writing of the proposal is in itself important, the study directs the focus to how students make sense of the practices that precede the writing of the proposal, rather than the act of writing itself.

An Academic Literacies approach takes into account contextual elements such as individuals' identities and how these intersect with dominant institutional practices and power relations therein (Lea & Street, 2006) while underscoring the value of making these practices explicit for members. Implicit in this view is the notion that individuals are positioned in particular ways not only by these values and practices but by the identities they bring with them to the site of practice. This points to the importance of a consideration of what students bring with them to a field of participation (Bourdieu, 1986). In an attempt to explore this, the study draws on Bourdieu's concepts of institutionalised and embodied cultural capital and considers the implications of students' possession of these forms of capital for their engagement with the proposal process.

1.6. Research Questions

This study asks the following broad question:

What are MBA students' experiences of the proposal process within a School of Business and how do these experiences impact their approach to the writing of the proposal?

The sub-questions which will enable an exploration of this question are as follows:

Q1.   What are the valued practices and ways of being and doing as communicated in official documentation within the proposal process?

Q2.   How do MBA students access and engage with these practices within the proposal process?

Q3.   How are students' engagements with the proposal process impacted by prior work, disciplinary and personal experiences?

As the research questions show, I am interested in seeing how the official documentation which is presented to students as part of the proposal process reflects ways of being, doing and valuing within the programme and how students then engage with these ways of being and doing. Gaining insight into the practices that are valued within the proposal process and how these are presented in discourse form is important for determining the nature of support that is required to facilitate students' access to the research component of the MBA programme.

1.7. Structure of the dissertation

The introduction chapter contextualises the research study, explores the research problems and the study's rationale, and briefly introduces the theoretical and analytical frameworks. In Chapter 2, I discuss the theoretical concepts that are at the centre of this study. Chapter 3 provides a review of the literature on students' experiences of the support available within MBA programmes and their negotiation of identity therein. The methodology and methods employed in the study, as well as validity and ethical considerations regarding my insider status, are presented in Chapter 4. Chapter 5

presents and discusses the findings yielded by the CDA of the Dissertation Outline as a key document within the proposal process while Chapter 6 presents my analysis and discussion of the students' experiences of the proposal process and implications for how they experience the writing of the proposal. In Chapter 7 I present the conclusions reached by the study. In presenting these, I describe how they address the research questions of the study and their implications for the MBA research component. In doing so I argue that students' resources in the form of the experiences and knowledge they bring should be acknowledged and validated through collaborative efforts between various stakeholders such as supervisors, lecturers, and Academic Support so as to facilitate their access to the research component of the MBA.

CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2. Introduction

This chapter presents an overview of the theories and concepts which provide the framing for this study. Sections 2.1 and 2.2 locate the study within the field of New Literacy Studies (NLS) and, within that, the sub-discipline of Academic Literacies. James Gee's (1998) notion of Discourse is introduced in section 2.3 and is used to highlight how power operates through the structuring principles of Discourse. Section 2.4 unpacks the notion of identity, with a particular focus on professional and disciplinary identity while section 2.5 provides a definition of agency and its relevance for the study. Section 2.6 concludes this chapter with considerations of power dynamics through the lens of Bourdieu's (1986) theories of Field, Capital and Habitus.

2.1. New Literacy Studies

This study considers how a group of MBA students engage with the practices constituting the proposal process within the MBA programme. It draws on understandings of literacy as espoused by theorists within New Literacy Studies (NLS). Theorists such as Gee (1990), Lea (1998), Lillis (2003), and Street (1993) conceptualise literacy as a social practice which moves its definition from a crude and instrumental view were literacy is viewed as a set of technical skills that can be quantified and commodified. Literacy as a social practice foregrounds "the recognition of multiple literacies, varying according to time and space, but also contested in relations of power" (Street, 2003, p. 77). Thus, the ways in which power works within the MBA programme in terms of students' exclusion from and access to the key practices required for a successful engagement with the proposal become key. New Literacy Studies research requires that individuals' engagement with social practices that govern a context be studied as they occur within a community. This research project aims to contribute to the growing pool of knowledge within the field of New Literacy Studies in its exploration of a group of MBA students' engagements with the

literacy practices informing a key process – the proposal process – within the School of Business (SoB).

2.2. Academic Literacies

According to the sub-field of New Literacy Studies, Academic Literacies, learning in university within spaces such a business school involves new ways of presenting and engaging with knowledge that can be classified as a particular set of academic literacy practices. Accordingly, Lea and Street (Lea & Street, 2006) define Academic Literacies as the "diverse and multiple literacies found in academic contexts" (p. 227). They point to three approaches to literacy in academic contexts. The first is the *study skills model*, which views literacy in technical and instrumental ways and presumes that students can transfer their knowledge literacy "unproblematically from one context to another". The second, the *academic socialization* approach, focusses on students' induction into disciplinary and subject-based discourses and genres with the end result being the acculturation of students to the academic discourse. The third approach is the *academic literacies* approach, which incorporates aspects of the other two approaches (Lea & Street, 2006) while differing significantly in its view of writing and the place of the student writer therein.

A key aspect of the Academic Literacies approach, which is not foregrounded in the other two approaches, is its consideration of how students negotiate conflicting literacy practices and the impact of context on the various identities students bring. As such, this approach views the contexts within which academic practices are enacted as sites of power and unequal access to and engagement with resources. By taking this view, Academic Literacies draws attention to the ways in which power and identity (at the levels of student, teacher, institution, discipline) are inscribed in literacy practices, and the need to explore the possibilities for adopting transformative approaches to academic writing (Kaufhold, 2015). The transformative role of Academic Literacies research is to highlight ways in which pedagogy can facilitate the consideration of students' resources from previous discourses as "legitimate tools for meaning making" (Lillis & Scott, 2007, p. 13).

Documents such as the official Dissertation Outline within the MBA programme signal the ideologies and beliefs that the SoB holds about the nature of pre-MBA attributes and literacies (disciplinary ways of writing and engaging with knowledge) that students entering the programme possess. However, there tends to be a gap between these theoretical expectations and the reality which a diverse group of post-experience students bring to the MBA. This study explores the ways in which MBA students' disciplinary and professional identities facilitate an engagement with the literacy practices and discourses associated with the proposal process. Below I describe the notion of 'Discourse' as expressed by Gee (1990).

2.3. Discourses and Power

The concept of "Discourse" (spelled with a capital "D" by Gee) refers to a combination of the ways in which people "enact and recognize socially and historically significant identities" or "kinds of people" (Gee, 2013, p. 1) through ways of being; i.e. language use, actions, beliefs, and values. Gee (1990) categorises Discourses in society into two broad forms: primary and secondary Discourses. Primary Discourses are those that constitute individuals' first social identity; i.e. our home-based Discourses. They are what we are socialised into in the early stages of our lives via apprenticeship within the family, and function as a base from which we acquire or resist the secondary Discourses which we encounter later on in our lives (Gee, 1990). These primary Discourses inform our understandings of the world, who 'we are' and who 'people like us' are (Gee, 1990: p.168). Gee defines literacy as mastery of a secondary Discourse. According to him, "secondary Discourses are those to which people are apprenticed later through institutions such as schools, religious institutions, universities, gangs and work, all of which are part of wider communities" (Gee, 1990, p. 168). Secondary Discourses build on the use of language, values, and attitudes of primary Discourses; i.e. a child who is raised in a home where reading, writing and critical argument is valued will most likely adapt easier to a secondary discourse such as academic writing at university where those abilities and skills are expressed. This implies that secondary Discourses, through participation and mastery, can afford one power, therefore allowing participants a means to advance in society in various ways. Academic Discourse is an example of a dominant secondary Discourse. Thus becoming 'literate'

in academic Discourse is also becoming 'literate' in the dominant discourse of a particular social group and ultimately affords increased social standing. In the context of this study, an MBA graduate will likely be afforded more opportunities in certain sectors because the MBA qualification is associated with certain competencies and is considered a prestigious qualification.

There is, however, potential risk for the individual trying to enter a secondary Discourse since failure to acquire the required ways of being can result in exclusion from that Discourse and its community. This then positions these ways of being as powerful due to their gatekeeping nature.

This reference to power points to how academic institutions are viewed as sites of discourse where power is reproduced through discursive practices, as Foucault (1981) asserts:

> Any system of education is a political way of maintaining or modifying the appropriation of discourses, along with the knowledges and powers which they carry…What, after all, is an education system, other than the ritualisation of speech, a qualification and a fixing of the roles for speaking subjects, the constitution of a doctrinal group, however diffuse, a distribution and an appropriation of discourses with its power and knowledges (p. 64).

Foucault's quote eloquently asserts that every education system is a political means to maintain power and shape society. Universities construct and distribute knowledge but university systems also transmit and apply conditions to ways of being via the discourses they construct. Thus, these institutions maintain and control the distribution of power to those who are able to acquire access. Luke (2003) states that in multilingual societies (such as South Africa), specific modes and genres of linguistic practice constitute forms of cultural capital with variable and field-specific exchange value. The MBA dissertation proposal, which is the outcome of the proposal process, is an essential component of the MBA programme. Mastery of the MBA proposal and its ways of doing, saying and believing afford power and status within the SoB, therefore, making it a "genre of power" (Luke, 1997, p. 308). It is therefore important to gain insight into the discourses that constitute the proposal process which informs

the writing of this genre. The notion of identity is an important one in understanding this process and is explored below.

2.4. Professional and Disciplinary Identity

The notion of Identity has been approached from several perspectives in studies on students' experiences. This study draws on a poststructuralist understanding of identity which foregrounds its fluid and multiple nature and the role of context in its enactment (Bhabha, 1994; Norton & Toohey, 2011). This view of identity is considered alongside Gee's (2001) conceptualisation of identity which he defines as "being recognized as a certain "kind of person," in a given context (p. 99). Gee (2001) highlights four perspectives of identity as recognised within a context of power. These are nature-identities (N-identities) which refer to a state of being, such as being male or female, which is linked to natural forces and genetic makeup. Gee explains that "N-Identities must always gain their force as identities through the work of institutions, discourse and dialogue, or affinity groups, that is, the very forces that constitute our other perspectives on identity" (p. 102). The next perspective involves institutional identities (I-identities) which are the identities set by authorities within an institution. Gee gives the example of himself as a professor, whose identity is defined by the university as an institution. The third perspective on identity is the affinity perspective (A-identities). A-identities are built by shared "allegiance to, access to, and participation in specific practice" (p. 105). Gee gives the example of being a Star Trek fan, where the sharing in the associated distinctive practices of attending screenings, swapping memorabilia and dressing like characters of the show, are the source of power in forming this identity. He further explains that one must *choose* (my emphasis) to join a group in order for the A-identity to be formed. As I will show in the analysis of data this notion of choosing is important for students and how they respond to how they are positioned as researchers.

Lastly, Gee (2001) presents the notion of discourse-identities (D-identities) which refers to an individual trait, such as being charismatic. The source of power for D-identities is social interaction where "other people treat, talk about, and interact" (p. 104) with the person in ways that bring forth and reinforce the trait. This makes this

identity largely discursive. According to Gee (2001) "D-identities can be placed on a continuum in terms of how active or passive one is in 'recruiting' them, that is, in terms of how much such identities can be viewed as merely ascribed to a person versus an active achievement or accomplishment of that person" (p. 104).

These perspectives on identities, specifically the A and I-identities, are particularly relevant for my participants. Students are assigned the role of student (I-identity) within an institution which places them in a certain position in the hierarchical structure, with certain expectations about how to engage within that institutional space. This framing of identity also suggests that discourse (ways of doing and being) regulates one's access within the institution. One of these ways of being and doing is that of being a researcher, which represents an Affinity group in which the student is expected to engage and participate. In the proposal process, students are endeavouring to develop the identity of researcher within the field of Business Administration. Furthermore, MBA students are adult learners with professional experience and thus are also practitioners from various professional fields with values, dispositions and underpinnings which inform their professional practices. The A-Identity can thus be thought of in terms of the identity that comes with conducting research within the MBA and how students are expected to enact this identity in convincing ways. It is thus a crucial aspect of identity as students need to negotiate their other identities (professional and personal) alongside the researcher identity (A-identity) they are expected to assume. The actions they take as part of this negotiation are important as they demonstrate the extent to which they can be agentic within this process. The notion of agency and its significance for identity negotiation is described in the next section.

2.5. Agency

A factor which facilitates the development of the researcher identity is the extent to which one exercises agency in the academic environment. McAlpine and Amundsen (2009) describe agency as an "evocation of identity, one that represents the capacity to perceive personal goals towards which one is directing action" (p. 112). The SoB typically positions its students as clients. MBA students are senior professionals and

managers in business and thus generally expect to interact with SoB staff (professional and academic) in a manner which resonates with their professional statuses of leaders and managers within their various contexts. This positioning affords the MBA student a status that is linked to power within the SoB environment. However, it is important to acknowledge that students need access to certain types of skills / practices to effect the power attributed to them.

This study will highlight the role of cultural capital and professional identity on students' agency (or lack thereof) in the proposal process. In highlighting this, the impact of their prior contexts on this process will be considered. The importance of this is captured by McAlpine and Amundsen who state, "… central to developing academic identity are the students' experiences of agency as they engage in academic practice" (p. 112). These authors highlight the significance of "linking present actions to past experiences and future intentions" (p. 112) in exploring individuals' agency. The analysis of the data points to how the research participants who come from disciplines which should afford students the relevant capital within the programme have to navigate prior and present experiences in order to achieve professional development goals.

The concept of capital takes me to a consideration of the term as conceived by sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu. The next section will discuss how power operates at the level of the capital that individuals bring to a site of practice through the lens of Bourdieu's (1986) concepts of field, capital and habitus. In doing so I will also illustrate how these concepts speak to Gee's (2001) framing of identity, particularly his notions of discourse-identity and institutional-identity.

2.6. Theories of Field, Capital and Habitus

Gee's (2001) notion of identities speaks to Bourdieu's (1986) concepts of field, capital and habitus which are used extensively in education. Bourdieu's concepts assist in illustrating how the MBA proposal process functions as a social practice and the extent to which the personal, educational and work experiences that students bring to the programme impact their engagements within the proposal process. Below, I explain each of the three concepts in detail to highlight their significance for this study.

2.6.1. Field

According to Bourdieu (1986), a field is a network of social positions, which is constituted by forms of capital. In a later article Bourdieu (1998) explains a field as follows:

> A field is a structured social space, a field of forces, a force field. It contains people who dominate and people who are dominated. Constant, permanent relationships of inequality operate inside this space, which at the same time becomes a space in which the various actors struggle for the transformation or preservation of the field. All the individuals in this universe bring to the competition all the (relative) power at their disposal. It is this power that defines their position in the field and, as a result, their strategies (p. 40-41).

Bourdieu's quote highlights how a field is a structured social space based on power relations between people (agents) who occupy certain positions in the field. The agents in the field take positions which are aimed at conserving or transforming the structure of relations that make up the field. The MBA as a field attempts to bring together the values of the higher education field and those of business. The MBA programme can be seen as a field with both lecturers and students as agents who hold various positions of power; each occupies a distinct position determined by the forms of capital they have accumulated. These forms of capital define and shape the SoB (as an institution) as well as an individual's success within the field.

2.6.2. Capital

Bourdieu (1986) states that it is impossible to account for the structure and functioning of the social world unless one reintroduces capital in all its forms and not solely in the one form recognized by economic theory. He asserts that:

> capital can present itself in three fundamental guises: as *economic capital*, which is immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalized in the forms of property rights; as *cultural capital*, which is

convertible, on certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the forms of educational qualifications; and as *social capital*, made up of social obligations ('connections'), which is convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the forms of a title of nobility (p.16)*.

Official discourses around research give view to what attributes are valued in an MBA candidate. The SoB MBA selection criteria are publicly available (Graduate School of Business, 2018c). Student selection criteria do not simply privilege academic criteria, but also value occupation, years of work experience, age, and the personal attributes of applicants such as "goals, attitudes and values" (Graduate School of Business, 2018c). As discussed in Chapter 1, MBA students joining the MBA programme come from diverse disciplinary, professional and personal backgrounds. Therefore, the nature of cultural capital on which they draw in negotiating the proposal process within the programme is equally disparate.

Bourdieu points to three types of capital which individuals bring to a field. The first is economic capital which refers to the material wealth that we own such as money and property. The SoB MBA is an elite programme which costs in excess of R220 000, more than many other Masters' programmes. Students must have access to economic means to enrol in the programme. The MBA programme thus attracts students from a privileged social class, a point which is reinforced by implicit gatekeeping mechanisms such as the cost of the programme. This access to economic capital continues as a key distinguisher in the MBA research process because aspects of the proposal process require students to acquire resources such as software for analysis, the services of transcribers, and editors for their dissertations. Those students who do not have access to economic capital are thus disadvantaged in this regard.

Social capital, according to Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) refers to "the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (p.119). An example of social capital as a key influencer of students' ability to succeed in the proposal process is the ability to access vital resources: supervisors for their research, resources for teaching case research types, companies to research or influential participants. In my experience in my role at the

SoB, some students struggle with this as they often lack the networks required to access resources for their research.

Cultural capital refers to the collection of valued symbolic resources such as skills and competence, mannerisms, tastes, credentials and material goods and can be seen as affording power and social mobility to individuals. According to Bourdieu (1986), this type of capital exists in three states: namely the embodied state, the institutionalised state and the objectified state. The relevance of these three states of cultural capital is outlined below in the definitions of each concept.

The embodied state refers to the embodiments or dispositions that result from the knowledge we acquire over time, through socialisation and education. One form of embodied capital is how well we are able to acquire language skills. A person who is from a privileged home environment with access to books, education and family and who is able to develop language skills has significantly more embodied cultural capital that someone who is not. The data from my research will show how participants' embodied cultural capital impacts their ability to succeed in the proposal process. The objectified state results from the material objects we own; i.e. our clothes or how we dress, the cars we drive, our furniture or books, and is an indicator of how much cultural capital we possess. The institutionalised state refers to the recognition bestowed on an individual by an institution. An example of this form of capital is the academic qualification acquired by an individual. In the context of the MBA proposal process, certain qualifications and types of knowledge are privileged and this has implications for students' ability to engage effectively with the practices within the proposal process.

2.6.3. Habitus

Habitus is defined as a system of dispositions that shape the way that individuals interact with the world (Bourdieu, 1986). Bourdieu (1990) describes it as follows:

> Habitus is a product of conditioning which tends to reproduce the objective logic of those conditionings while transforming it. It's a kind of transforming machine that leads us to 'reproduce' the social conditions of our own production, but in

a relatively unpredictable way, in such a way that one cannot move simply and mechanically from knowledge of the conditions of production to knowledge of the products (p. 87).

Bourdieu's quote above refers to a way of being in the world as a result of all the aspects of our being and doing. For the MBA students, habitus functions prominently on three levels: at the level of family and class background, then school/educational background and, lastly, at the level of professional experience. The MBA students are socialised to work in particular ways in their various professions and are then additionally required to interact in particular ways as student and researcher. This highlights the importance of various embodied attributes which are privileged within the SoB space.

Linking Bourdieu's (1990) concepts to Gee's (2001) notion of Identities, if habitus is "the sum of all of the aspects of our being and doing, built both consciously and unconsciously, over years of being in the world" (Clarence, 2019) then all Gee's (2001) aspects of identity are implicated in students' ability to enact their agency in the proposal process. The acquisition of cultural capital is either limited or enhanced by all aspects of Gee's identity, where field structures delineate and determine the interpretive system through which identities are recognised. Bourdieu's (1990) concepts present a framework for addressing the different questions which this research asks, specifically the question that seeks to understand how students' engagement with the proposal process is impacted by prior work, disciplinary and personal experiences. Bourdieu's three concepts function in relation to each other and help to describe individual dispositions and behaviour (habitus); to examine the various resources and power each individual possesses (capital), and locate both of these within a specific context (field).

This chapter has presented an overview of the theories which provide the framing for this study. Chapter 3 provides a review of the literature on the role and relevance of the research component within the MBA and how students' experience the role of researcher within this context as well as the overall support required to enable them to function effectively in this role.

CHAPTER 3: LITERATURE REVIEW

3. Introduction

In this chapter, I review studies that have considered the role and place of research within the MBA. I then present literature on students' experiences of the research process within Management programmes. In doing so I highlight instructive studies on student transitions into research within the Management discipline, specifically examining students' experiences of the support attached to research writing.

3.1. The silencing and gatekeeping power of the proposal

A number of studies have explored the ways in which students have engaged with the genre of the research proposal (Cadman, 2002; Denscombe, 2013; Ndlangamandla, 2015; Onwuegbuzie, 1997; Paxton, 2013). These studies offer valuable insights into the dilemmas experienced by graduate students and the 'gatekeeping' attributes associated with the research proposal in general. Cadman (2002) emphasises how "the research proposal is a site of struggle between knowledge and power on several levels at once" (p. 101)*. This is evident in Paxton's (2013) study which illustrates the difficulties students face in trying to incorporate their experiences into the constraining genre of the scientific research proposal for a Master's programme at a South African university. In doing so her study illustrates the risk and gatekeeping potential of the Master's proposal. She uses two case studies framed within the theories of genre and voice to illustrate the silencing power of the academic conventions associated with the proposal genre. Paxton (2013) shows how traditional scientific research genres have allowed for little space for personal experiences. However, in the case of Idrina (the subject of one the two cases), allowing her to include her personal narrative in her research writing contributed to her projecting stronger authoritative voice. In addition, her personal narrative contributed as a new source of knowledge in understandings of neonatal death in Zambia. My study shows that MBA students come from professional discourses which are subject to differing academic conventions in terms of thinking

and writing and could potentially be experiencing the same silencing challenges as they engage in the MBA proposal process.

The second case of Serina in Paxton's (2013) study demonstrates the proposal's role as a gatekeeper for students who perhaps are not regarded as capable of meeting subjective criteria. Serina is an experienced midwife who was advised by her supervisors that she would not be allowed to continue her masters after spending more than a year working on her proposal. Her writing was regarded as a chief obstacle for the acceptance of her proposal. Her case illustrates the risks associated for her, the writing consultant assisting her, as well as the risk for her supervisor. However, the case also shows that embracing that risk can open up possibilities for transformative pedagogy.

Cadman's (1997; 2002) studies on postgraduate research similarly investigate the gatekeeping potential of the research proposal. The first study (2002) examines postgraduate students' situated understandings of the research proposal at a conventional Australian university. A total of 72 supervisors were surveyed to understand what criteria they were using to assess research proposals. The second study (1997) addresses international students' challenges with writing English language theses. While these studies serve to highlight the gatekeeping power of the proposal, like Paxton's (2013) study, they focus on the actual writing of the process rather than on students' experiences of the support structures which inform the writing of this genre. Moreover, the positioning power of disciplinary ways of valuing and being as outlined in course documentation and how these are reflected in students' experiences are not the focus of these studies.

3.2. Literature on students' experiences within professional disciplines from an Academic Literacies perspective

There is a growing corpus of studies in the field of Academic Literacies which explores students' negotiation of disciplinary discourses in various professional disciplines at South African higher education institutions through a critical lens which considers access and equity (see for example Hyland (2017) in Accounting; Case (2007) in Engineering; Clarence, Albertus and Mwambene (2014) in Law; Kapp and Bangeni

(2009) in the Humanities; Paxton (2013) in the Health Sciences; and Bangeni (2013) in Marketing). The findings of these studies speak to the challenges students face as they transition into various professional undergraduate and postgraduate disciplines in higher education. While these studies have, at their core, what my study aims to understand - students' negotiation of the elements influencing their academic writing in professional disciplines - they do not explore these from the perspectives of students negotiating the transition from workplace contexts into the research component of their degrees.

Unlike the above studies which focus on students' engagements within higher education, Ndlangamandla's (2015, 2017) study does consider students' transition from the workplace into academia. His study examines how professional and academic discourse practices amongst postgraduate Magister Technologae (MTech) in Policing students intersect in the research proposal. The study's findings illustrate how mixed forms of academic discourse are produced in a MTech in Policing context. The findings also suggest that the way students draw on the workplace in their academic texts results in clashes between the workplace and academic knowledge practices. The study's findings further illustrate how students use recontextualisation (Bernstein, 2000) strategies such as mimicry in their engagements with research literacies as they "shuttle" (Ndlangamandla, 2015, p. 2) between the workplace and academic contexts. While my study is similarly examining students' transition into research literacies, a key differentiator is the context of the research. Ndlangamandla's study (2015, 2017) considers the impact of workplace literacies on students' engagement within a policing and distance learning context while my study explores students' experiences within the context of management and business administration. This means that issues around discourse and power as dictated by the context of the MBA would necessarily differ from those raised within the MTech study's context. In the next section, I direct attention to the body of literature on student experiences that is located within Management programmes.

3.3. Literature on students' experiences within Management programmes

While there are a number of resources that provide guidelines on business and management research (Bryman & Bell, 2007; Gray, 2017; Sekaran & Bougie, 2010; Yin, 2014), there are few studies which explore the challenges facing MBA students as they embark on research within this context. While the role and place of research within Management programmes is addressed, this has mainly been from the perspective of curriculum rather than from students' perspectives. Denscombe's (2013) study, for example, explores the use of research proposals as stand-alone components within business and management courses. It seeks to understand how the research proposal can help Bachelor's and Master's students to comprehend the principles of research methodology and their application. A shortcoming of this study then is its discussion of the benefits and limitations of using research proposals without a consideration of the actual experience of conducting empirical research.

Another significant study which is located within the MBA context is that of Kangis (2009) who conducts a quantitative analysis of students' performance within 100 MBA dissertations against a set of criteria. He argues that research policy on "MBA dissertations should be challenged and rather be informed by learning outcomes relevant to students as present or future senior managers" (p. 8). The study concludes that "rigid adherence to the conventional scientific model should be toned down and that the potential benefits of several alternative models of research and knowledge creation should be given greater prominence" (p. 8). The findings of this study underscore the importance of including other forms of research in the MBA curriculum.

While these studies usefully point to international perspectives and views on the place for research within the MBA, they do not offer insight on students' experiences of having to negotiate research-related aspects of the MBA. This means that the role and place of research within this context is not prioritised. Furthermore, several MBA programmes abroad do not have a compulsory dissertation requirement. Therefore, literature on students' experiences of the MBA mainly addresses the relevance and effectiveness of curricula in terms of meeting MBA learning objectives (Louw et al., 2001), international students' experiences of pedagogical methodologies and strategies in MBA curricula in the UK (Currie & Knights, 2003); and students' perceptions about their learning processes and the development of their capabilities

and competencies through participation in MBA programmes (see Vazquez & Ruas, 2012; Witt, Sandoe, Dunlap, & Leon, 2019).

Similarly, research from a critical perspective on students' experiences of the support for the writing of the proposal within the MBA within the South African context is sparse. Similar to the studies cited above, South African research within the MBA also considers issues of curriculum quality and the evaluation of MBAs (Louw et al., 2001; Singh et al., 2005). Within Southern Africa, Temtime and Mmereki's (2011) study investigates students' perceptions of their challenges within and the relevance of the MBA programme at the University of Botswana. It examines the students' level of satisfaction and the extent to which the skills and experiences they obtained correlate with those required by the business world. The study also briefly highlights how thesis or dissertation writing does not form a compulsory aspect of the programme, which resulted in most students opting to complete their degree through course work only. An interesting question raised by these studies is why do so few students opt into the dissertation component if it is not compulsory? This connects to the larger question question related to my study about how accessible the dissertation/proposal writing (or research) discourse is to students in MBA programmes.

3.4. Literature on students' experiences of the research process

A study that does consider students' experiences of the research process is located in the context of Asian international students undertaking dissertations in Management degrees in Tourism and Hospitality in the UK (Huang, 2009), where students' positive and negative experiences of this process are described. Quite significantly, the study found that participants' research topic selection was influenced by three aspects, namely: their personal interest in a subject area; the perceived ease of access to sources of data; and, the most common motivation, the relevance of the topic to their jobs or possible job prospects. While this study considers students' experiences of research, it is not within the Business Administration field nor does it gain insight into students' experiences at the initial stages of undertaking research where their experiences of the support on offer are considered.

Similarly, a recent study by Cassell (2018) considers students' experiences of qualitative research and examines how the skills acquired in the research process contribute to the skills required for managerial practice. In addition to the research participants being MBA students, this study focusses on the key challenges experienced by novice researchers in order to inform teaching practice. In doing so it contributes to much-needed accounts of students' experiences with conducting qualitative research and highlights the lack of available documented research on instruction in qualitative research in MBA programmes internationally. This is evident in Cassell's observation where she notes that while there are many researchers who present insider accounts of their experiences with Business research, "these focus on those who have already made a considerable commitment to learning how to do qualitative research rather than on the general members of the Management classroom" (p.120). Cassell's study, however, is based on MBAs based in the United Kingdom. It also does not consider these students' experiences from a critical perspective which takes into account how students' educational and disciplinary backgrounds can contribute to uneven participation within a research context.

3.5. An instructive study on students' transitions to postgraduate Business Education in South African institutions

Even though there is an increase in studies on students' negotiation of the research components of their studies (Deem & Brehony, 2000; Huang, 2009; Keller & Kros, 2000; Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017; Marshall, Klocko, & Davidson, 2017) there are not many instructive studies which address access within the field of business studies in South Africa. One study which does take this approach is that of Winberg, Ncubukezi, and Ntloko's (2015) which has examined students' successful transition from practice-based undergraduate business degrees to postgraduate studies in the business field. Their study investigated the nature of Master's students' experiences in business studies across different fields and in different institutions. It also examined the types of support students receive (or need) to enable their success in postgraduate research. One of the key findings of the study was that students were unaware of "the specific academic knowledge-building practices" that they were expected to develop. Importantly, these include non-textual practices such as accessing assistance from a

subject librarian and how, and when, to request a meeting with a supervisor. The authors found that these practices had their own "social norms" or accepted conventions which the students had to learn. The challenges that students had with understanding these particular types of practice and conventions of disciplinary cultures were highlighted as key issues. However, the study's exploration of transition is limited to the field of Business which would mean that the research participants were largely insiders to the business discipline. Therefore, the need to negotiate different disciplines and the impact of different disciplines on their transition into research is not a feature of their study.

One of the key concerns associated with this potential struggle faced by students is the issue of negotiating identities as mature professionals. The following section considers literature that explores the challenges experienced by practitioners with managing their identities in the academic research process.

3.6. Negotiating professional and disciplinary identities

Chapter 2 outlines the theoretical significance of the notion of identity for this study. Ivanič (1998) states that the term 'identity' is useful because it is an everyday word for people's sense of who they are. Drawing on studies by Hockey,(1987); Gardener, (1992); Moss, (1987); and Roach, (1990); Ivanič (1998) highlights that higher education is "associated with change, difficulty, crisis of confidence, feelings of strangeness and the need to discover the rules of an unfamiliar world" (p. 7). MBA students are mature adult practitioners, with some of them entering into academia from non-academic contexts. As such, they typically find it challenging to transition into the discourses associated with undertaking research where their identity as a practitioner may be in conflict with the identity of novice researcher. This is illustrated in a study by Blenkinsopp and Stalker (2004) who highlight the difficulties experienced by practitioners as they transition into academia in the Management discipline (management academics). The study explores how emergent management academics "manage" their self-identity in terms of how they are perceived and how they perceive themselves. The authors argue that practitioners "are left to construct a cautious, limited academic self-identity instead of being supported and encouraged to

draw upon their management experience in engaging in the full range of scholarly activity" (p. 428). While their study focusses on management academics who have made considerable commitment to the role of researcher, my study focusses on MBA students who are mostly ambivalent about the identity of researcher as they embark on the proposal. This study thus considers the role of these students' personal and professional identities in their engagement with the proposal process.

Bangeni's (2012) study on how English second language Social Science graduates transition into postgraduate professional disciplines offers useful insight into students' constructions of their various identities in their academic journey. A key finding of this study is that students' challenges with the literacy practices of the law discipline resulted in a rejection of the professional identity of lawyer attached to legal studies. The study considers the impact of students' brought-along identities on their transition into law from an academic literacies perspective which considers issues around access. However, the aspect of identity considered is that of disciplinary identity as the research participants did not have professional experience and were yet to enter the world of work. Therefore, the enabling and/or constraining effect of the environment on students' agency is not considered from this perspective.

A significant study on identity which considers agency looks at the development of academic identity within doctoral students. The authors, McAlpine and Amundsen (2009), drew on data from three separate studies examining doctoral students' engagements in order to explore students' expressions of agency in the doctoral process. Importantly, these authors look to students' prior experiences within the workplace and how these impact agency as they construct academic identities. While this study speaks to my focus, the research participants do have previous experience of conducting research. Furthermore, the study does not consider access from a critical perspective within a business context.

In this chapter, I reviewed available literature on students' experiences of the transition into research from work and disciplines that are different to the MBA. My review of the literature in this area highlights the gaps within the field as related to this study; research on students' negotiation of the processes informing MBA research writing is sparse. There is not much literature related to the MBA that discusses students' experiences of the practices which prepare them for writing the proposal. None that I

am aware of explores students' transitions within the context of the MBA research proposal from a critical perspective that considers students' professional and educational identities and implications for access to the practices which are necessary for an effective writing of the proposal. This points to the need for more studies that explore MBA students' experiences of socially situated practices in order to explore possibilities of transformative pedagogy within the MBA proposal process.

In the next chapter, the methodological dimension of the study is presented. I describe the study's research design, methodology and methods of data generation and data analysis. In doing so I reflect on the implications of conducting insider research within my work context for negotiating access to the research site and participants.

CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY

4. Introduction

In this chapter, the study's methodological approach, methods of data generation, and the frameworks of analysis are outlined. First, I start by discussing the rationale behind drawing on a qualitative interpretivist case study approach for the generation and analysis of the data. Thereafter, I discuss my professional identity and its implications for this research followed by a description of the data sources, data generation process, and the methods of analysis. I conclude the chapter by addressing ethical considerations and issues of validity.

4.1. Research Perspective: An interpretivist and critical approach to qualitative research

Interpretivist research aims to gain an in-depth understanding of the relationship of human beings to their environment and the role they play in creating the social fabric of which they are a part (Thanh & Than, 2015). This study places significant value on the meanings and interpretations of participants, central to the interpretive perspective, from a critical perspective which considers their differing access to and engagement with key social practices. This approach makes an effort to "get into the head of the subjects being studied" and to understand and interpret what the subject is thinking or the meanings on which they draw. Thus, every effort is made to try to understand the viewpoint of the subject being observed, rather than the viewpoint of the observer (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). This study seeks to understand MBA students' experiences of the proposal process within a School of Business and how these experiences impact their approach to the writing of the proposal.

The interpretivist approach is mainly employed in studies taking a qualitative view of the phenomena under investigation where individuals' sense making and interpretation of their realities is at the centre of the investigation. By employing the qualitative approach, I aim to observe the setting with the objective of understanding

the situation without imposing pre-existing expectations on the setting. This approach thus allows me to construct a holistic viewpoint of the setting rather than a search for the 'truth' or how things should be (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017).

4.2. The Case Study

This study uses a case study approach in seeking to understand MBA students' engagement with the valued literacy practices associated with the proposal process. A case study entails an intensive and detailed analysis of a single setting or location (Bloomberg, 2018; Bryman & Bell, 2007). Yin (2014) describes a case study as an appropriate method to investigate a contemporary phenomenon in its real-world context. This research was conducted in a single setting of a prestigious South African business school and examines six students' experiences of what is termed the "proposal process" within the MBA programme with the aim of foregrounding the academic literacies associated with the proposal process within the MBA. Yin (2006) tells us that one of the rationales for choosing a case study approach is the opportunity for the "revelatory case" (p. 40). The revelatory case provides the researcher with the opportunity to observe phenomenon not previously observed or revealed by other researchers. The advantage of using the case study method within my research context is the in-depth interaction with the data on participants' engagements with key literacies and how such information can contribute to the growing pool of knowledge about MBA students' experiences of management education from an Academic Literacies perspective.

In the next section, I describe my dual role of Academic Development practitioner and researcher and how it shaped the data generation process and my access to the study's participants.

4.3. My Role as Academic Development Practitioner and Researcher

4.3.1. Insider Research

It is important for researchers to clarify their roles and positionality especially when undertaking qualitative research. As described in Chapter 1, this research explores MBA students' experiences at a South African School of Business where I am a member of staff. As an academic development practitioner working with MBA students, the research setting is my work area. I am also a graduate of the SoB, and subsequently a student within another faculty of the same university. In many ways, I am part of the same social community that I am researching; thus, by implication, I am considered an insider researcher (Banks, 1998; Breen, 2007; Greene, 2014; Mercer, 2007; Merton, 1972; Unluer, 2012). Insider research is that which is conducted within a social group or organisation of which one is also a member (Mercer, 2007). In the next section, I describe the ways in which my insider researcher status facilitated access to data sources within my research context.

4.3.2. Gaining Access as an Insider

As a member of staff at the SoB, I did not have any significant difficulties with understanding the site of practice that an outsider might experience. My positionality meant that I already had an in-depth understanding of the culture I was studying. I knew the administrative and academic structure of the school as well as the power relations that shape its inner workings. As outlined in my description of the data generation process, I also experienced no barriers with regard to access in terms of generating the data required from the SoB. As an insider, I could anticipate when and how to generate data in order to avoid altering the flow of social interactions (Unluer, 2012). Documents were also readily made available to me and I was willingly granted permission to engage in classroom activities and with participants for interviews. Overall, the SoB community as a whole was very supportive in assisting with data generation. I was, however, also acutely aware that I could only make these requests after I received the required permissions from the university's ethics committee. More importantly, I benefited from having established trust with the students with whom I interacted on a daily basis.

However, being in the position of insider also presents disadvantages that affect the credibility of the research. While I suspected that certain aspects of the dissertation proposal process may not be working well, these aspects had to be proven with relevant data. Scholars such as Unluer (2012) and Greene (2014) both highlight the need to mitigate for issues of role duality, bias, ethical issues and confidentiality of participants. I also had to acknowledge the possible pitfalls of my positionality throughout the research process and the need to employ stringent reflexive practices (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Haynes, 2012; Hellawell, 2006) to address these concerns. These practices are discussed as part of the data generation section below.

4.4. Data Generation

In keeping with the qualitative approach, I drew on a variety of data sources. In this study, the research data were generated through document analysis and semi-structured interviews with the six MBA students which allowed for insights into their engagements with the literacy practices that constitute the proposal process as well as the meanings they attach to these. In the next section, I describe how I selected my research participants. This leads me to the notion of 'purposive sampling' which I describe below.

4.4.1. Purposive sampling

In qualitative research, the selection of samples is usually more purposive, which means that "participants are selected because they are likely to generate useful data for the project" (Bricki & Green, 2007). These authors emphasise that it is essential to select one's sample in a systematic way in order for it to be seen as credible and indicative. This is echoed by Baker and Edwards (2012) who provide a useful perspective on sampling in the case of qualitative research. Like Bricki and Green (2007), they assert that the appropriate sample size depends on the nature and purpose of the study. This research aims to bring into view ways in which students access and engage with the valued dominant practices associated with the proposal process. This research is not aimed at generating results that can be used to create

generalisations about the MBA population as its focus on six case studies means that it is not representative of the views of the individuals who constitute the MBA student population in its entirety. The aim, therefore, is not statistical representativeness, as the qualitative nature of the study does not value this. The next section outlines the process of selecting the participants and the need to relate this selection to the research questions that this study asks.

4.4.2. Selecting the research participants

The notion of purposive sampling (Bricki & Green, 2007) was evident in the study's criteria used to select research participants. To ensure a representative sample, I approached students who had failed the proposal as well as those who had done well. While twelve students originally agreed to participate, only nine availed themselves for the interviews. The sample of nine included three students who achieved above-average grades for the proposal and six who had achieved a below average grade. Three participants had submitted their proposal after the deadline date and were thus deemed to have experienced some kind of challenges with the proposal process.

My professional role as the MBA Learning Support meant that I was in regular contact with the students. Once the study received ethical clearance, I contacted the students in person, via telephone and email to gauge their interest in participating in the study. Taking into account my relationship with the students and the power relations therein and the duality of my role, I acknowledged that my relationship with the students while they were studying their MBA may have influenced their responses to my initial request. Thus, in order to ensure that participation remained completely voluntary, I did not pursue them if they did not reply to my request to interview them. The data presented in Chapter 6 reflects the experiences of six of the nine students. The reason behind this focus is due to the fact that these data cogently capture the overall experiences of the full sample.

As discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, students' undergraduate studies involve specialist instruction in writing according to particular genres and disciplines. Students construct their identities as part of their studies within those specialist (professional) discourses, for instance, Engineers and Health Professionals. In order to answer the study's third

question on the impact of previous discourses on students' engagement with the proposal process, the sample needed to include students from specialist professional disciplinary areas such as health sciences and engineering. The sample also included students from previous discourses that are perceived as 'similar' discourse communities like the Commerce faculty and other academic programmes at the SoB. I was aware of the potential impact of language use on students' academic work because of my academic development work at the SoB but did not know to what degree it influenced students' engagement in the proposal process. Thus, the sample included three students who used English as an additional language. Finally, the SoB MBA is a postgraduate programme that privileges relevant work experience and thus students can be admitted to the programme via the recognition of prior learning (RPL) process. I was fortunate that a student who came in via this route with no prior higher education academic experience volunteered to participate in the study and thus formed part of the sample.

The students who participated in this study, namely Aziz, Brandon, Dianne, Elsa, Graham, Khetiwe, Leonard, Mark, and Shafiek (pseudonyms), were all MBA students currently on the MBA programme. Table 1 reflects the demographic breakdown of the final sample of nine as well as the biographical information and undergraduate qualifications of each student. Further biographic details are highlighted in the findings section under Chapter 6.

Name	MBA Programme Format	Gender	Age	Nationality	Race Group	University 1	Degree 1	University 2	Degree2	Field	YRS Exp.	Position	Proposal Grade
Aziz	Mod	M	35	Eritrean	Black	Cape Peninsula University of Technology	National Diploma Information Technology (2001)	Cape Peninsula University of Technology	Bachelor of Technology Information Technology (2007)	Retail Trade	11	Developer and Development Team Lead	50
Brandon	Mod	M	38	South African	White	UNISA	Certifcate in Retail Buying	University of Cape Town Graduate School of Business	Postgraduate Diploma in Business Administration (2013)	Retail Trade	19	Senior Merchandise Planner	65
Dianne	FT	F	49	South African	White	RPL	Senior Certificate (1983)			Media	30	Owner/ Executive Producer	69
Elsa	Mod	F	32	South African	White	University of Stellenbosch	Bachelor of Science Molecular and Cellular Biology (2004)	University of Stellenbosch	Bachelor of Science in Medical Sciences (Honours) Human Genetics (2005)	Pharmaceuticals		Specialist Representative	75
Graham	FT	M	31	South African	White	University of Cape Town	MB ChB Medicine & Surgery (2008)	None		Medical	6	GP	75
Khetiwe	FT	F	32	South African	Black	University of Pretoria	Bachelor of Commerce (2007) Informatics	University of Pretoria	Bachelor of Commerce (Honours) Informatics (2008)	Consulting	8	Lead Business Analyst	50
Leonard	FT	M	37	Polish	White	Warsaw School of Social Psychology	Master of Psychology (2003)	College of Europe	Master of Arts (2006) Governance in the EU	Government	10	Public Relations	55
Mark	Mod	M	31	Zimbabwean	White	University of Cape Town	Bachelor of Science in Engineering Mechanical Engineering (2008)	University of Cape Town	Master of Science in Enginereering Mechanical Engineering (2011)	Energy	7	Field Engineer	57
Shafiek	Mod	M	33	South African	Coloured	University of Cape Town	Bachelor of Commerce in Information Systems (2014)			Education	9	Business Analyst	73

Table 1: Demographic Breakdown of Student Participants

The diversity in the study's student participants is reflective of the diversity in the MBA student population in terms of demographic profile, educational background and performance on the proposal. The average age of the MBA student is 31 years. All the participants are between the ages of 31 and 49. In terms of racial identity, six of the nine participants are White, two are African and one is Coloured. Six participants are South African, two are from other African countries and one is European. In terms of prior academic qualifications, two of the nine participants have other Master's level degrees, two hold Honours degrees, one has a post-graduate diploma from the SoB, four have bachelor level qualifications and one participant, as mentioned in the previous section, did not have a tertiary level qualification and was admitted via RPL. The student participants held qualifications from a variety of disciplines including, commerce, engineering, humanities medicine and science. Lastly, the students' performance in the proposal assessment is equally varied as they range from 50% to 75%. Two of the participants, Aziz and Khetiwe, initially failed and were given the opportunity to resubmit for a passing grade of 50%.

4.4.3. Research Methods Course Documents

As mentioned in the introduction, the Research Methods (RM) course forms an important part of the proposal process and the proposal constitutes the final major assessment for the course. I collected instructional materials relating to the proposal from the RM Vula site, the SoB's online learning management system which is used as the primary form of communication with all students for all course-related matters. These instructional materials communicate the rules that govern the production of the proposal within the school. Documents collected included the students' submitted (ungraded) MBA proposals and Research Methods course materials: i.e. the dissertation (proposal) outline, RM course outline, supervisors' list and session slides. However, for the purpose of this study only the Dissertation Outline is analysed and discussed as it makes reference to the writing of the research proposal and how students are expected to engage as researchers. The course outline, supervisors' list and session slides are used in so far as to provide further insight into the context of the course.

4.4.4. The Dissertation Outline

The Dissertation Outline is issued to students as part of the course material prior to the start of the dissertation process. It was important to include this document as a data source due to the fact that both the staff and students of the SoB use the Dissertation Outline as a guide to the dissertation (proposal) process. It communicates the structuring rules in the rubrics provided and the stringent deadlines and timeframes to students. As an insider, I already knew the importance placed on the Dissertation Outline, and how it is used by staff and students alike. While I already had access to the approved Dissertation Outline, I made sure to retrieve the version students had access to via the RM Vula site. Again, this was done as a deliberate reflexive action in acknowledgement of the duality of my role. I wanted to ensure I was using the same material that the MBA students accessed in order to gain insight into their experiences.

I analysed the Dissertation Outline document using Fairclough's (1992a) three-dimensional framework for the study of discourse, namely Critical Discourse Analysis (see section 4.5.2.). This was in order to gain insight into the dominant ways of believing and valuing within the programme's research component as expressed in the use of language at the level of text, discursive practice and social practice (these levels are discussed in detail in section 4.5.2). Gaining insight into how discourse functions at these levels allows for a discussion of issues around power, inequality and access to aspects of the proposal process for the research participants. This analysis was done in order to address the first research sub-question of this study: *What are the valued practices and ways of being and doing as communicated in official documentation within the proposal process?*

4.4.5. Student Interviews

In order to construct a holistic picture of students' experiences of the proposal process, I conducted semi-structured interviews with nine students (see Appendix A for questionnaires). Semi-structured interviews are widely used across disciplines as a primary research method. From a researcher's perspective, 'good' interviewing

practice includes the ability to help participants tell their stories (Roulston & Choi, 2018). The interviews aided my understanding of the students' experiences of the proposal process from the students' perspectives, thus allowing for a prioritisation of their voices (see Gennrich & Dison, 2018 for the importance of this methodology). The data from the interviews show the ways in which students access and engage with the valued practices of the proposal process. The data further highlight how students' experiences of the proposal process are impacted by students' brought-along work and personal experiences.

The timing of the interviews was a deliberate reflexive action. As an insider, I was mindful that my research interaction with the students could influence how they experience the proposal process. I was concerned that my engagement with them as research participants in the midst of the writing of the proposals would impact their responses. Thus, in order to avoid influencing the students' experience of the proposal process the interviews occurred after students had concluded their final dissertations when they could reflect on the entire proposal process.

As mentioned earlier, accessing the MBA students was not difficult as I am in regular contact with them during their studies. Also, several of them maintain contact with me after they have completed their studies. I contacted the students via telephone, email and in person after they received their proposal grades. I informed them of my research and gauged their willingness to participate in the study. Because this research is so closely aligned to my work, I was conscious that some students recognised their participation as a means to assist MBA students in avoiding similar challenges in the future. I arranged interview times and ensured that these suited students' schedules. Six of the nine students volunteered to come to my office and one requested that the interview take place at his home. One interview was done via Skype and the last student opted to do the interview in a coffee shop close to his work.

Prior to starting the interview, I once again informed all the participants of the background and purpose of the study. We discussed the informed consent form (see Appendix B) and I insisted that they take time to go through it before they completed the form and to ask questions if anything was unclear. I did this deliberately as I was aware of the levels of trust that already existed between the participants and myself and thus wanted to ensure they understood what their participation entailed. I also

emailed the interview questions to two of the participants beforehand at their request. Graham wanted to reflect on the questions prior to seeing me and Khetiwe's interview was done over Skype so I emailed the consent form and the questions to her beforehand. I was surprised at how most of the students mentioned that they did not mind if their real name was used when they were completing the consent form. I indicated that I would prefer to be consistent and opted to use pseudonyms for all participants in line with the institution's ethical guidelines for conducting research. I was concerned, given my insider status and support role, that the participants would assume that I could anticipate their responses. Therefore, I asked all the participants to answer as if I was unfamiliar with their process or their experiences, and even if we had already discussed something, to talk about it as if we were discussing it for the first time.

The interviews, which were recorded and transcribed, were between 30 and 60 minutes long and were guided by the scripted questions in the interview schedule. The questions (see Appendix A) I asked the students focussed on their experiences of the MBA proposal process. The aim was to understand the ways in which they accessed and engaged with the practices constituting the process and to establish the implications of this for their approach to writing the proposal. The questions also aimed to explore the challenges they faced in the process and how they navigated these challenges. The influence of their previous educational and work experiences on their experience of the proposal process formed a key aspect of the interviews. While the scripted questions were specifically focussed on the students' experiences of the MBA proposal process, I found that students often answered questions by making reference to their MBA experience as a whole.

In the next section, I describe the rationale behind my choice of analytical tools, namely thematic analysis which I use to analyse the interview data and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) which provides insight into the values and ways of being which inform the proposal process as reflected in course documentation.

4.5. Analysis of Data

The study draws on thematic analysis as well as Fairclough's (1992) Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) model to analyse the data. While the thematic analysis of interview transcripts provided insight into how students experienced the proposal process, the method fell short of providing a language to explore issues of ideology and power in the proposal process as evident in official documentation. CDA offered a framework that enabled this and was thus used as a complementary method of analysis.

4.5.1. Thematic Analysis

A thematic analysis was conducted on the students' interview transcripts to identify themes and patterns in their responses. Thematic analysis is a process of encoding qualitative information with a principal focus of identifying, organising and interpreting themes: i.e. recurrent and distinctive features of participants' accounts, characterising particular perceptions and experiences, which the researcher sees as relevant to the research question (King & Brooks, 2018, p. 220). The interviews were recorded, transcribed, analysed and coded according to the broad themes and patterns emerging from the analysis. I used thematic analysis because I wanted to explore common experiences in the students' responses. The thematic coding was done using qualitative analysis software called NVivo. This process consisted of repeatedly reading each transcript until all relevant text was categorised and all themes were compared against each other.

The thematic analysis was used to explore answers to the second and third research questions of this study:

Q2   How do MBA students access and engage with these practices within the proposal process?

Q3.   How are students' engagements with the proposal process impacted by prior work, disciplinary and personal experiences?

The following section describes my use of Critical Discourse Analysis as an analytical tool.

4.5.2. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

The study draws on Fairclough's (1992a) Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) model in analysing students' engagement with the proposal process. CDA, which aligns itself with the academic literacies approach in its aim to understand how power operates and shapes individuals' actions, was conducted on the MBA Dissertation Outline as a means to understand the ways in which valued practices are communicated within official documentation of the SoB in the use of language in the document. The CDA provided data seeking to address the sub-question 1 of this study: *What are the valued practices and ways of being and doing as communicated in official documentation within the proposal process?*

As discussed in Chapter 2, section 2.3., Discourse is defined as going beyond language in use; it constructs and reflects reality and is embedded in situated practices. Thus, CDA provides a means to engage with issues of social inequality and power relations within these practices that are enacted through written (and spoken) text. The affordances of CDA are relevant and pertinent to the understanding of the ways in which particular individuals and practices within the SoB are positioned by dominant discourses and practices therein.

While I have found CDA to be an effective means of exploring and demonstrating the socially situated nature of the chosen text, there are critics of CDA as a method and methodology. Widdowson (1998), for instance, feels that a weakness of CDA is its sole reliance on the analyst's interpretation of the texts. He feels that CDA should draw in the producers and consumers of texts as part of the methodology. While conducting this CDA, I was cognisant that my positioning and interpretation of the text is influenced by how I am situated in the discourse. CDA allows for this. I did not feel constrained by the fact that the analyses did not include a discussion with the producers, especially since I consider the students, supervisors and myself as consumers of the text. Luke (2002) also highlights two main critiques of CDA. Firstly, he points out CDA's difficulty to engage with the 'unwritten', 'unsaid' and the 'unspeakable', which he recognises as being equally important as what is said. While I agree with Luke that analysts need to

develop and structure CDA to include recognition of the 'unsaid', this would similarly produce subjective interpretations. The other criticism expressed by Luke is that while CDA is committed to social justice it is mostly focussed on the negative aspects of discourse. Luke therefore challenges analysts to further develop CDA to include methods that would engage with more productive uses of power.

While these critiques of CDA are valid, they do not detract from the value of CDA. Even Luke (2002) asserts, "CDA is an explicitly normative analysis of how text and discourses work in ideological interest with powerful political consequences" (p. 96). In Chapter 2, section 2.3., I present a detailed discussion of the notion of Discourse as defined by Gee (1990, 2013). Discourse constructs knowledge and governs what is valued and what is not within a particular setting. Thus, discourse is related to the distribution and enactment of social power. The objective of CDA is to make explicit the ideologies that prevail in our language use, to uncover the hidden agendas therein and to offer a means to challenge and transform prevailing forms of power.

4.5.2.1.   Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis Model

This research draws on Fairclough's (1992a) three-dimensional framework for the study of discourse which maps out three levels of discourse: discourse as text, discourse as discursive practice and discourse as social practice. The framework provides a critical lens for viewing how students are expected to navigate the proposal writing process and how these processes are impacted by broader elements and structures of power, both within the SoB as well as external to the school, such as national and international accreditation bodies. Fairclough's (1992a) framework is valuable for this study because it affords a means to systematically determine the relationship between these three levels of analysis. A graphic representation of these three levels is illustrated in Figure 1 below.

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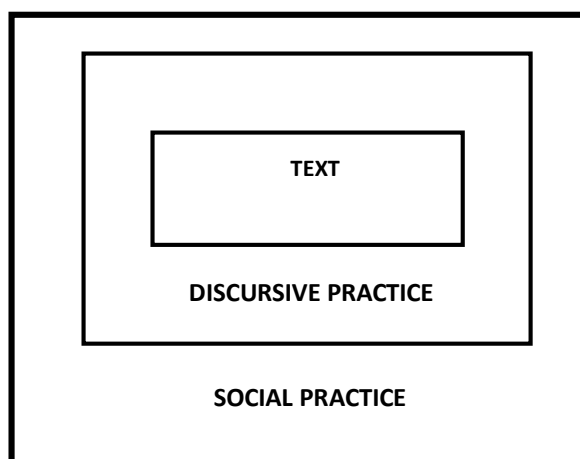
Figure 1: Graphic Representation of Fairclough's (1992) Three-Dimensional Framework

This framework was used in this study with the objective of offering a mechanism for description, interpretation and explanation (Fairclough, 1992d) of the academic literacies associated with the MBA proposal process and how power and ideology within the SoB play out in this process. While each dimension of Fairclough's model is discussed separately below, it is important to highlight the interrelatedness and interdependence of these three dimensions because "it is the nature of the social practice that determines the macro-processes of discursive practice, and it is the micro-processes that shape the text" (Fairclough, 1992a, p. 86). The graphic representation of the three-dimensional model of one box within another helps to articulate the interrelated nature of the three levels of discourse analysis. The element of CDA which deals with analysis of text has to do with providing a 'description' of language use and the parts of analysis focussed on discursive practice and social practice offer an 'interpretation' of the text. Next, I describe how each dimension of the framework will be analysed.

4.5.2.2.   Discourse as Text

Discourse as text refers to the "written or spoken language produced in a discursive event" (Fairclough, 1993, p. 138). Analysis at the level of text is concerned with the formal properties of text. For this study an analysis was done at this level by examining the Dissertation Outline which is part of the Research Methods course documentation.

According to Fairclough (1992c), text analysis can be organised under four categories: *vocabulary* which examines lexical choices; *grammar* which examines clauses and sentences; *cohesion* which examines how these clauses and sentences are linked together; and *text structure* which examines the organisational properties of texts (p. 75). Producers choose how to construct sentences and thus they make choices about how to signal their "social identities, social relationships, and knowledge and beliefs" (Fairclough, 1992, p. 76). They do so by their lexical choices, the use of pronouns, adjectives, metaphors, repetition of words and the structuring conventions of text. The analysis of discourse as text in the Dissertation Outline allows for insight into how students are positioned within the SoB, the restrictions on the types of research allowed and the power of the dissertation as a component of the MBA.

4.5.2.3.   Discursive Practice

Discursive practice involves processes of text production, distribution and consumption (Fairclough, 1992a, p. 79). These processes vary according to the social conditions of their discourses. An exploration of Discourse as discursive practice examines the production of the Dissertation Outline, its distribution as well as its consumption by the target audience who receive and interpret the text. Fairclough (1992d) advises that the analysis of discourse as discursive practice is done under three categories: *force of utterances* which examines the speaker/writer's intention behind the speech act; *coherence* of the text; and the *intertextuality* of the text (p.75) which considers the presence of "traces of other texts" (Fairclough, 1992a, p. 97) in the text under investigation.

The social relations, as represented through the text, highlight the ideologies and power dynamics at play in the students' production of the proposal within the MBA and the wider context of the SoB and beyond. This analysis provides a lens through which to view how students are expected to navigate the proposal process and how these processes are impacted by broader structures of power both internal and external to the SoB. I discuss this aspect of Discourse in the next section.

4.5.2.4. Discourse as Social Practice

Discourse as Social Practice relates to the relationship between language, power and ideology. Fairclough (1992a) argues that ideologies are embedded in language use and tend to become naturalised and invisible due to individuals' repeated exposure to and consumption of these ideologies. The analysis at the level of social practice provides a means to understand and make explicit the ideological processes that structure and delimit dominant discursive practice in the proposal process and how that bears upon the proposal text. Thus, this research examines the conditions i.e. the notions of management research and social constructs that have given rise to valued knowledge in the MBA proposal process. I have drawn on the document analysis and my situated understanding of the SoB and the business school context to explain the social structures that give rise to the valued ways of being and doing within the MBA proposal process. This level of analysis helps to highlight significant contextual factors that might be relevant to, for example, the relationship between the Council on Higher Education and other accreditation bodies and the MBA curriculum as well as the place and role of research within the MBA.

In this section, I describe how I used thematic analysis and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as complementary methods of analysis in analysing the main research question: *What are MBA students' experiences of the proposal process within a School of Business and how do these experiences impact their approach to the writing of the proposal?* In the next section, I discuss how I address concerns relating to validity within this study.

4.6. Validity

Cresswell and Miller (2000) state while there are multiple perspectives about validity within qualitative research, there is general consensus that qualitative researchers need to demonstrate that their studies are credible. Therefore, researchers identify common procedures such as member checking, triangulation, thick description and peer reviews for establishing validity in their qualitative studies. This study employed triangulation as a validity procedure. Triangulation is a "validity procedure where researchers search for convergence among multiple and different sources of

information to form themes or categories in a study" (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 126). The study provides an account of corroborating evidence through interviews and document analysis. This account is considered valid because it draws on multiple sources of evidence rather than a single incident or data point in the study. Furthermore, the study's presentation of 'thick descriptions' (Denzin, 2001; Geertz, 1973) of students' experiences means that the narrative is layered and complex and values nuances and contradictions.

Researcher reflexivity is the second validity procedure used in this project. This is a valuable aspect of qualitative research which requires the researcher to self-disclose and make explicit their assumptions, values, beliefs and biases that give rise to their inquiry (Creswell & Miller, 2000). In the Introduction (see Chapter 1 Section 1.3.) I explained how my personal history as an Academic Development practitioner at the SoB gave rise to my interest in this topic. I could identify with the students' challenges, some of which I became aware of as an Academic Development practitioner at the SoB and was therefore aware of how this aspect of my identity could potentially bias and influence how I gathered and interpreted the data. One way that I attempted to address potential bias in the data gathering stage of the study was to explain my role as researcher clearly. I asked clarifying questions and ensured that I revisited questions which I felt had not been addressed to avoid the imposition of my interpretations. In doing this I fully probed and encouraged elaboration and explanation where relevant, even in instances where I had insight into students' challenges with aspects of the proposal process.

As an employee of the SoB, my core function is to provide support for students' social and academic challenges. I have already discussed how my professional identity was of benefit within the data generation process while acknowledging how it also potentially led to concerns regarding my interpretation of the data. Academic literacy acknowledges – and values – the subjective selves which we bring to the research process. Bangeni (2012) highlights that approaching a study from an insider perspective requires two layers of interpretation of the data that emerge in a study. In this study, the first layer is the students' interpretations of their engagement with the proposal process. The second layer of interpretation is that of the researcher, which is then layered on the participants' interpretations (p. 40). Thus, in this study, I have

first prioritised the students' interpretations of the challenges with the proposal process. These then guided my own analysis and interpretation. As is stated by Bangeni (2012), doing so helps to "strike a balance between 'giving voice' to the participants' interpretations and to the researchers' interpretations of the data" (40-41). In employing reflexive research practices throughout the research process, I also conscientiously checked in with my supervisor about my interpretations in order to avoid potential bias and to ensure that the participants' voices are prioritised.

4.7. Ethical Considerations

All research involving human subjects is required to follow a code of ethics. Ethical approval was obtained from the UCT School of Education in the Humanities Faculty prior to starting this study. As noted earlier, the study did not commence until after the students participating in this research had completed both their proposals and their dissertations, and received final grades and feedback. After I had clearly explained the objectives of my study to them, I obtained written consent from all the participants to consult their proposals and to interview them about the experiences of the proposal process and writing the proposal. Participants were advised in writing (see Appendix B) that they were able to withdraw from the study at any time. This research involves students and staff and thus the relevant permission was granted by the Executive Director of Student Affairs and the Executive Director of Human Resources of the University prior to starting the study.

4.8. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have presented the study's methodological approach, methods of data generation, and frameworks of analysis. In the next chapter, I present the findings yielded by the CDA of the Dissertation Outline.

CHAPTER 5: CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS (CDA) OF COURSE DOCUMENTATION

5. Introduction

This chapter presents the findings yielded by the CDA of the Dissertation Outline as a key document within the MBA proposal process. The insights provide a lens into the research context and its valued practices by presenting and analysing findings from the document analysis of the instructional materials to illustrate how these practices are communicated at various levels of discourse. The data from this analysis point to how students are positioned as researchers as well as having implications for the extent to which they can exercise agency in this role. In the next chapter interview data from the student interviews are then presented and are used to illustrate how students engage with these expectations. In analysing the data, I draw on my sustained observations of the social setting as an Academic Development practitioner based at the SoB for the past eight years. The data analysis in this chapter is guided by the following research sub-question:

Q1.   What are the valued practices and ways of being and doing as communicated in official documentation within the proposal process?

As highlighted in Chapter 1, the MBA is a professional Master's degree programme generally offered through business schools such as the SoB. The primary purpose of the MBA degree is to educate and train professionals in the field of business administration in order to enable them to better lead, manage and operate organisations. MBAs the world over have this 'purpose' as the core outcome of any MBA programme. A very important characteristic of the MBA is that its value is also linked to external evaluation such as rankings and accreditations. The programme's curriculum choices are thus influenced and regulated by national and international institutionalised bodies. The SoB is a triple-crowned, accredited school and is thus a powerful institution in the African business school context. Chapter 1 also discussed the MBA programme structure as it pertains to the proposal process. Pertinent to an understanding of the social context in which the MBA dissertation proposal is constructed is an appreciation of the rules that govern the production of the proposal.

In this chapter, I discuss the social context (Fairclough, 1992) and present a key document that communicates these rules governing the production of the MBA proposal. I draw on Fairclough's (1992) description of discourse as text and discursive practice to show how the institutional culture of the SoB, which emphasises students' agency, is reflected in the lexical choices used in the course documents.

5.1. Discourse as discursive practice

The interpretation of text begins at the level of discursive practice and thus it is important to first situate the Dissertation Outline text within the context that it was produced, distributed and consumed. Fairclough (1992d) points out that the production, distribution and consumption of text can be complex, involving many social agents and complex or simple routines. While some texts, like the casual conversation, have simple distribution patterns, reflected in conversation from the person uttering a statement to the intended recipient of the statement (Fairclough, 1992c), other texts have more complex distribution, which is mediated by a range of social factors. These complex texts have their own complex patterns of consumption (Fairclough, 1992c); for instance, those produced by university academic departments as part of the academic exercise. The production of the Dissertation Outline is one such example that illustrates complex production and distribution.

The MBA Dissertation Outline is produced as an element of the Research Methods (RM) course material. This is produced in the genre of a course outline and the intended consumers are MBA students, MBA faculty, supervisors and administrative staff. The document provides readers with proposal and dissertation-related information such as deadlines, permitted types of research, information about supervision, marking rubrics, word limits, ethics applications and embargo requests. There are a number of contributors to the document such as the SoB Research Office, the SoB Academic Office and the SoB Ethics committee and MBA administrative staff. The Dissertation Outline is then distributed to students by the RM course convenor via Vula, the university online learning management system, as part of the RM course materials. Supervisors and SoB staff are sent the Dissertation Outline via email, along with other dissertation-related communication.

In terms of consumption (Fairclough, 1992a), the Dissertation Outline is equally complex in terms of the patterns of consumption associated with it. Consumers of this text use this document as a reference guide to the MBA research process as it depicts the explicit 'rules' of the research process as outlined to students and staff. The students use the rubrics provided in the outline as a template or guide for their proposal documents. Other consumers of the text, such as the supervisors and administrative staff, similarly use the text as a reference guide for proposal- and dissertation-related information, especially as it communicates the official deadlines related to the entire research process.

In the next section, I explore the intertextuality in the text production, and coherence in the interpretation of the extract below from the 2016 MBA Dissertation Outline (Appendix 1):

1. The Dissertation

The dissertation provides an important opportunity to develop critical reasoning, research and writing skills, and it will also provide you with an in-depth understanding of a particular aspect of business management or related fields.

Furthermore, the dissertation is a formal requirement of South African education policy:[1]

> An important function of graduate professional education is to acquaint future practitioners with current academic research in their field and equip them to apply that knowledge… Although the MBA is a generalist degree that provides a comprehensive survey of management theory and practice, candidates must also acquire depth of knowledge in some area of specialisation. In this vein, the dissertation assists in acquiring applied competencies, such as the ability to interact with and critique the scholarly literature, acquire information, apply appropriate research methods, technologies and techniques and draw implications for management strategy and practice within a field. It also assists in acquiring competencies that help graduates learn autonomously in complex information environments and thereby manage organisations and their own personal professional development better.

Figure 2: Extract from Page 3 Dissertation Outline- 1. The Dissertation

The extract shows how the SoB legitimates the MBA dissertation (and by implication the proposal) as a key component of the MBA curriculum. The document legitimises the power of the dissertation by including the South African Council on Higher Education's (CHE) policy statement regarding the dissertation as a formal requirement

of the MBA degree. Intertextuality of a text is a matter of how elements of other texts (words, phrases or larger elements) are incorporated within a text (Wodak & Fairclough, 2010). The producers use the textual feature of intertextuality to bring in other voices of authority and power to signify the relevance of the dissertation as part of the MBA. The dissertation (and by implication the proposal) is mandatory for South African Masters' programmes, but its relevance for the MBA programme is something that is debated by SoB staff and MBA students alike. Several MBA programmes abroad do not require a research thesis for qualification. Instead, MBA students abroad are presented with a choice of either doing a project, business-oriented research such as a feasibility study or creating solutions to situated organisational problems. It is for this reason that the dissertation is sometimes an unanticipated requirement for SoB students. The CDA reflects that the SoB is aware of this, hence the need to legitimise and validate it as an important aspect of the programme. The intertextuality and reliance on the South African education policy highlight the producers' awareness of the tension around the dissertation as a requirement of the MBA. Bringing in this policy thus assists in legitimising this requirement.

Fairclough (1992c) states that "a coherent text is a text whose constituent parts (episodes, sentences) are meaningfully related so that the text as a whole 'makes sense', even though there may be relatively few formal markers of those meaningful relationships – that is, relatively little explicit cohesion" (p.83). Linkages can be formed by repeated words, using synonyms, and other substituting devices. The strong cohesion in the text is achieved by the producers continuously stating the importance of the dissertation in the MBA. The MBA is classified as a professional Master's degree programme and thus there are more research output options available to students than the dissertation. The CHE stipulates that 25% of the credits of a professional Master's programme must come from independent research. This can take the form of a single project or can be divided into a portfolio of tasks. According to the Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF): "A professional Master's degree must include an independent study component that comprises at least a quarter of the total credits, which must be at NQF level 9, consisting of either a single research or technical project or a series of smaller projects demonstrating innovation or professional expertise" (Council on Higher Education, 2015). The professional Master's format gives the student a wide range of flexibility – in choosing their task, as

well as the details of the task – while maintaining the rigour of the research process. This information is however not included in the RM course materials, nor is it mentioned in the MBA Dissertation Outline. This omission is significant when considered in the context of the types of research that the Dissertation Outline allows.

The MBA Dissertation Outline further highlights the significance, and thus power of the dissertation as part of the MBA programme by drawing attention to the weighting of this component in the MBA curriculum. This is shown in the extract below:

> As such, the Dissertation is a very significant component of the MBA as a whole – with 55 credits, it provides for over 25% of the total MBA credits.

Figure 3: Extract from Page 3 Dissertation Outline- 2.1 Important Issues Related to the Dissertation

The dissertation carries a 25% weighting of the entire MBA programme, which makes it the biggest single component of the programme. The student interview data in sections 6.1 will show that it is also the component of the curriculum for which they feel least prepared. However, it is the MBA programme component which requires the most personal direction and initiative from the students themselves in terms of acquiring the necessary skills to develop in the role of novice researcher.

Furthermore, the importance of the proposal as a prerequisite for access to the dissertation is highlighted by the statement below:

> Note that because successful completion of the proposal is a prerequisite for continuing with the final dissertation:
> - if a student fails the proposal, they will be offered a second and final opportunity to resubmit the proposal within 2 weeks of the proposal marks being released.
> - if a student fails the proposal on the second attempt, the MBA Director, in consultation with the GSB Research Director and the supervisor, will advise the student on the prospects of completing the dissertation in the current year of registration œ there will be costs involved should the dissertation not be completed within the current year of registration.

Figure 4: Extract from Page 10 Dissertation Outline- 2.9. Submitting the proposal

The producers of the text highlight the gatekeeping potential of the proposal with the inclusion of the statements above. For example, their use of the phrases "successful completion" and "is a prerequisite", show how the students' access to the dissertation is dependent on success in the proposal. Furthermore, the use of phrases such as "final opportunity", and "will advise the student" show that while the agency and personal initiative required of the student is emphasised, they are clearly positioned as non-participatory agents in the decision regarding the timely completion of the dissertation after failure of the proposal.

The next section will discuss the students' positioning in the MBA proposal process by considering what Fairclough (1992b) terms 'discourse as text,' and, more specifically, how the language at the level of grammar and lexical items serves to promote a particular view of the student as 'researcher'.

5.2. Discourse as text: positioning of the student in official documentation

Moving to the inner layer of text analysis, the data show how the producers signal their own positioning, and position the reader to take a particular stance through the choice of textual features such as grammar, lexical choices, and semiotics. Grammar refers to how producers choose to construct sentences, reflecting choices about how they signal their "social identities, social relationships, and knowledge and beliefs" (Fairclough, 1992a, p. 76). The extract below reflects the expected role of students in the research process through the use of language. This is most prominently evidenced in the following statement:

> Bear in mind that the dissertation requires significant ***personal initiative*** in identifying a suitable supervisor and investigating and building capabilities in appropriate, specific research methods.

Figure 5: Extract from Page 3 Dissertation Outline-1. The Dissertation

This statement clearly positions the students as the drivers of the research process. In terms of vocabulary, "producers have choices about how to use a word and how to word a meaning" (Fairclough, 1992a, p. 185). The producer's repetitive use of

adjectives like 'significant' and 'important' serve to emphasise the value of the dissertation within the MBA. The author's semiotic choice of italicising and bolding the words "***personal initiative***" highlights the SoB's position and expectation that students are required to understand their shortcomings with respect to the required research methods and to "build capabilities" themselves to address those shortcomings.

The students' and supervisors' roles and positioning in the proposal process are clarified in section 2.3 of the Dissertation Outline. The students' role and their presumed identity, their Institutional-identity (I-Identity) as a student with adequate MBA level language skills in the proposal process is further demonstrated by the extract below:

> **Note that supervisors cannot be expected to provide language and structural editing of either the proposal or final dissertation.** Adequate writing skills are considered a pre-requisite and furthermore the student can make use of writing support or editing services provided elsewhere.

Figure 6: Extract from page 6 Dissertation Outline: 2.3 Finding a Dissertation Supervisor

Similarly, the semiotic choice of bolding the supervisors' role as not providing editorial support highlights the importance placed on making students aware of their presumed language and writing ability and their presumed role identity as researchers in this aspect of the proposal process. MBA students are expected to have the "adequate writing skills" as a "prerequisite" to the proposal process; if this is not the case then they are to obtain editorial and writing support via their own means. The SoB offers limited support to students in terms of the on-site Writing Centre, in that the Writing Centre does not provide editorial support. Moreover, the interview data which are discussed in detail in Chapter 6 will show that students with access to the valued forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1986) are privileged in this process.

Students' positioning in the supervisory process is an important aspect of this study as securing a supervisor is a key aspect of the proposal process. The statement below highlights how students are positioned in terms of the supervisory process:

Students are not permitted to change supervisors. In rare cases the Research Director may, in consultation with the MBA Director, consider a request for a supervisor change, provided that the student has identified a qualified supervisor that is willing to take over supervisory responsibilities, the student and current supervisor agree to terminate the existing relationship and the student agrees to meet the original deadline for submitting the dissertation. A request to change supervisors is not taken lightly, requires explicit consideration and consultation and must take place prior to deadline for submitting the dissertation proposal. Personality conflicts, diverging opinions about the research or lack of availability are not generally considered as sufficient reasons to change supervisors. In the event of a dispute, the matter will be referred to the GSB Research Director, who will consult with all involved parties and reach a decision to resolve the matter.

Figure 7: Extract from page 6 Dissertation Outline: 2.3 Finding a Dissertation Supervisor

The above extract positions the students as lacking agency in so far as they are able to change supervisors. The extract does show that in the "rare" circumstance a supervisor change will be considered if the students themselves have identified a qualified alternative, suggesting the students' responsibility in the process, but at the same time they are not allowed to be agentic in the process. This is first demonstrated by the opening sentence stating "students are not permitted to change supervisors" as well as the firm indication that the decision to allow a supervisor change lies with the SoB and requires "explicit consideration and consultation" by the SoB academic leadership prior to submitting the proposal. The issue of the lack of available SoB supervisors has been a key area of discontent among staff and students at the SoB. The MBA students are often apprehensive about approaching potential supervisors because they are not well positioned to do so. A very interesting observation made during the student interviews was when a student participant compared the process of supervisor selection as a 'lottery' because students tend to be unfamiliar with the supervisors they choose. In students' engagements with me many have expressed challenges in receiving a response from potential supervisors, sometimes even after sending multiple requests. The analysis of interview data in Chapter 6, section 6.1 will show how students' ability to excise agency in the proposal process under the conditions set out in the Dissertation Outline is in fact affected by their access to the relevant forms of valued cultural capital. In the next section I discuss the value placed on adherence to stringent timelines as expressed in the Dissertation Outline.

5.3. The "Issue" of timelines within the MBA

The CDA analysis of the Dissertation Outline points to the valuing of time within the MBA. This is evident in the foregrounding of non-negotiable deadlines and timeframes in this document. One of the features of the MBA programme is the orientation toward high intensity, high stakes, deadline-driven activities. The approach of high stakes decision making and a quick turnaround of deliverables mimics the approach in business. This intersection of values in two fields, i.e. that of business and higher education, is reflected in the proposal process as can be seen from how the producers' frame the deadlines associated with the proposal process. Fairclough (1992) notes that producers signal ideologies by using the structuring conventions of text. The producers of the Dissertation Outline position the time frames as one of the most "Important Issues" related to the dissertation. This is evident in this information's placement as the first issue highlighted on page 3 in the 2016 MBA Dissertation Outline (Appendix 1):

1. **Important Issues Related to the Dissertation**

2.1 **Assessment, due date and time frames**

The MBA Dissertation counts 55 credits (representing 550 hours of learning).

- Dissertation due date: 7 December

The time frame for the dissertation is outlined below (you need to meet *at least* five times with your supervisor):

The non-negotiable time frame for the dissertation is presented immediately after the above extract on the next page of the Dissertation Outline:

15 June:

- Use the time until <u>15 June</u> to find a supervisor.
- Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) is due.
- **Meeting 1:** Discuss research plan, literature review and proposal timelines.

15 July:

- First draft proposal is due.
- 1st chance to submit a completed Ethics form.
- **Meeting 2:** draft proposal feedback (be sure to have draft proposal read, and feedback by 5 August)

26 August:

- Dissertation proposal due
- Last chance to submit a completed Ethics form.

Figure 8: Extract from page 4 Dissertation Outline- 2.1 Assessment, due date and time frames

As can be seen from the language and foregrounding of this information, the proposal and dissertation timelines are framed as the most "important issue" for the consumers of the Dissertation Outline text to take into consideration. In effect, the proposal is expected to be completed over a period of approximately 10 weeks. This is a condensed timeframe to complete the associated work of an MBA proposal, especially for a student who is employed on a fulltime basis. The RM course provides a generalised overview of the research process but students are required to find a supervisor, a topic, to learn appropriate methods and then write a 10 000-word proposal within this timeframe. The interview data discussed in the next chapter (see Chapter 6, section 6.1) will show how students experienced challenges with managing these aspects of the proposal process within the prescribed timeframes. The producers signal the valuing of a deadline-driven ideology as well as their knowledge of the challenges associated with the tight timeframes by the structuring conventions used and the framing of this information in the Dissertation Outline. The following section will discuss the students' topic selection as it relates to the permitted types of research in the MBA.

5.4. Valued types of research outputs within the programme

This section examines discourse as text by highlighting the conditions for students with regard to topic selection as another aspect of the proposal process. As will be discussed in the interview data in the next chapter, the students are often not prepared for the types of research they are required to undertake as part of the MBA programme. The MBA is a generalist management programme and, as is noted in the first paragraph of the Dissertation Outline, students can conduct research in a "business management or related field" of their (or their supervisor's) choice. The extract from the Dissertation Outline below presents students' options in terms of the types of research which are permitted:

2.2   Types of Research Permitted for an MBA Dissertation

Generally, all MBA research must contain a comprehensive review of the literature and theory <u>and</u> an empirical component (whether for theory testing or theory building). Three particular types of research are the most common and are encouraged:

1) Largely deductive, theory-testing research – this is generally based on quantitative data and statistical analysis thereof;

2) Largely inductive, theory-building research – this is most typically using tenets of grounded theory or analytical induction, and/or applying single or multiple (comparative) case studies; and

3) Development of a teaching case – this applies many of the methodological requirements of a research case, but more emphasis is placed on developing a narrative to illustrate a particular set of teaching objectives. The actual teaching case needs to be complemented with an introduction, literature review, methodology and teaching note.

Figure 9: Extract from page 4 and 5 Dissertation Outline-2.2 Types of Research Permitted for an MBA Dissertation

The authority evident in the use of the highly modal auxiliary verb 'must' in the sentence "all MBA research must contain…" signals an obligation in terms of the types of research permitted. This situates the SoB in a position of power in this regard. While the use of the verb 'encouraged' is more suggestive, the reality is that students have little choice but to adhere to the types of research stipulated: namely deductive research, inductive research and the development of a teaching case. Gee (2001) maintains that:

> when an identity is underwritten and sustained by an institution, that institution works, across time and space, to see to it that certain sorts of discourse, dialogue, and interactions happen often enough and in similar enough ways to sustain the I-Identities it underwrites (p. 105).

However, the interview data show how this is not a straightforward process as the type of research the student chooses affects their access to essential resources such as a good supervisor and research support. Moreover, the interview data reflect how the valued types of research, such as the development of a teaching case, are new to the majority of students and that not much support is available within the RM course in terms of preparing students to work in this genre. This is discussed in detail in section 6.4 where I describe how students experienced the RM course as an integral part of the proposal process.

Fairclough (1995) maintains that language use is social because social conditions influence how we use it, and thus social conditions are likewise influenced by language use. Text can be seen as part of social events. CDA helps to make ideologies and identities in text production explicit; through CDA we are able to link social practice to textual practice. The CDA of the Dissertation Outline points to how the values underpinning research within the SoB are evident in the textual features of repetition and emphasis.

5.5. Summary of findings yielded by the CDA of the Dissertation Outline

The CDA assists in illustrating how students, as novice researchers, are positioned and expected to engage as researchers within official documentation that forms part of the proposal process. Discourse at the level of text highlights how the document positions students as the drivers of the research process, highlighting agency and personal initiative as important aspects of their research process and shows how these were undermined by the power allocation embedded in the text. Here, the need to undertake research as well as the requirement to assume a specific researcher identity is foregrounded through the use of textual features, reflecting the values and dominant discourses within the programme and the SoB.

The CDA analysis of the Dissertation Outline also pointed to the valuing of time within the MBA as is evident in the foregrounding of non-negotiable deadlines and timeframes related to the proposal process.

The data in this section highlight the significance and power of the dissertation as part of the MBA programme. They show how the institutional culture of the SoB, which emphasises students' agency, is reflected in the lexical choices within the Dissertation Outline. However, while students agency is highly valued in the SoB, the underlying contradiction of the Outline is that their agency is not enabled but rather curtailed by the ways in which the proposal process is timed and structured.

CHAPTER 6: ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF STUDENT INTERVIEWS

6. Introduction

In this chapter, I present interview data which provide insights into the research participants' experiences of the proposal process. In the interviews, students were asked to describe their overall experience of the proposal process, their challenges during the process and the impact of professional and personal identities on their engagement with the proposal process. As is mentioned in the Methodology chapter, students have been given pseudonyms for confidentiality purposes. In order to contextualise their responses, students' biographical information, as well as data from the CDA analysis of the Dissertation Outline, are interweaved with the themes that emerge from the interviews to show how students' experiences sit alongside the valued ways of being and doing within the programme as outlined in this central documentation. The data presented in this chapter address the following sub-questions:

- How do MBA students' access and engage with these practices within the proposal process?
- How are students' engagements with the proposal process impacted by prior work, disciplinary and personal experiences?

6.1. Students' experiences of the proposal process

As detailed in Chapter 4, section 4.4.5., the interview questions focussed on students' experiences of the MBA proposal process. They aimed to explore the students' 'on the ground' experiences with the practices of the proposal process and how these experiences shaped their approach to the proposal. The questions also explored the influence of the students' previous educational and work experiences on their experience of the proposal process. The students' interview data indicate how they experienced the proposal process as "challenging", "anxiety-inducing" and

"overwhelming" as is evident in three main factors which shaped their experiences of the research process. These were: the interlinked process of selecting a topic and securing a suitable supervisor; reconciling professional development goals with the valued types of research within the programme; and the impact of forms of cultural capital on their experiences of the proposal process. The data show how the SoB field invisibly sets up whose knowledge and ways of being and knowing, are valued and whose are not. The data further show how the forms of cultural capital that students bring facilitate a questioning or rejection of the researcher identity, an identity which is explicitly foregrounded in the Dissertation Outline.

The tension between the Dissertation Outline as a key document within the proposal process and students' expectations of the programme was evident in how students characterised the MBA dissertation as an aspect of the MBA curriculum which they had not anticipated. This was the case for Leonard, a 37-year-old Polish, Public Relations Officer who holds two other Master's degrees. Leonard worked in various senior roles for European governmental agencies prior to coming to South Africa to do his MBA. The extract below highlights Leonard's tension with the dissertation as a requirement of the MBA:

> [The Dissertation] for me, was like a completely out of the blue thing... because I didn't come to a business school to become a researcher. I came to business school to learn the best business practices, to understand myself, to understand my leadership, how do I position myself in a leadership role, to get tools that I will be using in my future professional life, and it's definitely not research, you know, because I know that I'm not going to be a researcher.

Leonard heavily questioned the identity of researcher associated with the dissertation process and thus was an unwilling participant in the proposal process. As discussed in the Literature Review in Chapter 2, typically MBA programmes in Europe and the USA are more practically orientated and do not have a compulsory dissertation component. Leonard's sentiments echo those which many students have expressed to me as MBA Learning Support over the years; the frustration with having to assume the unanticipated role of researcher. While some have done research before, like Leonard, they appear to struggle with understanding the relevance of the proposal and dissertation within an MBA curriculum. This sentiment reflects how students'

experiences and expectations are at odds with the researcher identity that is foregrounded in the official dissertation documentation. This speaks to Gee's (2001) notion of the Affinity-Identity. Gee points to how institutions "socially engineer certain practices that ensure that employees or customers gain certain experiences, that they experience themselves and others in certain ways, and that they behave and value in certain ways" (p. 106). What is significant here is how Gee states that "the Affinity group is something that one must actively choose to join" (p. 106) in order to give meaning to the practices that constitute it. Leonard's rejection or questioning of the researcher identity that is explicitly set up for him points to his rejection of the research practices that govern the proposal process. however, due to the power of the institution and his instrumental objective to obtain the MBA, he has no choice but to engage with them.

6.1.1. The challenge of 'getting going': Navigating the process of topic selection

The CDA analysis of the Dissertation Outline pointed to the valuing of time within the MBA, as is evident in the foregrounding of non-negotiable deadlines and timeframes. This section shows how various factors at the start of the proposal process impacted the productivity and ability to 'get going'.

In the interviews, students described their challenges with 'getting going', a phrase used by students to emphasise how the start of the proposal process was particularly difficult. The data show how the challenge of 'getting going' mainly stems from challenges with topic selection. Students' challenges with selecting a topic were as a result of various challenges with the proposal process. These were primarily securing a suitable supervisor and aligning their research interests with the valued types of research within the programme while considering their professional development goals within the programme.

6.1.2. The challenge of 'getting going': Securing a suitable supervisor

As mentioned in the Introduction (see Chapter 1, section 1.2.1.) where I describe the proposal process, a list of potential supervisors (see Appendix 2) is distributed during the RM course. The MBA Supervisors' list comprises names and contact details for SoB core faculty, faculty from other departments and external associates of the school. While the supervisors' contact details are available to students, there are no guidelines on how to approach the supervisor. Moreover, there is a lack of clear information provided on what is expected of both the student and supervisor in the proposal process.

For many students who are doing research of this nature for the first time, this lack of guidance can be problematic. This was the case with Aziz, a 35-year-old African male student. He received his last qualification, a Bachelor of Technology degree, in 2007 from the Cape Peninsula University of Technology. Aziz's challenge with 'getting going' was finding a suitable supervisor. The only supervisors on the supervisors' list that could supervise a dissertation in Aziz's area of specialisation were based at another department within the Commerce Faculty of the University. He was unfamiliar with these supervisors because they were not involved with the MBA programme in any other way other than supervision. He did not know what the process of contacting them entailed, and, given that he had no experience in his previous studies with a project of this nature, was quite anxious to approach a potential supervisor for fear of rejection on this basis.

This fear was common among MBA students. As highlighted in Chapter 5, section 5.3., the issue of a lack of available supervisors located at the SoB has been a key area of discontent among staff and students at the school. The MBA students who come to me for assistance are often apprehensive about approaching potential supervisors because they are not well positioned to do so. Aziz, therefore, had to employ a high degree of courage and personal initiative to navigate through this challenge. He initially approached me to ask about how to go about doing a dissertation in his area, Information Systems. After narrowing down his objectives I directed him to Department of Information Systems where he secured a supervisor external to the SoB but internal to the University. Aziz failed his proposal but he was

allowed to resubmit for a passing grade. During our interview I asked him about his experience with supervision:

> I had challenges with the supervision for a number of reasons... er... number one... the... the supervisor was mainly supervising students who had done research in the past... and PhDs and that kind of stuff... so, there was a higher level of expectation... and the supervisor was really... didn't have the appetite or the time to entertain people who didn't have that kind of exposure.

After he failed the first proposal submission, Aziz requested to change his supervisor prior to his second submission, citing a communication breakdown between him and his supervisor. In the interview I asked him about the experience of changing supervisors:

> Aziz: I thought it was a big deal to change a supervisor. And er, I should have done it earlier because when I went through with it, I... suffered a lot, because I thought like me going to change, er, that person is kind of... has been trying to help me a bit... I felt it's a bit disrespectful to change, whatever... I put a lot of, er, African style social connotations into how changing... what it means, but when I found it actually... that person was very okay with it,...I would have done it earlier, it would have been... better, I think.

> Interviewer: And your experience with your second supervisor? Did you receive feedback that you could act on?

> Aziz: Ja, because it was more supportive and encouraging. So, I think that's for a student... especially for someone as struggling as really... the manner in which feedbacks are given is very important. So, I think... the second time around, there was a lot of encouragement... there was a lot of hope. But, in the first time, there was a lot of punishment and actually, now that I, um, now that I see... that... different supervisors have different levels... it's very interesting to see that you... I haven't seen as harsh supervision that I have, as I have received.

The MBA students are a close-knit group and they discuss their experiences of the MBA as a community. In reflecting on his experience, Aziz compared his feedback to the feedback some of his classmates reportedly received, which he felt was "less

harsh". Aziz experienced a lack of agency in the proposal process due to a number of factors. Some of his challenges related to his use of English, a second language. He experienced challenges with the feedback that he received from his supervisor, he lacked direction and was unable to act on his supervisor's limited feedback which, according to Aziz, was focussed on language use rather than content. He struggled through this because he did not feel entitled to change his supervisor despite having good reasons for doing so. It was only after he failed and I reached out to him to offer assistance, that he realised he could request a change of supervision. It is interesting how he makes reference to his ways of being and doing, his "African style social connotations", and how this prevented him from advocating for himself and taking steps to change his circumstances. It may be worth noting that Aziz changed to an African supervisor whose field was not Information Technology.

Graham, a 31-year-old, White South African male also experienced challenges with 'getting going'. Raised within a middle-class family he is a product of privileged model C schooling who graduated from the University of Cape Town in 2008 and worked as a medical practitioner before joining the MBA programme. Graham wanted to do a dissertation in the marketing discipline in order to shift careers and was performing very well in his coursework in the MBA. He employed a great deal of personal initiative and had a clear idea of what he wanted to do. However, he only managed to secure a supervisor a few days prior to the proposal submission deadline in August. The extract below reflects his response to my question about what he experienced as the most significant challenge in the proposal process:

> Personally, for me, it was all process. It was all process orientated rather than the actual task of writing the proposal. I'd break it up into three categories. One would be supervision for me, by inference, not only for me but a lot of my colleagues as well. But so, I had a distinct lack of supervision, through various factors and that meant having to navigate my way through the process, drawing on whatever sort of advice and support I could glean from whoever was willing to spend some time with me and give me that advice… I had a fairly clear idea of, at least, the field or subject area or discipline in which I wanted to do my research, which was marketing and brand strategy and sort of new business ventures, and strategy, and I had a fairly good idea of the sort of story that I

wanted to write because I wrote a teaching case, Harvard case... And, yet, I didn't have a supervisor and I felt quite unsupported in the process of finding anyone on faculty here or on the list which was given to us, who would be prepared to take on students, especially in the area which I had expressed an interest in. And that meant that I did most, or most entirely my proposal without an official supervisor until the very last minute. In fact, it was after the deadline that I secured someone to sign the proposal – that was really him just signing off something which I had written to the point of completion and asked him to put a signature on it so I could submit it to the... whoever has to approve the proposal.

The data show how all the challenges he experienced were "process-related" and were mainly tied to an institutional issue: the lack of available supervisors to supervise his kind of research. These institutional practices resulted in him having to request an extension, despite having a clear direction in terms of the topic and a genuine interest in the subject. He was also a top performing student with a first-class grade average. Unlike Aziz, Graham successfully drew on his embodied, institutionalised, and social capital to enable him to navigate through the process. Graham is confident in his English language skills and he embodied that confidence in his verbal and written communications. He used the English language in ways that are valued at the SoB. He was able to convert his previous academic experiences as a medical doctor to valued cultural capital in the MBA context as the ways of being, valuing of time and deadlines and procedures in the medical profession were aligned to the ways of valuing within the MBA and how they were expected to engage as students. His familial background also meant he was confident to advocate for himself in the proposal process. Graham and Aziz's accounts of their challenges with the proposal process highlight how the process of securing a suitable supervisor is not as straightforward as is suggested in the Dissertation Outline. The data thus illuminate the ways in which students' agency, which is similarly foregrounded in the Dissertation Outline, can be limited by access to valued forms of capital in this process.

6.1.3. The challenge of 'getting going': Achieving professional development goals

The data also reflect the extent to which students' personal and professional development goals played a role in topic selection. Personal and professional development are the main reasons why students do an MBA. Bourdieu (1986) states that cultural capital is convertible into economic capital in the institutionalised form of educational qualifications; social capital, in the form of connections, is likewise convertible into economic capital. Aziz's pursuit of the MBA was to support his career development and thus he chose to do a dissertation topic in his professional context which was Information Technology. He had a goal of using the dissertation as a mechanism to do his research for professional development and career progression. He aimed to conduct his study at the site of his potential employer and confirmed in his interview that the dissertation helped him to secure contacts with a large retailer and assisted in his progression to a more senior role. The challenge for Aziz was to find a supervisor who would help him achieve his personal and career aspirations by first recognising his prior knowledge as a resource and linking that to possibilities for research. While he managed to achieve this with the academic development interventions prior to the submission of the final dissertation, unfortunately he was not able to acquire the valued practices prior to submitting his proposal and thus he failed the first submission.

Getting going similarly posed a challenge for Khetiwe, a 32-year-old African female from Gauteng. She stated that topic selection was the most challenging aspect of her proposal because she was "so unfamiliar" with the finance discipline. Khetiwe's highest educational qualification was a Bachelor of Commerce Honours in Informatics degree from the University of Pretoria which she obtained in 2008. She did her MBA in order to achieve upward career progression and to secure a position in a top-tiered consultancy. Her choice of topic in the finance discipline was motivated by what she perceived to be privileged by recruiters for consultancies. This choice was rewarded as it contributed to her being recruited by a top consulting firm immediately after she completed her MBA. However, just like Aziz, Khetiwe also failed her first submission of the proposal because of a lack of understanding of the requirements of the MBA proposal genre. She struggled with the disciplinary conventions associated with doing a literature review and research methods in the finance discipline. After failing the

proposal, Khetiwe approached her supervisor and requested additional support in order to continue in the field because of her career aspirations. It took significantly more additional personal effort for her to learn the relevant techniques but she acquired the valued skills and was successful with her dissertation.

MBA students generally are quite competitive but more so when competing with their peers for jobs at the consultancies where MBA grades are important. Many students use the MBA dissertation to demonstrate capability in order to transition from a technical field like engineering to a field like finance. Students who want to shift careers to consulting sometimes opt for dissertations in finance to demonstrate the ability to apply analytical rigour. It is a specialisation that does "pay dividends" in that respect. There are certain recruiters, usually the top consultancies, who favour applicants for this reason. Both Aziz and Khetiwe's experiences shows how they were able convert their institutionalised form of capital of the MBA educational qualification and their social capital, in the form of social connections, into economic capital after completing their MBA. However they were challenged in the proposal process because they lacked the valued cultural capital and thus were unprepared for the demands of the process.

Mark, a 31-year-old, White Zimbabwean male University of Cape Town Engineering graduate, had similar professional development objectives to Khetiwe. Mark also wanted to change careers, and move from Engineering to Business Consulting. He stated:

> I took a bit of a strategic decision around my topic as well, choosing finance is likely to be recognised moreover… And, other interviews I had, people did ask what my dissertation topic was, and it seemed being able to say [finance], carried some weight.

Mark chose his supervisor first and found the biggest challenge to be "finding a topic that would work for the supervisor" he wanted. This demonstrates how topic selection is coupled with the challenge of finding a supervisor as a student's choice of topic is determined by the availability of a supervisor who is competent and willing to take on the role. Students are aware of the competitive nature of the supervisors' choices because of the limited number of available SoB supervisors. While there were many

supervisors on the list of supervisors, students generally experienced many of the supervisors to be either unavailable or unresponsive. In terms of subject areas or disciplines, there are a variety of disciplines reflected in the list of supervisors. Mark's choice of topic was motivated by the supervisor he wanted and further motivated by his desire to use a quantitative methodology. This illustrates how his 'choices' played into the power of the SoB processes and ways of valuing.

Dianne's topic choice was also influenced by her preferred methodological approach. Dianne, a 49-year-old, White South African female Entrepreneur with no previous tertiary level academic experience, entered the MBA programme via the Recognition of Prior Learning mechanism. Dianne found the whole research process challenging. Like the other research participants, finding a topic was the most challenging aspect for her. Dianne's choices were more informed by her personal development objective of obtaining an MBA as her first educational qualification and to help her to transition into a career outside of the film industry. Dianne favoured the qualitative methodology because she was discouraged by her negative experience of the quantitative research methods taught in the RM course. After completing the RM course, she did not have confidence in her understanding and ability to use a quantitative methodology for research.

Aziz, Dianne, Graham, Khetiwe, and Mark's descriptions of their challenges with 'getting going' highlight the importance of recognising that, for MBA students, the choice of dissertation topic is not only influenced by academic inquiry but by factors like personal and professional development, preferred methodology and the availability of supervisors.

The next section will discuss students' experience of the Research Methods course as a vital part of the proposal process.

6.2. The Research Methods curriculum as preparation for the proposal process

In Chapter 4 section 4.4.3., I outline the documents I collected as part of gaining an understanding of the students' preparation for the proposal process. Part of this process was reviewing the course material for the RM course. This was done in order

to get a 'feel' for what the students were experiencing in the classroom with respect to their preparation for the proposal process. The student interview data show how students struggled with aspects of the RM course. These challenges are discussed below.

6.2.1. Students' perceptions of the role of the Research Methods (RM) course in the proposal process

Students' descriptions of their experiences of the RM course pointed to two areas that presented challenges: namely the teaching approaches used in the course, as well as the content that was prioritised. I argue that these point to valued types of research within the programme (see CDA of the Dissertation Outline in Chapter 5). In my AD support role, I have noted the poor attendance of the RM course sessions by students on the MBA. This made me question why students would risk missing valuable instruction that they required for their research projects. The RM course outline clearly states that the proposal counts towards 40% of the final RM course grade. This allocation accounts for the high stakes attributed to the final proposal document. However, the RM course sessions were not well attended by the MBA full-time students. This concern led to the inclusion of an additional question regarding the value of the RM course during my interviews with students. The responses were somewhat varied in terms of the value of the course but it appeared that most of my research participants found the RM course lacking in terms of the applicability to their research. This appeared to be largely due to the theoretical nature of the sessions. The course covers a variety of methods for business research and students are expected to glean what is applicable to their projects as their research progresses. This point is also highlighted in section 5.2. where I discuss the students' positioning in the proposal process. The following sections shed light on the students' experiences of the Research Methods course and offer possible explanations for the poor course attendance. Below I discuss how students pointed to the teaching methods used in the course as problematic.

6.2.2. Teaching approach on the Research Methods (RM) course

The data suggest that the students' poor attendance was significantly influenced by the pedagogical approach in the course. In response to my question about the value of the RM course in supporting their preparation for the proposal, Aziz responded in the following way:

> It was useful definitely, but it had a lot of content. It needed to be a little more hands-on. A lot of time could have been spent in the actual doing of the assignments or the engagements, even in the class, but we obviously went through quite a lot of details of things you will really struggle to remember what they were. I enjoyed... but maybe I am biased because I am... I have a science type of... maths type of background, so the quantitative stuff, the numbers stuff, that was exciting, ja.

While some students valued the RM course for its role in building quantitative skills, they found the teaching methods problematic. Aziz's quote demonstrates a view that is shared by other participants who similarly felt that the course could have been more beneficial with a "hands-on" approach to the curriculum. This applied way of learning is something that is valued in an MBA curriculum (Hay & Hodgkinson, 2008). Graham expressed his dissatisfaction with the method of delivery of the content in the RM course below:

> I think lecturing is the most awful way of trying to teach this thing. It is dry. The research methods course and this is not an indictment on our research methods lecturer, I think she is tasked with something quite difficult to be fair, but it is the driest course content in the MBA probably. It is the least attended set of lectures, she was sometimes lecturing to a lecture hall of six.

Like the other research participants, Graham expressed the view that he found "workshopping, practical exercises and individual coaching" to be more effective methods of instruction. My experience of the RM course in my role as an AD specialist supports this. I had noted how lectures were delivered in the traditional lecture style which involved the lecturer 'transmitting' material and the student proving that they have received the 'transmitted' material. The student interview data reflect that this is a less effective method of teaching the content of this course.

Like Graham, Leonard did not find any aspect of the RM course valuable. It is possible that his view of the RM course's value may also have been influenced by his previous Master's study experiences. He explained below that he found his supervisor's instruction more valuable:

> I did not take anything from the research methods... What I think, again, is that more trust should be put on the supervisors, and actually, my supervisor was very helpful in introducing the research methods, and then the student, together with the supervisor, should work on the particular research methods that he or she needs.

Leonard's point about his supervisor's role is significant for the consideration of the potential role supervisors can play in thinking through the RM course curriculum.

6.2.3. The lack of instruction on Teaching Cases in the Research Methods course

Another challenge regarding the RM course had to do with the content of the course. A clear example of a curriculum shortcoming of the RM course, according to the students, was the lack of instruction and support for those who wanted to do a teaching case as their chosen type of research output. Typically, MBA teaching case methodologies involve working in real time with real organisations. The MBA students received very little instruction on the intricacies associated with working in this specific genre. The MBA students navigated their way around the lack of instruction on the case study methodology by self-arranging into a small 'case study support group', where they shared information and resources with each other. Access to these resources was, however, dependent on the social and cultural capital available to them. For example, only some students who were contributing to the group in terms of materials, contacts or tips had access to the resources in the group. The group arranged for additional informal instruction from faculty members who were more familiar with the genre and shared resources with fellow group members. Khetiwe's quote below highlights this:

> I do business cases at work [speaking about her current job as a consultant]... case studies... people who wanted to do case studies, they organised

themselves. So, I remember... Lauren, Vimendree, Tahir... those people, they organised themselves, they created a Google doc and then that's when they got lecturers on the side about how to do case studies... but it wasn't part of the Research Methods course.

Khetiwe was initially excited by the idea of doing a teaching case but when she started the RM course she found "limits" that motivated her to choose another type of research. The main limitation, according to her, was the limited number of supervisors willing to supervise teaching cases and a lack of formal preparation for this type of research. She acknowledged that she could have requested to join the self-organised group but she felt it would be "one more" thing outside her MBA programme that she would have to resource and that it should rather have been part of their "official" instruction on the RM course.

In my AD support role, I had also observed that there were at least four different presenters on the RM course but only two were SoB faculty. There was more time spent on quantitative methods instruction with eight of the fifteen course sessions dedicated to that methodological approach. A plausible explanation for the amount of time spent on quantitative methods is that typically teaching complex quantitative methodologies to MBA students who come from non-quantitative educational backgrounds may require more time. An understanding of the skills associated with this type of method is privileged in the business school environment (Singh & Chakravarty, 2018). This is evidenced by the fact that there were only four of the fifteen sessions covering qualitative methods, and only one of the four sessions included the case study method as a topic. Like the students, I also found the lack of instruction on teaching cases as a research type perplexing given the prominence of the move to this type of research in business education and the way it is foregrounded as a preferred type of research in the Dissertation Outline. The overall sense from the student interview data is that the Research Methods course does not prepare MBA students adequately for the writing of the proposal and for conducting certain types of research.

6.3. The value of cultural capital for access to the proposal process

In Chapter 2, I describe the relevance for the study's research questions of Bourdieu's (1986) forms of capital, specifically Question 3 which asks: *How are students' engagements with the proposal process impacted by prior work, disciplinary and personal experiences?* In the interviews, I asked students whether their work and educational backgrounds had any impact on how they experienced the proposal process. The interview data addressing this question reflect the importance of entering the SoB with the relevant cultural capital. Apart from illuminating students' experiences with aspects of the proposal process such as selection of topics and supervisors, the interviews showed how the institutionalised and embodied capital (as forms of cultural capital) with which students came into the programme impacted their engagement with the practices within the proposal process.

Graham, who could be considered as possessing significant embodied cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) in the form of his family and educational background found that his previous educational experiences facilitated his relatively smoother transition into business education discourse. Towards the end of our interview, Graham recalled an aspect of his education that he felt could have influenced his ability to navigate the proposal process and the Research Methods course, more especially in developing his research capabilities. He details the experience below:

> In primary school, I was in a model C school in the Free State Province, where they had piloted a programme called Enrichment Education. They selected kids from classes to run a parallel curriculum to the mainstream curriculum where we did a set number of courses. In the last four years of primary education … it was quite, like, dedicated time with the person teaching... there was one subject called research methods, or, research generally, we had a subject on computer programming. So, we were learning a very fundamental computer programming language, even in the, whatever, the 90s. We did a course called problem-solving, and a course called creativity. At home we were also read to, there was a lot of focus on … correcting faults and challenging you when you made mistakes and how you tried to present arguments and even over dinner table conversation, we still fight one another over the minutia of language. My dad is an entrepreneur and business person. So even those dinner table

conversations and the way that he speaks generally tends to alternate between quite a formal style and a business language style.

Graham's explanation is relevant to the point made by Bourdieu (1986) about embodied cultural capital and Gee's (2013) notion of a primary discourse. Embodied capital is made up from the embodiments or dispositions that result from the knowledge we acquire over time through socialization and education. Graham's access to the resources of his schooling and early exposure to ways of being and doing in research meant that he was able to process without much guidance with the proposal process. This would suggest that his experiences in his formative education, coupled with the cultural capital gained from his family and their way of life, played a role in him completing a good proposal without (or with minimal) supervision.

Fairclough (1989) writes about unequal distribution of cultural capital within sites of practice, using the example of how access to highly valued literacy excludes 'outsiders' from accessing prestigious sorts of discourses. Aziz and Khetiwe came from previously disadvantaged backgrounds and thus did not have access to knowledge, through socialisation and education in the way that Graham did. While both Aziz and Khetiwe were able to convert institutionalised capital into economic capital (see section 6.1.3.) by obtaining the MBA qualification, they did not possess the same cultural capital as Graham in the proposal process context, resulting in both failing the proposal. Khetiwe spoke about how her literature review "did not make the grade", with her supervisor's comments pointing to how it was not adequate. In describing her failure, she spoke of how she was lured into a "false sense of comfort" because what she had learnt about literature reviews in her Honours discipline did not translate into the same quality within the MBA. Despite having achieved a distinction for her Honours research, she was not able to draw on previous experiences to support the acquisition of valued knowledge in the MBA finance discipline.

For Aziz, the issue appeared to be more with culture, language and communication. Aziz spoke about how his supervisor's comments mostly pointed to issues of grammar and language rather than the actual content of his proposal. He struggled to communicate with his supervisor, thus he was not able to act on the feedback he received and failed the proposal. As mentioned earlier, he did not feel he could address the poor supervision he received because of reverting to what he referred to

as "African style social connotations" (meaning he felt it would appear disrespectful or ungrateful) to request better feedback and supervision. In Chapter 5 section 5.3., I discuss the students' positioning in the supervisory process through the use of highly modal language in the Dissertation Outline. Aziz's description of his experience with the supervision process demonstrated the lack of agency students feel and the influence of the relevant cultural capital (or lack thereof) in their experiences of the proposal process.

In Chapter 1, I pointed to the SoB Acting Director's call for South African Business schools to create more opportunities for widening access by considering the educational backgrounds of applicants to the MBA programme. One of the ways the school does this is to recognise student's prior learning. Dianne's interview highlighted important aspects of the differences in the discursive environments (her professional context as a successful film production company owner versus the higher education environment at the SoB) and how these shaped her experience of the proposal process. Dianne's description of her transition to the research discourse highlighted how different it was in comparison to Graham's. Despite her numerous years of being a business person and the accumulated knowledge and expertise she came with, she was not able to convert this experience into the valued capital in the proposal process. Her lack of institutionalised capital in the form of academic qualifications always left her feeling like "an outlier" on the MBA programme, leading to her questioning the researcher identity which is foregrounded in the Dissertation Outline. Dianne's questioning of the researcher identity is evident in the following quote from her interview:

> So I am still quite challenged about these things... it took me ages to understand what a literature review was and like I mentioned before the Research Methods course did not really help with this. Seriously, [I am] the most non-academic person you will ever meet.

Dianne's identity was firmly rooted in her work thus her identity as a practitioner was in conflict with the new identity of novice researcher. Her lack of higher education experiences meant that she found it challenging to transition into the discourses associated with undertaking research. She was therefore left to cautiously construct a researcher identity because she so was unprepared for the proposal process.

Dianne's experience highlights the need to think through the kind of support required for RPL students to gain epistemological access (Morrow, 2009) to MBA research discourses.

6.4. Summary of findings

In this chapter, I have presented data on students' experiences of the various aspects that constitute the proposal process and how their personal and professional identities, position them within the SoB. In so doing, the analysis considered these findings alongside the data yielded by the CDA. The data highlight the significance and power of the dissertation (and hence the proposal) within the MBA programme. These findings show how the institutional culture of the SoB, which emphasises the need for students' agency, is reflected in the lexical choices within the Dissertation Outline. The CDA also pointed to the power afforded to the dissertation and a valuing of particular types of research. This was in stark contrast to how students experienced the available support for these research types, such as the teaching case, due to a lack of instruction and available supervisors who were willing and, in some instances, qualified to supervise this type of research. The data also highlight the valued types of research in the MBA programme as depicted in the Dissertation Outline. However, the student interview data reflected how quantitative research was valued over qualitative research even though both types of research were foregrounded in the Dissertation Outline. The data highlight the curriculum issues which resulted in poor attendance of the RM course, thus negatively impacting students' levels of preparation for the proposal. The findings emanating from the student interviews highlight issues of concern regarding the RM curriculum structure and how it is inadequate in preparing students for the proposal.

The analysis of student interview data provides evidence of the impact of institutional practices on the students' agency and power in the proposal process and beyond. For example, while the process of securing a suitable supervisor should be a fairly simple process for most students, the data showed how this was not the case for Aziz. The analysis also revealed that for some MBA students the dissertation was an unanticipated component of the MBA programme which resulted in them questioning

the researcher identity foregrounded in the Dissertation Outline. The analysis of student interview data highlighted the role of cultural capital and valued enactments of habitus as enabling a relatively smoother transition in the proposal process. Graham's ways of being and doing count, and are valued (both implicitly and explicitly in terms of his grades) by the field. This is because he has the 'right' kinds of capital. Aziz, Khetiwe, and Dianne, are at a distinct disadvantage in comparison, because they do not have all the 'right' kinds of symbolic capital and enactment of habitus. The Outline makes it appear like everyone has equal access to the programme and the means for success on paper, the interview data show that in reality this is not true.

In the next chapter, I consider the implications of the findings presented here for the questions that this study asks. I conclude by presenting some recommendations to address the teaching and learning issues raised by this study's findings.

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

7. Introduction

The main objective of this study was to gain insight into students' experiences of the proposal process and how these experiences impact their approach to the proposal. The data highlight student perceptions and experiences of the proposal process as well as the implicit values of course documents, as illustrated by a CDA of these documents. The CDA made explicit particular ways of valuing which would otherwise remain invisible. In this chapter, I present the conclusions drawn from this data and suggest ways in which the issues raised by the findings could be addressed. The conclusions and recommendations are discussed by responding to the following research question:

What are MBA students' experiences of the proposal process within a School of Business and how do these experiences impact their approach to the writing of the proposal?

The sub-questions which enabled an exploration of this question are as follows:

Q1. What are the valued practices and ways of being and doing as communicated in official documentation within the proposal process?

Q2. How do MBA students' access and engage with these practices within the proposal process?

Q3. How are students' engagements with the proposal process impacted by prior work, disciplinary and personal experiences?

7.1. Conclusions

7.1.1. The valued ways of being and doing within the proposal process

In chapter 5 (see section 5.2.) I describe how the School of Business (SoB) positions students as the drivers of the research process. As is to be expected, the MBA programme expects its students to be highly enterprising, innovative and resourceful. In addition, the MBA proposal process requires students to have 'significant personal initiative', as documented in the Dissertation Outline. The CDA of the Dissertation Outline reveals how the SoB is explicit in the expectation that students are required to navigate the research process using their own means. Students are required to understand their shortcomings with respect to the research methods and to "build capabilities" themselves to address those shortcomings. However, the interview data show the impact of institutional practices and course curricula on the students' agency and power in the proposal process. The data reveal how, for some MBA students, the dissertation is an unanticipated and unwelcome component of the MBA programme which impacts how they engage with the research aspect of the MBA, particularly the production of the proposal.

The MBA is a professional Master's degree offering a variety of formats for the research component of the degree, some of which are more practically orientated. However, the SoB has unofficially excluded those formats from the curriculum in that they are not supported nor encouraged in the SoB MBA programme. This points to how power works to exclude particular ways of doing. The institutional culture, as reflected in the documentation of the SoB, emphasises students' agency and power in the research process. However, by excluding formats such as a business-situated project for the research component, the SoB may be limiting the students' potential to fully explore the affordances of the professional and applied nature of the programme, thus limiting the extent to which students like Dianne and Leonard can be agentic.

7.1.2. Students' experiences of accessing and engaging with the literacy practices within the proposal process

Students' topic choices were influenced by the potential for the research output to 'pay dividends' in terms of professional (career and other) advancement reconciling professional development goals with the valued types of research within the MBA programme. Students' choices of research topics were influenced by the availability of supervisors and the research methods by which they choose to supervise. This is reflective of valued practices within the programme. The interview data point to the SoB's challenges with the current MBA dissertation supervisory process. There appeared to be an insufficient number of available supervisors at the SoB to support students through the proposal process. The availability (or lack thereof) of SoB supervisors thus contributed to students' challenges in the proposal process and the extent to which they could display personal initiative in selecting supervisors. The data highlighted issues with poor or misaligned feedback that students found hard to act on, and less effective at developing their critical thinking and writing. It also pointed to supervisors being less than 'ideally' responsive, this coupled with the Outline placing the responsibilty on students to 'manage' their supervision, which placed the students at a distinct disadvantage for gaining access to a more knowledgeable peer/expert who is supposed to provide in-depth guidance.

7.1.3. The role of cultural capital in students' engagement with the proposal process

The findings highlighted the role of cultural capital in enabling students' relatively smoother transition through the proposal process where students drew on their social and embodied cultural capital to enable them to navigate the proposal process successfully. While the data showed that students were, at times, able to show 'personal initiative' in the proposal process, for example organising themselves into groups and finding resources on teaching cases when the curriculum activities on the RM course failed to provide this knowledge, the students' interview data show how students with the relevant cultural capital are privileged in this process. This is evident in how students' ability to succeed in the proposal process is shaped by their personal

and professional identities. The SoB field 'gatekeeps' to maintain the current set up and balance of power through setting the relative exchange values of the forms of capital of the actors in the field. It declares access for everyone who meets the minimum requirements for entry and can pay the fees but in practice, the relative values assigned to forms of capital actually results in selected access and success.

The data further demonstrate how institutional practices impact on the students' agency and power in the proposal process due to the fact that, while genres such as the teaching case are foregrounded as valued types of research in the Dissertation Outline, students' experiences point to limited support in terms of available supervision for this type of research. The lack of resources and support available for particular types of research during the proposal process resulted in students having to draw on their institutionalised and embodied capital to be successful.

The study's findings highlight the importance of the nature of support provided to students navigating the transition from workplace and different disciplinary contexts into the research component of the MBA.

7.1.4.   Understanding students' level of preparedness for the proposal process

Prior experience and disciplinary backgrounds had a direct impact on the students' levels of preparedness for the MBA proposal process. The data problematize the SoB's assumptions about students' levels of preparedness. The work experience of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) students helps them with the applicability of the MBA core course content but does not contribute adequately to levels of preparedness for the proposal process. Furthermore, given how the SoB positions students as the key drivers in the research process, a lack of academic experience leaves RPL students with low levels of confidence and a sense that they lack the 'personal initiative' that is a valued aspect of the proposal and research process. The SoB Director's point about the importance of valuing RPL is imperative. However, the data yielded by this study provide a snapshot of the possible challenges that RPL students face. While it is important to continue to strive for increased diversity in the students on the MBA programme, providing the relevant support is essential. The notion of 'meaningful access' as suggested by Morrow (2009) thus becomes important in

thinking about support for students such as Dianne as they try to gain epistemological access to the research component of the MBA.

The overall sense from the student interview data is that the Research Methods course does not prepare MBA students adequately for the writing of the proposal and, by extension, the dissertation. Students' experiences of the Research Methods course reflect how they struggled with teaching methods therein, as well as with its curriculum, which reflected a broader valuing of certain types of research over others. The data from the interviews highlight the need to include the supervisors in 'thinking through' the RM curriculum. Based on the student interview data this could include mechanisms such as more specific instruction on teaching case research types, workshopping, developing a community of practice and of a practical application of research methods and individual research writing support.

7.2. Recommendations

7.2.1.   Moving to a transformative pedagogy

A key aspect of the CDA framework that Fairclough (1995) offers is its ultimate objective of transforming practices. Transformative pedagogy requires academics to play a progressive role and open up curriculum spaces in order for disciplinary conventions to be contested. It is important to establish dialogue about how MBA students' prior knowledge might become a valued part of the pedagogical process. The findings presented in this study demonstrate the need for SoB staff to take up the challenge as described by Jacobs (2013) below:

> Identifying and inducting students into dominant disciplinary conventions would require lecturers to open up curriculum spaces where the literacy practices of disciplines might be critiqued and contested. But in order to critique and contest such practices, lecturers would need to interrogate the "ways of knowing" in their disciplines, as well as the "modes" and "tools" that their disciplines draw on to create disciplinary ways of knowing. The insights from such interrogation then need to be translated into explicit pedagogy (p. 140).

Even though Jacobs' statement emphasises the role that Academic Literacy practitioners can play, it is important that disciplinary lecturers be a part of this. The findings of this study make a compelling case for the SoB to consider adopting a more transformative pedagogical approach. Three recommendations are made in support of moving toward this transformative pedagogical approach.

The first recommendation is the facilitation of a dialogic approach to students' research writing to encourage the practice of 'feedback' as 'talkback' (Lillis 2003). This will entail working with supervisors to involve students in decisions about the kinds of meanings they might wish to make. Adopting this approach will require the SoB to work with supervisors to make explicit to students the disciplinary practices and boundaries, thus signalling what counts as knowledge. Coupled with this is the objective of the Academic Development practitioner working with supervisors to help them recognise students' prior knowledge as a resource in the proposal process, thus cultivating students' agency and power in the process.

Secondly, the data make a case for a careful consideration of the curriculum within key courses such as the RM course, especially for students working with teaching cases. The SoB can also consider opening up learning spaces to draw on the SoB Writing Centre, supervisors, and lecturers/supervisors where they would participate in team teaching and co-creating a new design of the Research Methods curriculum.

The final recommendation is that the SoB should consider including other modes of assessment which take into account students' purposes, desires for meaning making, identities, and aspirations. This could include the other types of research recommended by the CHE (Council on Higher Education, 2015) like a research project, an in-company technical project or a series of smaller projects demonstrating social innovation or professional expertise (see Chapter 5, section 5.4.).

7.3. Limitations of this study

A limitation of this study is that it has not examined the students' actual writing as part of the proposal process as this fell outside the boundaries of the study. However, the student interview data combined with the textual analysis provide a rich description of

the students' experiences of the MBA proposal process, which are considered alongside institutional values and practices.

A further limitation is that this study investigates the experiences of a small group of students in the MBA programme at one site of practice. Having said this, the aim of this qualitative, socially situated study is not to produce generalisable results, but rather to provide a thick description (Denzin, 2001; Geertz, 1973) of pertinent issues affecting a group of individuals which would not have been visible otherwise.

7.4. Further research

Opportunities for further research could be:

- An analysis of the textual and non-textual elements that influence students' research writing across business schools in South Africa. This would include an analysis of student writing,
- A study which examines MBA students' experiences of the research journey from a range of South African business schools,
- A focus on supervisors' ways of being and doing and how they approach aspects of the proposal process such as selecting students for supervision and the practices and values that guide them,
- And lastly, a longitudinal study tracking the impact of the recommended pedagogical changes stemming from this study and its impact on students' engagement with the research component of the MBA.

7.5. Concluding comments

This study has highlighted the ways in which the non-textual elements of research significantly shape the construction of texts and the extent to which students are able to take up particular ways of being. Students' ability to master these non-textual elements greatly influences their ability to effectively negotiate the proposal process and by extension the process of writing the proposal. Thus, surfacing the elements which shape students' engagement with the MBA proposal process is important for

providing opportunities for the enhancement of their research and proposal writing capabilities. Applying a critical lens to this inquiry has been important for highlighting how power operates within the space of the MBA and wider SoB and the ways in which the research component can be utilised to draw on the diverse experiences that students bring.

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