

‘Extreme teaching’: educational development in difficult contexts

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Abstract

In the ‘extreme’ case of South African higher education, historical legacies and current dominant practices continue to advantage some universities and disadvantage others. The post-apartheid expansion of student enrolment and the expectations of a society undergoing significant social change place particular pressures on university teachers and those who offer them support. The question that this paper addresses is: how should professional development be practiced in contexts of considerable change and challenge?

Introduction

I think a lot of what one does is determined by the circumstances ... sometimes the circumstances force you into ... or let’s say minimizes the amount of options that are available to you and sometimes ... yes it is chalk and talk ... because that’s all you can do at that moment...that’s all you have available to you at that moment (Interviewee 4).

Globally, the academic profession faces new challenges: including the pressures of mass higher education, fiscal constraints, new technologies, and changing attitudes towards accountability and how universities are managed. In the South African context, the post-apartheid expansion of student enrolment and the expectations of a society undergoing significant social change have created new roles for academic staff while challenging the coherence and viability of traditional ones. The ‘extreme’ case of South African higher education is partly due to historical legacies and current practices which continue to advantage some universities and disadvantage others (Bozalek & Boughey, 2012). The question that this paper addresses is: how should professional development be practiced in contexts of considerable change and challenge?

This study shows how the context of a particular higher education system impacts on teaching and learning practice, and on the professional development of academic staff in their teaching roles. The paper argues that that constraints and enablements of the context, as well as the possibilities and limitations of agency, need to inform professional development practice for the emergence of quality education. While context is particularly important in a developing country such as South Africa, it is also significant in the global international higher education system.

Conceptual underpinnings

The paper draws on a social realist framework (e.g., Elder-Vass 2010; Kahn 2009; Quinn 2012) to understand the ways in which the difficulties of context are negotiated in the development of a teaching agency. A social realist approach is pertinent to understanding the role that context ('structure' and 'culture') plays in shaping teaching practice by offering a way of understanding the dynamics of context and agency at different levels of the educational system. Social realism acknowledges the power of structure and culture and, equally, affirms the powers of human agency and creativity (e.g., Boud & Brew 2013; Kahn 2009; Murphy 2011). Context has tended to be underestimated in educational development, thus a social realist approach is pertinent to an exploration of the causal power of the higher education system, as well as of the individuals within it, in a way that takes into account the complexity of multi-directional relationships.

Archer (1995, 1996, 2001, 2007) makes analytic distinctions between social structure, culture and agency. Archer understands structure as a set of 'internally related objects'; thus 'structure', in Archer's work, does not refer only to social structures but to the inner composition making each object 'what it is and not something else'. Culture refers to 'any item that can be understood by anyone' because a common understanding has been constructed by a working group or sub-group. In this sense a cultural system is a 'propositional register of any society at a given time' and can usually be identified through its discursive practice. Culture in higher education meso-contexts can be accommodating or hostile to particular sorts of teaching and learning practices, and to the motivation to enhance teaching practice and develop professionally (Leibowitz, van Schalkwyk, van der Merwe Herman & Young, 2009). Structure and culture, as these are instantiated in any setting, provide potential constraints or enablements on human agents. How individuals respond to these potential constraints and enablements, leads to transformed structures, cultures and personal transformations – hence the significance of specific contexts and of individual agency. Agency thus allows for the transformation of society and emerges out of an interplay between structure and culture. Socio-cultural integration: relationship between cultural agents

Method

This paper is part of a larger South African study funded by the South African National Research Foundation that includes nine universities. In line with a realist approach, the study is based on the collection of data at the level of the actual (events that occurred) and the empirical (what people experienced) in order to hypothesize the 'real' (or causal themes) (Maxwell, 2012). The interview schedules developed by the larger research group. The project obtained ethical clearance from the lead institution, Stellenbosch University, and subsequently from each participating institution. All information identifying specific individuals was removed at the stage of transcription and storing of data. The data for this paper was obtained from interviews with ten academic staff members and four senior managers at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology in Cape Town, South Africa. All the staff interviewed were recipients of distinguished teaching awards (or similar commendations), while the managers had various levels of responsibility for teaching and

learning at the university. The interviews were conducted by external researchers and transcribed by a professional transcriber. The interviews were verified by the interviewers and interviewee and coded by two researchers with *in vivo* coding techniques (Saldanha, 2013).

Findings

The findings coalesced around a number of broad areas: different understandings of ‘good’ teaching, different views about the status of teaching in the institution, and different ideas on what might enable or constrain ‘good’ teaching practice. While the findings are presented in separate analytical categories, there is considerable overlap between them.

Finding 1: understanding teaching

Senior Managers predominantly understood good teaching in terms of satisfactory throughput and pass rates:

The [South African Department of Higher Education and Training] asked us ... to stretch ourselves more and set ourselves more challenging targets ... we had 78...79% nine percent ... they set us a target of 80.1% ... in our three year rolling planning cycle and ... so we addressed that through our review processes on an annual basis (Senior Manager 2).

Managers assumed that meeting these targets was a relatively straightforward matter:

First you have to say to yourself what are the skills that I want the student to achieve? ... how [do] we package what ... our students need to learn so that we can put down a specific learning unit ... what are the activities of the lecturers? ... what are the activities of the students? ... what are the assessment criteria? ... (Senior Manager 3)

Academic staff, on the other hand, understood good teaching as complex and multidimensional – and in a constant state of change and development as teachers respond to diverse students’ needs and the changing environment. Because good teachers respond to students’ needs, knowledge of students was identified as key to successful teaching. One of the interviewees described this as learning from her students:

I ... think that I’m as much a learner as I am a teacher because I learn from the students every day. ... I see teaching and learning as a communal enterprise between me and the students ... (Interviewee 6).

All the interviewees spoke about the importance active learning and of engaging students in the learning process, as one teacher put it: ‘the classroom belongs to the student...’ (Interviewee 1). While staff acknowledged the difficulties of teaching students who are under-prepared for higher education, these difficulties have inspired teachers to be innovative:

I think one of the biggest spurts to innovation has been a sense of frustration that I’m not being as effective as I possibly could ... and besides that it’s fun to try out new

things ... I just find when I have a new idea and I sit down and I start ... hammering it out on the computer I find it so inspiring ... and I often find that the students enjoy being taught in a different way to the regular chalk and talk thing....so that has been a virtuous cycle (Interviewee 2).

For many teachers, the act of teaching is a way of ‘giving back’ or ‘making a difference’ (Interviewee 7). The interviewees spoke of their passion for teaching, but were also self-critical, always striving to do better. Critical reflection on one’s own teaching practice was understood by all interviewees as a central to development and growth. For the academic staff, ‘good teaching’ was understood as an ideal for which one strives; it is a constantly shifting goal that is unattainable, but pursued with dedication. For many, good teaching is a journey, one that teacher and student embark on together. Good teaching is about innovation, and doing things differently – particularly if ‘doing the same thing’ is not effective. Good teaching is not about ‘going through the motions’ or following a set of procedures – it is about meeting students’ learning needs, inspiring them, challenging them, and making a meaningful difference in their lives.

Finding 2: the status of teaching

The senior managers interviewed acknowledged that improving the status of teaching was important at a teaching-intensive university, but was difficult because it had to compete with research recognition:

...and that is the issue, it sits around what sort of incentives are there for staff ... in our promotions criteria we are starting to place much more emphasis on the teaching and learning and ... we have included sub-minimum scores for ratings ... for promotion to associate professorship ... so it is possible for staff to attain the position of an associate professorship with a strong teaching and learning portfolio... (Senior Manager 2).

Managers felt that conferring ‘compulsory’ status on the training of new staff (who were required to attend a one-year part-time academic development programme) raised the profile of teaching in the institution. For one of the senior managers (4), the status of teaching was related to the status of university staff generally – and particularly important was attracting staff with strong research profiles to teaching.

The academic staff understood that although the institution was a teaching-intensive university, research outputs were important for its credibility - but emphasised the need for an appropriate balance. Some interviewees felt that, although there was a strong drive for staff to obtain PhDs in their disciplines, teaching qualifications were less valued. Several staff members felt the undervaluing of teaching in terms of practices, such as inadequate staffing in relation to the intensive teaching required in many departments:

...staff who leave aren’t being replaced and so we would have... a few years ago ... had a bigger staff structure ... and that allowed for ... more time for development for

the staff but it also allowed more time for them to do reading ... preparation and ... assessment (Interviewee 9).

Many programmes are accredited or reviewed by professional bodies, and staff felt that the professional status of the programmes provided concomitant status to teachers of such programmes, but also placed an additional burden on the academic staff, one that was not always acknowledged, as one staff member put it: '...keeping up-to-date in the profession in the department is huge' (Interviewee 9).

Academic staff did not expected to be rewarded for good teaching, for many it was a matter of personal pride and professionalism. One staff member felt that striving for teaching excellence was more 'beneficial for my own development than for that of the university' (Interviewee 4). Another took on an additional teaching load, as a personal challenge:

...the [pre-first year] group that I've just volunteered for ... I'm just doing it out of my own ... I'm not getting paid for it or anything ... I'm just doing it to explore teaching using technology (Interviewee1).

Finding 3: key enablers

Senior managers recognized the institution's responsibility to provide staff development and claimed that 'various methods of academic support for both lecturers and students has always been part of what we do' (Senior Manager 1). Senior managers understood the policy environment and the allocation of appropriate resources for the uptake of professional development opportunities, particularly for 'academics who really want to push the frontiers in this area' (Senior Manager 1). Senior managers also recognised that heads of department played a key role:

... heads of academic departments are not there as administrative clerks ... they are there to oversee that the academic project is delivered and delivered well and that ... the academics ... get the necessary support (Senior Manager 1).

The provision of an enabling policy environment and institutional structures to support academic staff development was noted by most managers interviewed. Institutional processes, such as 'subject reviews' (which require academic staff to reflect and report on subject pass rates, etc.) created opportunities for staff to reflect on their teaching.

Academic staff acknowledged that there was considerable institutional provision for teaching development, but not always departmental support (or individual motivation), some academic staff members being, as one interviewee put it, inclined 'to rest in their comfortable chair of mediocrity' (Interviewee 2). Most of the interviewees were aware of the professional development opportunities, but pointed out that development did not only occur through formal training, but through reading, interacting with colleagues, participation in teaching and learning conferences (Interviewee 2), or national interest groups (Interviewee 9), and involvement in educational research:

...a huge influence on my teaching I must say has been this whole scholarship of teaching, of reading, of understanding, of you know, trying to see why are the students doing this ... reading books ... reading articles (Interviewee 6).

Several interviewees spoke about team-teaching with a colleague, such as a communication or academic literacy lecturer as a way of developing themselves:

... I have had joint classes with the Academic Literacy Lecturer previously on giving the piece of text background to a topic ... and then I go through the scaffolded reading exercise on it ... that whole notion of scaffolding a concept ... [I have] incorporated it into my own methodologies (Interviewee 4).

While there was no shortage of ideas, inspiration and opportunities, interviewees felt that some staff lacked confidence to put themselves forward or to request opportunities to improve their teaching.

There was general support for faculty teaching and learning structures:

... another great influence is the [Faculty] Teaching and Learning committee ... that's the great influence on my teaching (Interviewee 6).

There was similar support for the 'embedded' teaching and learning experts in departments as enablers. Academic staff were enthusiastic about the potential of Teaching Development Grants as a mechanism for funding staff development:

From academic staff members' perspectives, supportive heads of department played a crucial role in enabling their development as university teachers. One of the interviewees (himself a departmental head) explained:

The HOD's have to balance a number of things of course ... their concerns are slightly different to somebody who is purely a teaching and learning person because they have to deal with logistics and the administration and finance and human resources ... but I think most of them are very positive about teaching initiatives and very supportive of good teaching initiatives ... they do tend to question very closely the means and the costs and the feasibility ... but I think they are very supportive ... as a manager I feel one of the key things I must do is try to provide an enabling and supportive environment ... (Interviewee 2).

Staff with supportive heads of department, as the following interviewee explains, consider themselves fortunate:

I consider myself very lucky in that regard because I am free to go and disagree with my Head of Department in principle and say to him I know you're the Head of Department and I know you will have the final say but my view on this is that ... (Interviewee 5).

The following interviewee explains different experiences with supportive and non-supportive heads of department:

I had a lot of support from the previous HOD who really was trying to understand teaching and learning and working towards it and ... went with me to conferences and wrote papers together to present ... so that was a tremendous support and it was nice because it's the first time I had experienced that ... but then that HOD left and we got another HOD who knows nothing about teaching and learning and quite honestly is not interested ... (Interviewee 6).

Finding 4: key constraints

Senior managers expressed an understanding of some of the difficulties that academic staff face with regard to engaging in professional development. According to one senior manager, the institution is 'burdened with numbers':

I think the impediments ... speak to student numbers ... the student-lecturer ratios at our institution are still fairly high and so the interventions sometimes although positive ... the numbers may militate against that (Senior Manager 1).

Thus heavy teaching loads are, ironically, a barrier to staff participation in academic development. In addition, the volume of work associated with the consolidation of faculties leaves little time or energy for staff development:

The merger has made us all very, very tired and so we have been too tired to spend time on teaching development ... (Senior Manager 3).

Senior managers recognised that while many heads of department supported teaching and learning, there were others who were not particularly enthusiastic about teaching, or about developing academic staff for teaching, and were thus a barrier to the uptake of staff development:

...there are a number of HODs [who] are more research-focused ... who don't really see teaching and learning as the main issue in the department ... so it is a challenge ... and from my position ... I speak to the Deans ... I try to emphasize this and the Deans are supportive but you know there is a limit to what you can do if you don't have ... the cooperation of all the staff ... so there are challenges (Senior Manager 2).

There were also cases where heads of department wanted to implement innovative teaching and learning practices, while academic staff 'in their comfort zones' 'derail[ed]' such initiatives (Senior Manger 4).

While most senior managers felt that the structures and systems (e.g., committee structures, the subject review mechanism) were generally supportive of staff development for teaching and learning, one manager felt that the structures played more of a constraining role:

...it's the lethargic nature of academic institutions ... everything revolves around committees and lengthy meetings and nothing gets anywhere and logic doesn't always prevail ... you're guided by policies and the policies eventually become laws ...the policy is there to guide not regulate ... (Senior Manager 4).

For academic staff, the most significant constraint to their engagement in academic development was a head of department who was unable to provide teaching and learning leadership or support:

... the HOD ... does not know much about [teaching and learning] but it is ... [expected] to implement it ... so but this is where the problem lies ... (Interviewee 8).

The issue of staff morale appeared as a barrier to the uptake of development opportunities. Some academic staff, who were interested in developing their teaching, found themselves in a department with colleagues who are not like-minded, often exacerbated by a lack of teaching and learning leadership – creating what one staff member called ‘a very toxic department’. Clearly in such stressful conditions, there can be no meaningful staff development.

Academic staff pointed out that while there were enabling policies and institutional structures, departmental practices often ignored institutional guidelines. As one staff member put it ‘They say the right things [but] what they say and what they do are two different things’ (Interviewee 4). Some staff were thus sceptical about the effectiveness of institutional systems and structures.

A major constraint identified by academic staff was the administrative burden placed on them:

One of the reasons why I think the staff do not use opportunities to improve their teaching is because of all the demands ... administrative demands ... we spend most of our time uploading marks ... downloading marks ... checking registrations ... if we can improve our systems and we can give staff more time to focus on teaching and learning ... we as a teaching institution will be much better (Interviewee 3).

Staff complained, and heads of department concurred, that the extremely high workloads prevented academic staff from taking up staff development opportunities: ‘workloads are just prohibitive ... workloads and marking ...’ (Interviewee 4).

Interviewees and questionnaire respondents generally complained about the burden placed on them by lack of adequate building maintenance and poor IT infrastructure:

...we are so caught up with operational matters that there is never is enough opportunity to speak about the teaching and learning issues (Interviewee 3).

Some staff felt that the ‘constantly changing regulatory framework in South African higher education, far from creating opportunities for staff development, was a barrier and an unnecessary burden on academic staff:

Now, I’ve been through previous re-curriculation exercises which were a fraction of the bureaucratic, technocratic complexity ... there were vast and complex bureaucratic ramifications and a number of forms that have to be filled in ... such that it was hard to think about what’s going into the curriculum ... which is what you

should be ... rather than which documents that you have fill in ... what are the deadlines and so on ... and your business plan (Interviewee 2).

Issues such as the poor state of facilities and building maintenance consume academic staff's time and energy that might otherwise have been used to improve teaching and learning:

...we have very poor facilities and I've been taking this up.... we've been taking it up ... everywhere and anywhere we can. We have compiled reports ... our facilities are just ... it's poor ... I've taken photos ... we've sent it in ...we've asked for equipment ... and we're hoping ... we're always hoping ... just that environment will go a long, long way ... I mean we sit with empty cold classrooms with no blinds and no ... some places not even a whiteboard ... I'm not even talking about data projectors and things like that ... we're trying to make do with what we've got ... but there's a big problem with the infrastructure (Interviewee 1).

Much of academic staff's energy tends to go into working around the dysfunctionality:

You know little things ... you want a light replaced in the classroom ... eventually I get a student to climb up on the ladder and put it in you know because ... it's quicker ... so we have to solve problems ... I don't for a moment believe that ... it's reached the stage where it interferes grossly ... I think they're hurdles and we have to overcome them and that's it ... then we solve it ourselves and you know there are budget limitations there are maintenance limitations and things ... but we have a really nice campus ...it's clean ... it's well maintained ... I am proud of it ...so I think the students have a nice environment to learn in ... I think we have a nice environment to operate in and for that I'm really grateful ... because I think learning in anything less is really hard... (Interviewee 9).

Several staff felt that there was no point in developing teaching methods or trying out new approaches when the resources and facilities to implement innovative practices are lacking:

There's one data projector in a department and even if you do manage to find a data projector, the venues are not such that you can easily use a data projector ... you have to cart it from one venue to the next ... In order to do the kind of developmental work that I am requested to do ... I also need physical facilities and those physical facilities are not forthcoming ... we are in the process of improving our infrastructure ... it takes time but I do not want the quality of my teaching and student learning to be hindered by something like infrastructure ... to the extent that the student can't learn optimally (Interviewee 3).

Discussion

Archer (1995; 1996) claims that structure, culture and agency are important concepts for understanding educational change; thus the structural features associated with policy, mechanisms, leadership and resources – as well as the cultures and discourses of different departmental groups and departmental leaders – need to be understood before change can be

effectively implemented. The case study reveals the influence and impact of enablements and constraints on the uptake of professional development. At the levels of structure (e.g., teaching and learning policies, subject review mechanisms, Teaching and Learning Committees, etc.) there are predominantly enablers; while at the level of culture (e.g., departmental discourses and practices, lack of concern for the educational project or functional environment) there are predominantly constraints. While structural and cultural features can be separated analytically, they are often interlinked and co-determining – they can become a vicious or a virtuous cycle. Archer (2002) argues that the structural and cultural features of systems have causal powers, and in the case study we see how the agents (university teachers) circumvent, or are thwarted by, contextual and cultural constraints; or are empowered by structural and cultural enablers.

There are similarities, but also strong dissonances between senior managers and academic staff in terms of understandings, practices, structures, attitudes, and discourses, for example, senior managers are concerned that students are weak, but good teachers take on the challenge. However, good teaching makes demands on university teachers that are exacerbated by dysfunctional environments – and there is a concern around the extent to which practices promoted in staff development initiatives – many of which are ICT-based – are suited for practice within all departmental settings. Teaching has been under-valued (and there seems to be a perception among managers that teaching is ‘easy’ therefore not rewarded; and in some cases high teaching loads are seen as a ‘punishment’ for not doing research. Intended enablers, such as the national qualification review, departmental audits that are intended to improve can have unintended consequences and have the opposite effect. Good teaching emerges as highly context-specific sets of practices...

Practical implications

Those attempting to introduce educational change should consider how structures and cultures may constrain as well as enable the emergence of quality education and the professional development of academics in their teaching roles. A merged or multi-site institution with multiple campuses housing different faculties (or sections of faculties) will need to take into account the different ways in which structure and culture have interacted over time to create divisions, differences and inequalities across sites. The emerging differences may need different approaches to enhance quality teaching. For instance, institutional policies or mechanisms that lead to enhanced teaching and learning on site A, might not be valued, and thus disregarded, at Site B; on the other hand, a mechanism not highly regarded at site A, might be extremely effective at site B.

Generally, in terms of structure, clear processes and support for teaching and learning, lines of accountability, and oversight of the implementation of policies are needed, but with due flexibility, sensitivity to different disciplinary or professional cultures – as well as the guiding, rather than ‘policing’ role of enabling structures. Improving the physical infrastructure and addressing the failing service and support systems is necessary to remove the burden that a dysfunctional context places on academic staff – and which takes its toll on teaching and learning. With regard to culture, it would be useful to showcase the considerable

successes in teaching and learning in ways that reach all staff and all managers; and that start the long process of changing perceptions around the 'second class' status of teaching at a 'teaching-intensive' university. There is also a need to address 'the human element', the distress caused by the merger, the enormous workloads imposed by the national qualifications review and other projects (over and above generally high workloads).

The case study shows the resourcefulness of university teachers in exercising personal agency to overcome the constraints of context and culture with remarkable and inspirational acts of teaching.

I absolutely love it ... I'm quite passionate about teaching and I always have been and I have like an energy affinity with teaching ... I can see what needs to be done and what happens when people don't understand and how to help people understand ...so ja ... I love it (Interviewee 6).

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