

**Narrating emergence in the curious terrain of  
Academic Development research: A realist perspective**

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**by**

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## Abstract

This dissertation adopts a realist meta-perspective on a body of the scholar's own research papers written between 2005 and 2011, all either published or in press and offered for reference in the Appendices. The six papers represent the point of departure for the thesis; they are the phenomenon for further investigation into 'what must be the case' for the research events to have emerged as they did. One aspect of this study, therefore, is an autoethnographic account of conducting research in the field of Academic Development within varied settings and over a given time frame. But alongside this personal history it narrates cycles in the Academic Development movement in South Africa over 30 years.

Margaret Archer's Social Realist principle of *analytical dualism* (1995) is used to disaggregate the emergent properties within these histories and to enable an analysis of the underlying mechanisms that generated them. It refers to three social domains. Firstly, it describes the material structures – the institutional environments, policies, roles or professional conditions – in which the projects were conceived. Secondly, it identifies the cultural registers that the profession was drawing on – such as theories, beliefs or discourses. Thirdly, it draws attention to the agency of individuals and communities in the field as they independently activated or mediated these various conditioning structures and registers. So the study is a systematic examination of *the parts* and *the people* in research stories, of the complex interrelationship of structural and agential elements, and of how together they have generated particular forms of knowing and kinds of knowledge in Academic Development.

Drawing from this 'history-within-a-history', the study makes some claims for 'what must be the case' for substantial knowledge to flourish in a newly emergent, hotly contested and relatively unstable field. It argues that Academic Development has few shared epistemological foundations and boundaries, and its roles and functions are shifting and diverse. It describes the tensions in the field between those who have been inclined to understand it as primarily concerned with redress or equity in the post-apartheid state, and yet others who have prioritised Academic Development as an efficiency project within higher education. But there is a third discourse emanating from those in the profession who have consistently argued that neither of these approaches

can succeed without drawing on stronger theoretical foundations. This study endorses the view that Academic Developers need to identify more coherent ontological and epistemological frames for their research work. This has important implications for building the kind of substantial knowledge base that could be more influential in addressing the troubled terrain of South African higher education.

The study refers extensively to Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871) and to Mervyn Peake's 1946 illustrations of these children's stories, finding in these texts powerful analogies and metaphors for principles in realist philosophy and theory, and for describing a researcher's journey towards a more assured identity in the curious field of Academic Development.

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I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my three children, William, Joe and Georgie in the hope that they will always seek out the deep, generative mechanisms that underlie the domains of the Actual and the Empirical.

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# Abbreviations

## 1. Names and terms used in Academic Development

- AD Academic Development
- AS Academic Support
- ELAP English Language for Academic Purposes  
(These courses were often named 'EAP' courses)
- SoTL Scholarship of Teaching and Learning
- TLA Teaching, Learning and Assessment

## 2. AD-related associations and conferences

- HELTASA Higher Education Learning and Teaching Association of South Africa
- SAAAD South African Association of Academic Development
- SAALA South African Applied Linguistics Association
- SAARDHE South African Association for Research and Development in Higher Education

## 3. South African universities and university terms referred to in this study

- CPUT Cape Peninsular University of Technology
- DVC Deputy Vice Chancellor
- HBI Historically Black Institutions
- HE Higher Education
- HWI Historically White Institutions
- NMMU Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University  
(formerly known as UPE – University of Port Elizabeth)
- RU Rhodes University
- SU Stellenbosch University
- UCT University of Cape Town
- UDW University of Durban Westville (including a Medical School)  
(now UKZN)
- UKZN University of KwaZulu-Natal, which merged three former institutions in 2004: University of Natal (UND and UNP), University of Durban Westville (UDW) and Edgewood College
- UND University of Natal Durban (now UKZN)
- UNIBO University of Bophuthatswana
- UNISA University of South Africa
- UNP University of Natal Pietermaritzburg (now UKZN)
- UWC University of the Western Cape
- VC Vice Chancellor
- WITS University of the Witwatersrand

#### 4. Academic Development's unit names in the various universities

- ADC Academic Development Centre  
(This term was mostly used in the 1990s but most universities have variously renamed their initiatives)
- CHED Centre for Higher Education Development (UCT)
- CHERTL Centre for Higher Education Research, Teaching and Learning (RU)  
CHERTL now runs a 'PhD in HE' programme (Doctor in Philosophy in Higher Education)
- CHES Centre for Higher Education Studies  
(formerly used at UKZN)
- UTLO University Teaching and Learning Office (UKZN)

#### 5. Government departments and policies

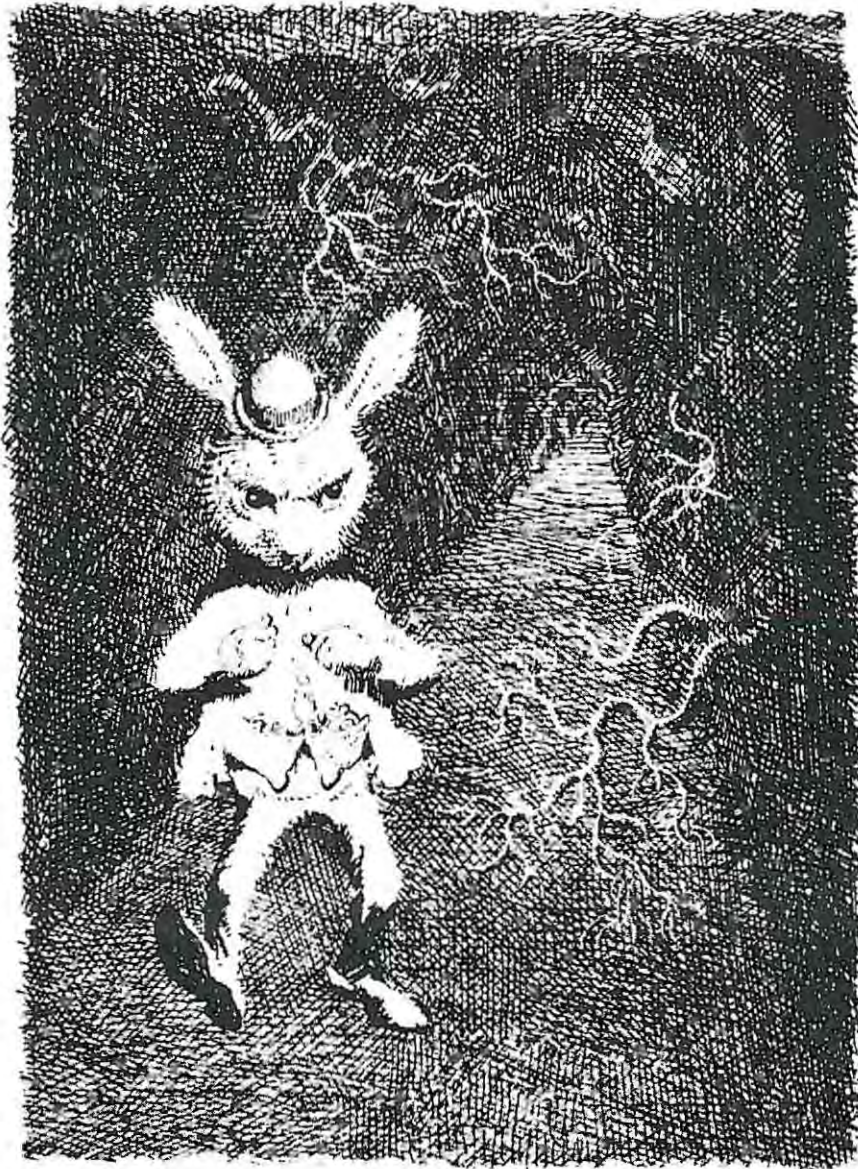
- ANC African National Congress
- CHE Council on Higher Education
- DoE Department of Education
- DoHET Department of Higher Education and Training
- GEAR Growth, Employment and Redistribution  
(a conservative macro-economic policy adopted by the ANC government in 1996)
- HEQC Higher Education Qualifications Committee
- NPHE National Plan for Higher Education
- NQF National Qualifications Framework
- OBE Outcomes Based Education
- RDP Reconstruction and Development Programme  
(the ANC's earlier, more socialist macro-economic policy)
- SANTED South African-Norway Tertiary Education Development
- SAQA South African Qualification Act

#### 6. Theoretical terminology

- NLS New Literacy Studies
- CDA Critical Discourse Analysis
- SFL or SFG Systemic Functional Linguistics or Grammar
- PEPs Personal emergent properties
- SEPs Structural emergent properties
- CEPs Cultural emergent properties
- TMSA Transformational Model of Social Activity

# Chapter 1

## Introduction: In pursuit of the 'phenomenon'



"... it was all dark overhead; before her was another long passage, and the White Rabbit was still in sight, hurrying down it. There was not a moment to be lost: away went Alice like the wind, and was just in time to hear it say, as it turned the corner, "Oh my ears and whiskers, how late it's getting" (Carroll, 1865/2010: 8).

"What are you doing? Why? Is it working? How do you know? What theories and principles and values underpin, or spring from, your practice? We look forward to such conversations with you through these pages" (Baume, 1996: 5)

## 1.1 An overview of the study

Baume's questions, quoted above, capture the central preoccupations of this study. These questions are as current today as they were fifteen years ago when Baume put them to practitioners and researchers in the Academic Development community in his first editorial for the *International Journal for Academic Development* in 1996. He was summoning the field to review the foundations of their practice and research, to account for what they were doing and whether it was working, to explore their ontological and epistemological values and to interrogate the forms of knowledge or ways of knowing that they were generating. These are the broad concerns that have also driven this study and are the stuff of the "conversations" (ibid: 5) that follow in the pages below.

My point of departure is an intensive review of the phenomenon of my own emergence as a researcher represented in five research articles, published between 2005 and (most recently) December 2011, and another, a sixth, which has recently been accepted for publication. Thus I draw on my own personal history and identity in the research field of Academic Development, but also on longer, more distinguished histories of knowledge-building in a complex of interconnected academic networks and communities, both national and international. I interweave an autoethnographic account of research experiences and events with the wider history of Academic Development, mostly in South Africa, over 30 years. Therefore this study explores the interplay between the 'parts' and the 'people', between structures and agency, in a particular research field.

This study adopts a realist frame and therefore I set out with a "certain phenomenon or a position which someone is holding" and work retroductively to reach some conclusions about "what must be the case for that phenomenon or position to be possible" (Bhaskar and Callinicos, 2003: 98). In Lewis Carroll's children's story *Alice in Wonderland* (1865) Alice is intrigued by the 'phenomenon' of a White Rabbit wearing a waistcoat and consulting a pocket watch, muttering distractedly: "Oh my ears and whiskers, how late it's getting" (Carroll, 1865/2010: 8). Burning with curiosity, she follows it as it disappears down a rabbit hole and so falls a long way down into very deep well.

Thereafter her adventures underground begin<sup>1</sup>. I too have begun this study in pursuit of a rather curious phenomenon. My own head-long dash has taken me tumbling down into a complex of poorly-lit underground passageways in search of whatever “generative mechanisms” might be able to account for “what must be the case for that phenomenon ... to be possible” (Bhaskar and Callinicos, 2003: 98).

Initially, the strange phenomenon that I pursued related to aspects in my own research history<sup>2</sup>. As I came to assemble and review examples of my earlier writing (mostly in the form of the series of research articles reproduced in the Appendices that accompany this dissertation) I was troubled by a number of observations. Firstly, I recognised the papers’ unsystematic use of theory. They seemed to hop, arbitrarily, from one theory to another, not only between papers but sometimes within them, and on at least one occasion there was no obvious theorisation at all. Even when I *was* consciously using theories, I was often merely *noting* them – they were usually not deep, systematic ways of knowing. For example, the first paper that I published emanated from my Masters research. It was fairly strongly theorised within a ‘New Literacies’ frame, drawing on Gee, Baynham, Heath and Delpit (see Appendix A, page 175). However, the second paper references Kristeva’s complex, psychoanalytic theories of identity and some Genre theorists within a critical action research paradigm (see Appendix B, page 188). The third paper seems almost a-theoretical although it is another cycle in the action research project and it refers to assessment theorists such as Boud, Hyland, Torrance and Pryor (see Appendix C, page 201). In complete contrast, the paper that follows it notes many, diverse theories such as Framing Theory, Socio-cultural Theory, Appropriation Theory, Sadler’s theory about effective formative assessment and even, briefly, some others (see Appendix D, page 211). The fifth paper returns to the ‘New Literacies’ paradigm (see Appendix E, page 222) and, finally, the sixth paper is based in the work of Becher and Trowler, especially Trowler’s ‘Teaching and Learning Regimes’ (see Appendix F, page 235) even though by the time I wrote this most recent paper I

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<sup>1</sup> Carroll originally entitled his story *Alice’s Adventures Under Ground*.

<sup>2</sup> There is an important proviso here: some of this research history is shared with others. For example, Papers 2 and 3 (Appendices B and C) are co-authored with Dr Billy Meyer and in the final paper (Appendix G) Dr Callie Grant and I explore what it means to write a PhD with publications. I will address the implications of co-authoring research articles in Chapter 4. However I will generally refer to the research papers as ‘mine’, partly because I am taking responsibility for my own part in designing and writing them but also to avoid overusing the stylistic awkwardness of ‘I/we’, ‘my/our’ and so on.

was already reading extensively in realism, particularly in Archer's Social Realism. What could account for this theoretical pluralism – if not downright incoherence?

A second oddity that I noted in my research history was that although my research papers were always 'critical' or 'emancipatory' in intent – the first four papers contain the word 'critical' in either their Abstracts or titles and the final two are also 'critical' in the sense that they are concerned with uncovering hegemonic constructions in the teaching/learning relationship – they seldom had any discernable effects. Despite my earnest, high-minded efforts to be 'critical' my research efforts generated little change, even in my own work context amongst colleagues and peers as I will record in Chapter 4. There were very few "transformations of consciousness" and even fewer "transformations in social reality" (Carr and Kemmis, 1986): I cannot claim to have been 'a change agent'. Yet I continued to make claims to criticality (see, for example, Appendix B, page 25). Whilst some students in some classrooms might have benefited from these research labours, this was not authentically critical research capable of generating "dangerous knowledge, the kind of information and insight that upsets institutions and threatens to overturn sovereign regimes of truth" as Kincheloe and McLaren (1994: 138) put it. This provoked further self-questioning about what kinds of research *could* generate "dangerous knowledge" (ibid) that might be capable of bringing about emancipatory change.

A third curiosity relates to my papers' narrow research focus. I was almost always concerned with the teaching/learning nexus between groups of first-generation, first year Humanities students and their lecturers. But although I was deeply concerned about the quality of these teaching and learning encounters in whatever immediate contexts came to my attention, my research never interrogated the wider curricular or institutional contexts in which such encounters were taking place. Following Street (1984; 1993), Gee (1990) and other theorists in the New Literacy Studies, most of the papers were concerned with challenging lecturers' autonomous understandings of literacy and with ongoing attempts to offer a more ideological model for understanding students' literacy practices. Whilst this was certainly a worthwhile research aim, the teaching positions I occupied and the curricular models in which I was conducting most of this research – at least in the first four papers I wrote – reinforced autonomous understandings of literacy *in themselves*. As an English Language for Academic Purposes

(ELAP) tutor at Rhodes University and later as a coordinator and tutor on an 'Access'<sup>3</sup> programme at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, my professional roles and positions 'embodied' autonomous understandings of literacy and structural constructions of students' literacies as 'non-mainstream', 'other' or 'non-traditional'. How did I fail to discern such a fundamental ideological disjuncture?

Early encounters with Margaret Archer's Social Realism, especially in Luckett and Luckett's paper 'The development of agency in first generation learners in higher education: A social realist analysis' (2009) persuaded me to review theories about learning and literacy that I had considered foundational. I had assumed that student and disciplinary literacies were primarily *socio-cultural* phenomena and the epistemological frame founded in the work of the New Literacy theorists, such as those mentioned above, was an orthodoxy that was beyond critique. Although I had recognised that in some of my papers I had used New Literacies theories superficially or improperly, this was *my* failure and not an inherent problem with the theory itself. Thus most of my research papers, with varying degrees of success, explored students' learning practices in socio-cultural terms and in Papers 1 and 6 (Appendices A and F) I discuss *tribes* of lecturers, and their *territorial* ways of knowing, the latter paper referencing Becher and Trowler (2001) and Trowler (2009). I will point out that this began to feel uncomfortable as I realised, both in practice and in theory, how very differently each student and each lecturer exercises her/his agency. Archer points out that in some epistemological traditions, the individual is dissolved and in *Being Human: The Problem of Agency* (2000) she provides a much fuller account of the role of agents and their *reasons* in generating social outcomes. Thus I began to realise that most of my research papers had ignored agents, their personal identities and autonomous social agency. The exception is Paper 2 in which Billy Meyer and I looked closely at how we exercised our agency as formative assessors (see Appendix B, page 188).

To sum up, my earlier writing on teaching, learning and assessment (TLA) failed to take *agency* seriously enough and there is also an absence of accounts of wider institutional and curricular *structures* in which I took up my research endeavours. I had conducted

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<sup>3</sup> Although the programme on which I worked at UKZN was known as the Humanities Access Programme this kind of work is more commonly referred to as 'Foundation' provision in South African universities.

'close-up' ethnographic enquiries into TLA and had understood them, most essentially, as *socio-cultural* interactions, largely overlooking issues of structure and agency.

All of the ironies, oddities and absences enumerated above are not exclusive to my own research history. Observations of a similar nature have been made of the wider field of AD research work. Ashwin (2008), for example, notes that most previous research into TLA in higher education ignores social theories that afford descriptions of both structures and agency in learning processes and he claims that this "[raises] some important questions about this research and the quality of the explanations it can generate" (ibid: 151). Later on in this dissertation I quote Shay's claim that "the field of educational development, in South Africa anyway, has largely operated from a craft-like knowledge base [...] The principles informing this practice are often tacit" and that theories are "much noted but never elaborated" in this body of work (in press: 9). Tight, in a broad overview of international research in the field, describes the research into higher education as emanating from "an a-theoretical community of practice" (2004: 395). Haggis, adopting a critical overview of many years of research into student learning in higher education, claims that most of this research has avoided the "really difficult questions about the nature of 'universities themselves'" and instead focuses on "what is wrong with students who do not engage in ways that their tutors wish them to" (2009: 377).

However, the fact that elements in my research history are by no means peculiar to me still does not systematically address the question of 'what must be the case' for similar kinds of absences, contradictions, confusions or failures to be fairly common phenomena in the field. So, adapting Baume's broad questions (1996: 5) quoted at the head of this chapter, and drawing on Bhaskar's conception of transcendental argumentation (which I will describe in detail in Chapter 2, Section 3.4) this study sets itself the task of finding satisfactory explanations for two main and two follow-up questions:

1. *What must be the case for Academic Development researchers to emerge as they do?*
  - *What are/were my/our ontological foundations? Do I/we have any coherent sense of ontology?*

2. *What must be the case for the particular forms of knowing and kinds of knowledge in Academic Development to have emerged as they did?*

- *How could this knowledge impact teaching, learning and assessment (TLA) in higher education more usefully?*

## **1.2 Using past papers in a PhD study**

This study works retroductively from a collection of past research papers, all of them small-scale and action research-based, and the first six papers in the Appendices represent the main data sources for the study. However, this is an independent, 'stand-alone' thesis. Although these earlier papers are all available to the readers of this dissertation, chiefly for purposes of reference, they do not form the substance of the study. It is also important to point out that I have no intention of making value judgements about their intrinsic worth or otherwise: some were better than others, but that is not the central interest of this study. Far from valourising earlier work or offering it as evidence of my worthiness to be granted a doctoral qualification, they are understood as artefacts of a 'historical Me', sources of reflection for the 'present I' (Archer, 2000). The current study finds their ongoing usefulness in what they can illustrate about the processes of researcher emergence and for what these insights might imply for how and what we can know in the field.

The seventh paper in the Appendices – Appendix G, page 245 – is not strictly 'data' in the sense that the other papers are. It is an attempt to theorise 'PhDs by publication' for a Humanities and Education context. Dr Callie Grant (a colleague from my time at UKZN) and I wrote this paper together during the course of 2011 as we struggled, retrospectively in her case, to explain the complex processes by which we had come to understand and use this model of doctoral study for ourselves. In a different sense, therefore, the paper in Appendix G also represents a starting point for this thesis.

The concept of a 'PhD by publication(s)' is a relatively new and untried concept in the South African academy, especially in the Humanities and Education. I had guardedly begun to mull over the possibilities of a PhD by publications at a time when the institution in which I was then working, UKZN, had recently made provision for the kind of PhD that could include or incorporate a body of prior research (University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2007). Reading, writing and reflecting with Callie Grant finally led us to

the conclusion that PhDs *by* publications (in the sense of *'by means of'*) is probably a misnomer in the Humanities. They are better described as PhDs *with* or *accompanied by* publications in that the PhD *thesis* (i.e., the argument) will always reside in a substantial *meta-level analysis* of earlier research work and seldom in the work itself. As I began to seek out ways of meta-narrating my own earlier research history, I gradually discovered the rich, generative potential of this mode of doctoral study. Although Callie Grant and I developed ways of using the genre in a more-or-less *ad hoc* fashion as our studies were progressing, we do now tentatively theorise the concept, at least for ourselves, and have outlined some fundamental principles for this kind of doctoral work in our knowledge areas. I refer the readers of this dissertation to the more detailed account of how we theorised this alternative mode of PhD in Appendix G and suggest that this short paper be used as a conceptual frame for reading the current study. 'PhDs by publication(s): An "easy way out?"' has now been accepted for publication in the 'Points of Departure' section of *Teaching in Higher Education* and will be appearing in the February 2012 edition of the journal.

### **1.3 Finding the meta-narrative in Critical and Social Realism**

A range of concepts within realism, both in Critical and Social Realism, facilitate a meta-level analysis of earlier papers. Because Bhaskar offers "theory about theory" (Potter, 2003: 162) Critical Realism can achieve an important 'distancing' function in this thesis in the sense that it can set up an entirely new platform from which I can review earlier writing. The validity of this thesis relies crucially on how thoroughly or successfully I can re-apply these different meta-theoretical frames to already analysed data.

The logic of the *transcendental argument* is the key to the analysis. Thus a phenomenon is first closely described, and then, by a systematic method of *retroductive inferencing* the mechanisms which made it possible can be satisfactorily identified. Thus, as Sayer describes, "events are explained by postulating and identifying mechanisms which are capable of producing them" (1992: 107). Bhaskar's 'depth' ontology, which understands reality as layered, differentiated and stratified, enables former research papers to be conceived as *events* in the 'layer' of the Actual and the task of the current thesis as the discovery of causal tendencies in the deeper 'layer' of the Real. Because realism holds out the possibility of good explanations for phenomena, it follows that realist

researchers can, in the end, make normative claims of a kind. They can offer “explanatory critiques” (Bhaskar and Collier, 1998: 385) thus reviving the possibility of an emancipatory agenda for research. Given the frustrations with my earlier research, described above in Section 1.1, this principle in realism is particularly appealing. Bhaskar’s reconciliation of two dimensions of reality – the *transitive* and the *intransitive* – will be another cornerstone of this thesis. Therefore I will consciously start out with a ‘transitive’ reality in the form of subjective descriptions of conducting research in particular physical and temporal settings and, from there, I will move on to identifying the *intransitive* dimensions of the case, those “relatively independent and enduring structures ... which operate as causal mechanisms and tendencies” (Carter and New, 2004: 4). Bhaskar’s rejection of “ontological monovalence” (1998c: 562) and his theorising of the causal power of *absences* will be another regulatory principle in this thesis and a powerful means of understanding the “the logic of absence” (1993: 16) in research designs and accounts. In Chapter 2 of this dissertation I describe Bhaskar’s ontology in much greater detail.

In the first half of Chapter 3 I turn to Archer’s social theories and a number of her ‘methodological toolkits’. I call them ‘explanatory programmes’ or, better still, (in Clegg’s phrase) “tools for thinking with” (2011: 6). By grasping the complex, multidimensional processes of *emergence* I will make some sense of how and why particular research events and kinds of knowledge came to emerge in the ways that they did. Archer offers *analytical dualism* which helps the practical social analyst to separate out all the independent powers and properties within structural systems, cultural systems and the life world of agents. Analytical dualism is a ‘trick’ in a sense – an “artifice of convenience” (Archer, 1988/1996: 143) – which permits the analyst to prise open the properties and powers that are at work in each of these domains and to examine their complex interplay sequentially and over periods of time. Archer persuades me to recognise the problems with *conflationary thinking* – that is, with collapsing any one of these separate elements in the social world into another. Avoiding or ignoring accounts of any one or other of them can result in incomplete explanations of the phenomenon under review. Another of Archer’s ‘tools for thinking with’ is her *morphogenetic approach* which enables a conceptualisation of former research papers in terms of cycles, each of which started out with different sets of conditioning

influences that I (and others) interacted with in different ways. Each paper led on to new cycles in the research trajectory, each cycle setting up new conditions for the next paper and so on. Archer's theorising of *agency* (2000) is also very useful. In my research history I can clearly trace "the continuous sense of self" (ibid: 3) despite the various theoretical shifts and turns that I took. Starting out as a *primary agent*, a conditioned/historical 'Me' attempted to develop *corporate agency* as an interactive 'We', striving towards the goal of an elaborated/future 'You', one who might become a *social actor* capable of effecting some change in her/our society. But there were constraints and enablements along the way driving either *morphogenesis* or *morphostasis*. These ideas will become clearer as I explain them more fully in Chapter 3 and apply them in Chapter 4.

#### **1.4 The nature of the Academic Development field in South African universities**

Academic Development is indeed 'curious terrain' as the title of this dissertation suggests. For a start, there is little agreement on how to name it. In the United Kingdom, for example, it is referred to as 'Educational Development' and in Australia, New Zealand and South Africa usually as 'Academic Development', sometimes as 'professional development', but in different national contexts it has rather different meanings, roles and functions (Clegg, 2009: 403). This dissertation has deliberately focussed on the South African field and therefore uses the term 'Academic Development' (henceforth 'AD'). But even in a relatively small community of AD professionals in a single national context, it is often differently conceived and theorised from one institution to another, as Gosling's recent report on a survey of 19 Directors of ADCs across the country has indicated (2009: ii) and as my own professional history in two different institutions will also clearly show. AD has undergone at least three major ideological shifts over its 30-year history in the South African academy (Volbrecht and Boughey, 2004). Shay's working definition of the field as "a range of development and research practices aimed at the professionalisation of teaching and learning in higher education, most commonly associated with various forms of student, staff, curriculum and policy development" (in press: 1) appears neat and clear but she also describes a field that is diffuse, fragmented and volatile. Harland and Staniforth's representation of

the AD profession as a “family of strangers” (2008: 669) aptly points to its inherent diversity.

That we need Academic Development in South African universities is beyond doubt. Scott (2009) argues that our post-apartheid higher education system continues to fail the majority of the population. There is clear evidence of this failure in undergraduate performance patterns (Scott, Yeld and Hendry, 2007). First of all, South Africa has low participation rates in higher education – only 16% of its 20–24 age cohort, a significantly lower figure than other economically comparable countries. In developed countries the average is between 60% to 90%. But the extent of the higher education sector’s failure is most painfully exposed when this participation rate is disaggregated by race: the white participation rate is about 60% and the black participation rate is around 12%. Scott, Yeld and Hendry’s cohort study of the 2000 national student intake (2007) showed that after five years of study only 30% had graduated. Even an optimistic prediction of the longer term throughput rate stands at no more than 45% of the whole cohort. The sad truth is that fewer than 5% of young black South Africans are succeeding in public higher education (Scott, 2009). So research that can effect real social change in higher education is therefore a matter of national urgency.

Shay (in press: 3) captures something of the nature of AD as a field of practice by drawing on Maton’s characterisation of intellectual fields. Maton likens intellectual fields to ‘cosmologies’ which can be either *axiologically* or *epistemologically* charged. Shay describes his conceptualisation thus:

In axiologically-charged fields the dominant gravitational pull is around moral, political and social values unlike epistemologically-charged fields where the dominant pull is the explanatory power of knowledge. Maton argues that in any intellectual field both are present, the question is which dominates. An examination of educational development discourses dominated by notions of improvement, change, transformation might point to a strong axiological-orientation. This is not a criticism of educational development. The failure of higher education in South Africa ... is morally indefensible and the reform of this system is a political, social and moral project. But what about educational development’s epistemological base? (Shay, in press: 3)

Shay is suggesting here that there is a two-way ‘gravitational pull’ in the identity of AD professionals in South Africa. Firstly, there are those who understand themselves as education or literacy activists with an equity agenda. In this conception, the field is primarily “axiologically-charged” (ibid). This kind of AD grouping arose during the late

1980's as apartheid was collapsing and the new democracy was being formed. But there was a second group, also from early on in the movement who, whilst not rejecting AD's strong equity agenda, soon saw that it would be better served if it built stronger theoretical foundations – they conceived the field as more “epistemologically-charged” (ibid). However, I will argue that in this community there is also a third group that exerts yet another ‘gravitational pull’. This group arose historically during the early to mid-2000s and they have constructed themselves – or been constructed – as carrying a more conservative, neo-liberal agenda of efficiency, performativity and institutional monitoring, essentially adopting a managerial role in the academy. This latter group, I will suggest, may not regard themselves as an intellectual or academic field at all. I believe that my own research history illustrates the two-way ambivalence that Shay describes, but the wider history illustrates a three-way tension in the field. I will argue that these unresolved characterisations of AD will need to be addressed if we are to build up the kind of substantial knowledge-base that can respond to the profound inequities that plague our higher education system.

In the second half of Chapter 3 (and in Chapter 5) I make extensive reference to Volbrecht and Boughey's analysis of cycles in the Academic Development movement in South Africa (2004) as well as Boughey's subsequent reviews and historical analyses of the field (2005; 2007; 2009; 2010), most recently in the form of an as yet unpublished book chapter that offers a realist interpretation of this history (in press). Boughey's work represents the kind of substantial knowledge-base that the profession requires if further research work – mine or others – is to gain credibility and this thesis has consciously built on these bedrock analyses. In fact, I believe the current study would not have been possible without them.

## **1.5 The use of analogy and imagery in this study**

Academic Development is a multi-disciplinary field. Those who find themselves working in this terrain are often not trained sociologists, philosophers, linguists or even educationalists, although some are. My own disciplinary background is in literature and I have a strongly visual, artistic disposition. To make sense of radically new discourses in the ‘foreign terrain’ of philosophy and sociology, this dissertation has called on stories and images drawn from texts and literacy practices based in my middle-class,

culturally English childhood as well as in the disciplinary ways of knowing developed in my undergraduate and postgraduate years. Thus I have made extensive use of Lewis Carroll's children's stories – *Alice in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871) in an edition that features Mervyn Peake's 1946 illustrations. Another register that I am familiar with is Gee's concept of 'Discourses' (1990). In a sense I am employing a range of primary or prior 'Discourses' as a means of access into the highly abstract and abstruse secondary 'Discourses' of realist philosophy and social theory. This approach is endorsed by Clegg who quotes Wright Mills (1959: 7 in 2011: 6): "You must learn to use your life experience in your intellectual work: continually to examine and interpret it. Craftsmanship is at the centre of yourself and you are personally involved in every intellectual product upon which you may work". Clegg here is discussing the problem of theorising in AD research and she also quotes Hey (2006: 439 in 2011: 6) who says that although we might self-consciously assemble various 'tools for thinking with' – such as theoretical resources – we will also need "research imaginaries" or "vivid ideas [that] come to haunt us" in our research work. In my case I have used Alice's haunting encounters and dream-like adventures as "imaginaries" both to internalise and to explain theoretical abstractions.

Peake's 1946 illustrations, like Carroll's stories, are sometimes dark and brooding, sometimes impossibly funny. Thus I have imagined myself falling down rabbit holes or passing through mirrored images into rooms that lie behind or beneath phenomena. I have understood myself as bravely resisting Red Queens or making carefully planned moves across an imaginary chess board. Zadie Smith, in her introduction to the 2010 edition of 'Alice through the Looking-Glass', quotes a physicist who describes the consequences if one were *actually* to pass through glass: "It would involve matter and anti-matter and, apparently, the charming prospect of an exploded Alice" (Smith, 2001/2010: 174). But my dissertation deliberately seeks to avoid this kind of literalism. Because it addresses the central issue of ontology and because ontology is an elusive, metaphysical concept – just beyond the reach of rational definition and language – I have needed two complementary ways of thinking about it. One is based in the *logos* of Bhaskar and Archer and the other in the *mythos* of Carroll and Peake. Armstrong (2008: 2–4) explains that these two different kinds of knowledge, *logos* and *mythos*, are both essential for making sense of our lives. Logos is reason, the pragmatic mode of thought,

but mythos or 'myth' is another kind of knowing that negotiates those existential regions of human experience which are more difficult to access and explain resorting to imagery or narratives as heuristics.

This, then, is my defence of the use of literary metaphor and imagery in a sociological study of how knowledge and knowers emerge in the curious field of AD.

## **1.6 An ethical note**

Because parts of this thesis are autoethnographic, and other players in this personal history will inevitably be identifiable, I have needed to refer to some colleagues and/or research partners by name at several stages. Those concerned have all read the sections of this dissertation that have related to them and have formally agreed to the use of their names in the interests of this study and the contributions it could make to our understandings of the processes of researcher emergence in Academic Development. I am very grateful for their generosity.

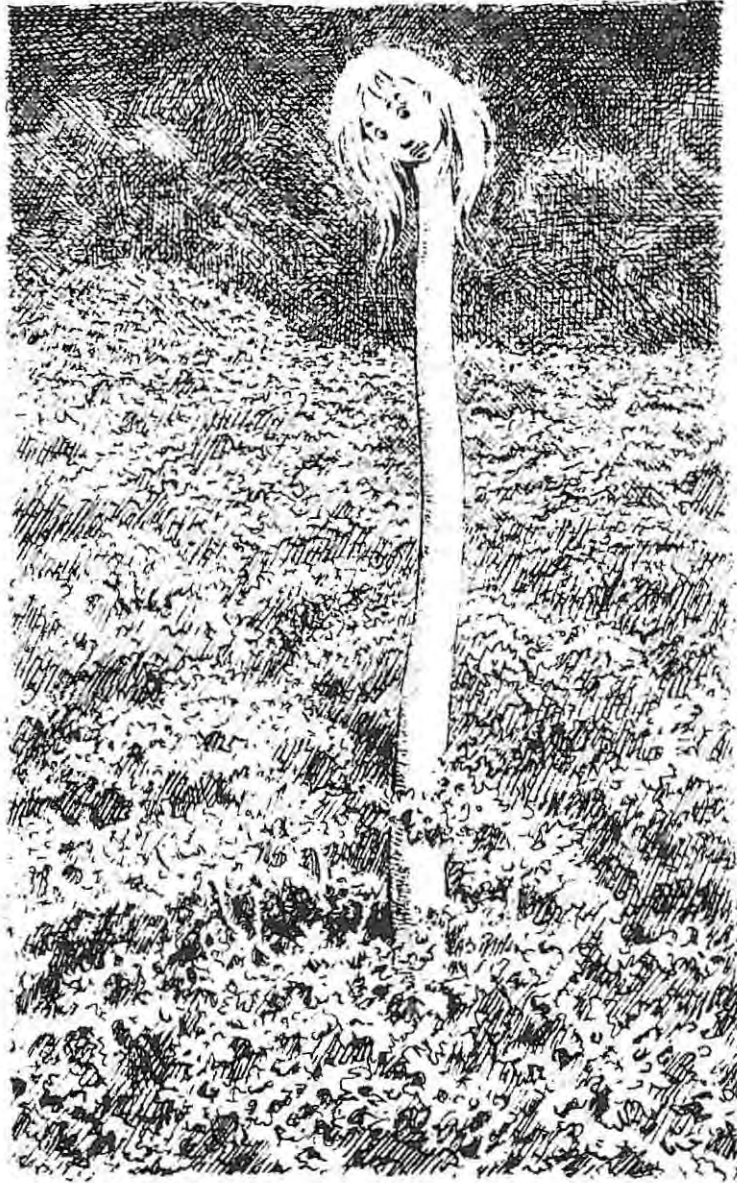
The Social Realist aspects of this study have prompted close attention to the role played by individuals or groups of individuals as active agents in the unfolding story of AD in South Africa. As I was preparing to write Chapter 5 (which broadly describes the generative mechanisms underlying the history of AD research in the country) I discovered that I needed to consult people who had worked in AD for much longer than I had. Therefore I either emailed or spoke with several key figures in the profession (based on the series of questions in Appendix H) and I quote from these conversations as 'Personal communications' mostly in Chapter 5. Some of these 'longer-term' AD practitioners shared aspects of their career or research histories and gave accounts of the profession more generally. Most of these references are to people in AD whose records of research activity are in the public domain. But, again, I have sought their special permission to quote their views or experiences of the field.

\* \* \*

In the following chapter I turn to the vexed question of 'ontology', what it is, how it affects our theorising, research designs or decisions, ultimately determining what and how we can know. For this, disturbingly, I have needed to grow an abnormally long neck.

## Chapter 2

### Meta-theories: 'Presuppositions about the nature of the world'



"Come, my head is free at last!" said Alice in a tone of delight, which changed into alarm in another moment when she found that all she could see, when she looked down, was an immense length of neck, which seemed to rise like a stalk out of a sea of green leaves that lay far below her", (Carroll, ([1865]/2010: 62).

"Whenever we speak something about the world, whenever we have a set of beliefs, embodied in that speech or those beliefs are presuppositions about the nature of the world", (Bhaskar and Callinicos, 2003: 98).

## 2.1 Introduction

This chapter is concerned with meta-theory, that is, with the ontological and epistemological assumptions that underlie all kinds of research. My interest here is in the sets of “first principles” or “ultimates” wherein researchers ground their ways of knowing the world they are studying (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994: 99). I will describe the range of ways in which ‘being’ and ‘knowing’ are understood and so begin to identify the kinds of theories and research discourses that are rooted in, or emerge from, such orientations. Referring to Peake’s illustration above, a meta-theory can be represented as standing above the dense and confusing plethora of theoretical positions that researchers might adopt, providing an ‘Alice-like’ overview of the landscape. Or, to use Bhaskar’s metaphor<sup>4</sup>, a meta-theory is an “under-labourer”, similar to the role of the “set-up man” who arrives at work before the master craftsman and readies the building site so that the craftsman’s work is enabled (Harvey, 2002: 190).

The most ‘ultimate’ question of all concerns *ontology*. Derived from the Greek word for ‘being’, it is a 17<sup>th</sup> century coinage for “the branch of metaphysics that concerns itself with what exists” (Blackburn, [1994]/ 2008: 260). Denzin and Lincoln describe the ontological question as: “What is the form and nature of reality and, therefore, what is there that can be known about it?” (1994: 108). Following on from this, and constrained by the way it is answered, is the *epistemological* question which asks: “What is the nature of the relationship between the knower ... and what can be known?” (ibid). The epistemological question concerns the origins of knowledge, how it is generated, the place of reason in acquiring knowledge and the place of certainty or scepticism in what we can know (Blackburn, [1994]/ 2008:118).

Although all researchers – indeed, all humans – have ontological and epistemological orientations, they may be quite unaware of them. Yet we are all ‘meta-theorised’, often implicitly. Gramsci argues that “everyone is a philosopher ... though in his own way and unconsciously, since even in the slightest manifestation of any intellectual activity ... there is a specific conception of the world” (1972: 323 in Collier, 1994: 16). In a similar vein, Inglis argues that “Everyone has a set of theories, compounded maybe of fact and value, history and myth, observation and folklore, superstition and convention ... Those

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<sup>4</sup> In fact, Bhaskar was reviving a metaphor originally used by John Locke to describe the work of philosophy (Blackburn, [1994]/2008: 212).

who refuse all theory ... are in the grip of theories that manacle them and keep them immobile, because they have no way of thinking about them and therefore of taking them off" (1985: 40 in Carr, 1995: 29). If we ignore the philosophy that underlies our investigations, we are mere "technicians", unable to critique the foundations and implications of our work and, "this means quite simply that we cannot claim to know what we are doing" (Morris, 1972: 60, in Carr, 1995: 87). Given, therefore, that we *are* all theorised in some way or another we need to proceed to the question:

Is it better to 'think' without critical awareness, in a disjointed and episodic way? ... Is it better to take part in a conception of the world mechanically imposed by the external environment, i.e., by one of the many social groups in which everyone is automatically involved from the moment of entry into the conscious world ... Or is it better to work out one's own conception of the world [and thereby] choose one's sphere of activity, be one's own guide, refusing to accept passively and supinely from outside the moulding of one's personality (Gramsci, 1972: 323, in Collier, 1994: 17).

This, then, is the idea that underlies this study and the decision to review my own earlier research. During the period in which I was conducting the research projects, I adopted various theoretical postures and systems. But I was hardly aware of having a meta-theoretical perspective – one which could guide the adoption or rejection of whatever theories I encountered as I was attempting to make sense of the various research contexts in which I found myself. It was something like a "Mad Tea Party" at which I moved from place to place around a tea table wearing a number of different hats (Carroll, [1865]/ 2010). It is difficult, in retrospect, to trace the reasons why I was so intent on, for example, doing critical action research, or using Discourse Theory or Socio-cultural Theory although this study does attempt to make sense of these choices. It seems that I adopted theories almost randomly, whatever 'hat' came to hand – whatever seemed useable in the context – and I will demonstrate in Chapter 4 that the selection was often unsystematic and naïve, both conscious as well as unconscious. As I have approached this doctoral study I have come to recognise – rather late in the day, perhaps – the importance of philosophical meta-awareness, not only to be able to make sense of my own research journey, but also to understand the research of AD colleagues in South Africa. In this way this we can engage in principled debates about how AD practices might be researched and, therefore, addressed.

The first move I need to make – and, I will argue, that the community of AD scholars probably needs to make a similar move – is to identify and revisit the meta-theoretical

framing that informed my earlier research. Why did I/we conduct the kinds of research that I/we did? What underlay the choices that I/we made? What kinds of ontological and epistemological ideas were informing and positioning me/us? Why? What consequences did these have? What kinds of substantial 'truth' or 'reality' claims can now be made, if any? The second move is to pose the question: would a different philosophical framework mean I/we could produce different, better or more powerful research? What could a new philosophic lens show up about what was hidden from view or unfocussed in my/our researchers' gaze?

To answer these questions I needed to orientate myself in the history of philosophy. The first half of the following chapter is the outcome of wide, general reading in the most fundamental ideas about knowing and being that have undergirded research in the Western intellectual tradition since the Enlightenment. I am aware of the enormity – even absurdity – of the task I set myself but say in my defence that I intended merely to set up a schematic framework – a broad conceptual map – in order to enable an identification of the paradigms in which most AD research had been conceived in this country over the past 30 years. I am also aware, of course, that there are other intellectual traditions such as Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) and Eastern systems, but the emergence of the realist school from within Western (specifically Anglophone) philosophical traditions constrained a consideration of other traditions in this limited context. The focus of this chapter will be on onto-epistemological frameworks with reference to the settings in which they emerged, “the activities of ... long dead people”<sup>5</sup>, (Archer, 1998: 368), the historical environments, scientific discoveries and socio-political contexts that gave them salience. My intention is also to scaffold a means of reference and comparison as I come to describe, in more detail, Roy Bhaskar’s Critical Realist ontology – the particular philosophical lens that this study has consciously adopted. In order to make sense of late 20<sup>th</sup> century realism I have needed to be able to locate it in a 300- year old historical, intellectual context. I will also refer to the illustration at the beginning of Chapter 3 in which Alice is represented as climbing through a mirror to enter a ‘looking-glass room’ on the other side of the image. I will employ this metaphor to describe different kinds of research as different ways of

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<sup>5</sup> Here Archer is referring to Auguste Comte’s insight that the majority of actors (who form societies) are “long dead people” whose past actions survive them and continue to have impacts (1998: 368).

reflecting reality. Thus I have developed a sense of the range of ways in which social researchers have historically conceived, investigated and represented reality.

## **2.2 Meta-theories: a retrospective review**

### **2.2.1 The Enlightenment tradition: positivism and empiricism**

The Enlightenment was a period characterised by an emphasis on *experience* and *reason* as the means by which we can know anything with certainty. Empiricist philosophy holds that “*Nihil in intellectu nisi prius in sensu*” (which means, ‘nothing in the intellect that was not previously in the senses’) (Blackburn, ([1994]/2008: 114). The idea of positivism is associated with the 19<sup>th</sup> century French sociologist, August Comte. He argued that there were three stages in human belief systems: the theological, the metaphysical and the ‘positive’, the latter confining itself to what is ‘positively’ given, avoiding all speculation (ibid: 283). In Britain the movement is associated with Francis Bacon, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and David Hume and in France with Rene Descartes, amongst others. The early Enlightenment philosophers attempted to establish a “universalist thesis”, that is, that natural science can be the basis of universal truths, producing law-like statements about the nature of reality (Mouton and Muller, 1997: 2). The philosophical influence of Newton’s discovery of the universal laws of gravity and motion encouraged the notion that scientific theories can carry universal, immutable, generalisable truths. Descartes argued that mathematics and objectivity were the means by which truth could be established – an idea that has been termed “Cartesian absolutism” (Hamilton, 1994: 63). ‘Hume’s Law’ is also worth noting: it is the principle that it is impossible to derive an ‘ought’ from an ‘is’, so there is no logical bridge that can link *fact* with *value* (Blackburn, ([1994]/2008):173). Bhaskar’s philosophy, in contrast, *does* make explicit links between fact and value as we will see later in his exposition of the ‘explanatory critique’.

The natural heirs of Enlightenment philosophy were the 20<sup>th</sup> century Logical Positivists such as Bertrand Russell and Alfred Ayer who linked the idea of universal laws to the notion of axiomatic systems, the “formalist thesis” (Mouton and Muller, 1997: 2). A true, mature science would, by a process of logical deduction, be able to derive all scientific propositions on the basis of more general theories and laws which are “axiomatic”. Positivism also works on a “logician thesis” (Mouton and Muller, 1997:3). The process of

explanation is “deductive-homological”: the ‘homological’ element is the postulation of a universal law or fundamental theory, the ‘explanandum’. From this the researcher derives, by logical deduction, the statement which explains the phenomenon under investigation – the ‘explanans’, (ibid).

To sum up, the ontology of positivism/empiricism is that there is verifiable reality, accessed by sense experience and logical deduction. (Critical realists, as we shall see later, would understand this as a ‘naïve’ or ‘shallow’ realism – Guba and Lincoln, 1994: 109; Collier, 1994: 3). The epistemology is ‘dualist’, that is, the investigator and the investigated are seen as separate, independent entities (Guba and Lincoln, 1994: 110). The investigator is capable of objectivity – subjective biases can be reduced or eliminated. Enquiry can be detached, taking place *as through a one-way mirror* (ibid: 110, own emphasis). Experiments can be set up in more or less *closed systems*, so that only one mechanism operates at a time in the matter under scrutiny. Hypotheses can be more or less infallibly verified or falsified and the purpose of research in this paradigm is one of explanation and prediction<sup>6</sup>.

In terms of their moral and political stance, the Enlightenment philosophers mistrusted religion and traditional authorities, such as the Church and monarchies, and their ideas were responsible for the gradual emergence of the ideals of liberal, secular and democratic societies (Blackburn, [1994]/2008: 155). Inherent in the idea of the Enlightenment was the notion of optimism, of unlimited material advancement and socio-political emancipation. It was thought that the human condition could be improved through the steady and rigorous application of reason. The following passage light-heartedly enumerates the extraordinary achievements of 200 (or so) years of positivist science:

As the nineteenth century drew to a close, scientists could reflect with satisfaction that they had pinned down most of the mysteries of the physical world: electricity, magnetism, gases, optics, acoustics, kinetics and statistical mechanics, to name but a few, had fallen into order before them. They had discovered the X-ray, the cathode ray, the electron and radioactivity, invented the ohm, the watt, the kelvin, the joule, the amp and the little erg. [...] If a thing could be oscillated, accelerated, perturbed, distilled, combined, weighed or made gaseous they had done it, and in the process produced a body of universal laws so weighty and majestic that we still tend to write them out in capitals: the Electromagnetic Field Theory of Light, Richter’s Law of Reciprocal Proportions, Charles’s Law of Gases, the Law of Combining Volumes, the Zeroth Law

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<sup>6</sup> By contrast, research in a critical realist paradigm would claim *explanatory* power but not necessarily *predictive* power.

... and others beyond counting ... The whole world clanged and chuffed with the machinery and instruments that their ingenuity had produced, (Bryson, 2004: 153).

These remarkable material advances in scientific knowledge represent positivism in its most flattering light. But many 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophers have interrogated what they termed “The Enlightenment project” – a project in the sense that it actively sought unlimited material progress and socio-political liberation (Sim and Van Loon, 2004: 97). Critical Theorists such as Adorno and Horkheimer (in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 1944, quoted in Sim and Van Loon, 2004) saw it as a failed project in the light of 20<sup>th</sup> century history: the terrifying savageries of the World Wars, the Holocaust, the Gulags and the A bomb annihilation. Later on in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the despoliation of the planet and unfettered neo-liberal economics are understood as logical outcomes of the Enlightenment’s “cult of progress”, dubbed by the Frankfurt School as no more than the “progress of unreason” (Sim and Van Loon, 2004: 40).

### **2.2.2 The emergence of the hermeneutic tradition: Interpretivism**

However, major philosophical challenges to pure forms of positivism and empiricism occurred long before the 20<sup>th</sup> century, first of all from Immanuel Kant, himself an Enlightenment thinker. His *Critique of Pure Reason* (published in 1781, referred to in Hamilton, 1994) began the disestablishment of Cartesian objectivism and the epistemological reliance on sense data as the only reliable means of knowing. Kant argued that knowledge claims about what is real cannot be separated from the ‘inside-the-head’ processes of the knowing subject (Hamilton, 1994: 63). In Kant’s epistemology, perception is grounded in *a priori* knowledge formed in our subjective minds so that there is a distinction between “things as they are in themselves and things as they are to us” (Blackburn, [1994]/ 2008: 197). Human beings organise, process and interpret incoming sense impressions. In effect, his philosophy is *transcendental* in that it sets limits on the role of empirical enquiry and claims that nature can only be understood if we see that there is a framework of *a priori* knowledge that underlies empirical experience. Kant prefigured many different strands of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century thinking, opening the philosophical doors for subjectivism, relativism, perspectivism and idealism (Hamilton, 1994: 63) but he also prefigured the more nuanced, stratified conception of reality that we eventually see in Bhaskar’s *Transcendental Realism* (Collier, 1994: 6).

Drawing on Aristotle, Kant postulated another distinction between “scientific reason” (*episteme*) and “practical reason” (*phronesis*). The former refers to the world of nature governed by causal determinism and analytic rationality; the latter is the moral world in which human beings are free to make decisions, choices and judgements. It concerns “The deliberation about values with reference to praxis” (Flyvbjerg, 2001: 57). As Hamilton puts it: “Knowing the truth about the workings of the world is one thing; knowing what to do about it is another” (ibid). So Kant began the interrogation of the relationship between different kinds of knowledge, and the application of scientific ways of knowing to theorising the social world.

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, post-Kantian thinkers such as Engels, Comte, Mill, Dilthey and others took up the study and theorisation of societies, using mostly naturalistic methods. But Dilthey argued that *Geisteswissenschaften* (the human sciences) required a different sort of epistemology and methodology to *Naturwissenschaften* (the natural sciences). Following Kant, he stressed the transcendental dimensions of the mind which could be best understood using *verstehen* (understanding) rather than *erklarung* (explanation). Max Weber, writing in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, drew on the tradition of *hermeneutics* that had developed in German Biblical criticism (Connole, 1993: 14). He argued, like Dilthey, that while the natural sciences employ causal explanations from the outside, studying humanity involves an empathetic identification with the inner, subjective experiences of the ‘other’ (ibid).

Interpretive perspectives have come to be understood as a viable, alternative epistemology for the study of people and society (Carr and Kemmis, 1986) and they represent a major meta-theoretical shift. Connole writes: “The task of the researcher becomes that of understanding what is going on, the *definition of the situation* ... To do this requires not detachment but active involvement in the process of negotiated meaning, using the researcher’s social competencies” (1993: 15). Thus the traditional split between researcher and researched is broken down and research becomes an inter-subjective, transactional process. To sustain the metaphor of research as a way of mirroring reality, interpretive approaches suggest that the researcher’s subjectivity is inseparable from the ‘research images’ she generates.

### 2.2.3 Paradigm shifts in Science: Relativism

The dismantling of the grand narratives of positivist science cannot be laid at the doors of philosophers alone, but events in science itself have also generated profound shifts in the ways in which we understand 'being' and 'knowing'. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century Newton's physics had provided a framework and impetus for new philosophies and in the same way Einstein's physics generated new metaphors for theorising the natural and social worlds in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Einstein's theory of relativity and the exploration of subatomic physics, leading to quantum theory, have shifted our onto-epistemological foundations and have led to "anti-foundationalism" (Connole, 1993: 17). Subatomic events do not obey Newton's laws, "instead they behave in ways which are utterly inconsistent with both common sense and classical physics" (ibid: 17). Connole gives a number of examples of the improbable, uncertain nature of subatomic reality. Firstly, she cites the phenomenon of quantum tunneling, "in which an electron approaching a barrier which it does not possess enough energy to penetrate will nevertheless sometimes appear on the other side" (ibid: 18). Another example involves theorising the properties of 'light': conflicting, incompatible explanations, involving *both* particles *and* waves, exist side by side. Neither is reducible to the other, a theory that accommodates both cannot be constructed, and both are necessary to understand the properties of light. Connole draws parallels between the new physics and social scientific theorising:

Most of the human sciences have generated a range of theories which are incompatible, not reducible to one another, but are all useful in understanding ourselves ... The new physics presents far more exciting possibilities for approaches to the human sciences than the old. The strict determination of an event by its antecedent causes, leading to the possibility of prediction and control is replaced by a world of indeterminacy in which competing explanations of the same event may exist side by side. The observer, rather than being detached and value-free, is part of the causal network of interactions ... The quantum universe is holistic rather than reductionist, organic rather than mechanistic and relative rather than absolute (Connole, 1993: 18).

The two scientific paradigms, represented by Newton and Einstein, seem to present radical, competing alternatives but Bhaskar's philosophy has effected a reconciliation between the ontological realism of a Newtonian worldview and the epistemic relativism of an Einsteinian one. Collier writes: "Bhaskar's work offers us the possibility of a new beginning ... because it avoids the alternatives of irrationalism and a positivistic conception of rationality, which dilemma has beset modern philosophy" (1994: ix) and Harvey claims that "critical realism seeks a middle path between positivism's fading

path and the unchecked caprices of hermeneutic analyses" (2002: 163). Later Harvey refers to critical realism as an "ameliorative third path" which I think more accurately represents its relationship to other philosophical positions (ibid).

Kuhn, writing from the 1960s onwards, also scrutinises the shift from Newtonian to quantum physics. In his *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1970) he submitted the natural sciences to a critical, historical and sociological analysis which led him to suggest that scientists work within accepted, legitimised frameworks or 'paradigms' which set limits on the sorts of research questions, methodologies or evaluative procedures they might use or ask (Connole, 1993:15). But "the stable periods of normal science are at times broken by periods of radical instability and "revolutionary" change. After a time, change leads to a new paradigm" (Flyvbjerg: 2001: 27). Kuhn considered that the knowledge produced in one paradigm is meaningless in another and no dialogue between paradigms is possible – the idea of "incommensurability" (Blackburn, [1994]/2008: 67).

Since Kuhn, therefore, natural science is often understood as 'constructed' within socio-historical contexts, and as relative as any other kinds of knowledge. So the ideal of a value-free, a-historical science is no longer sustainable. Flyvbjerg says that the natural sciences have been further relativised by means of a concept referred to as the "universality of hermeneutics," argued by scholars as wide-ranging as Feyerabend, Rorty, Garfinkel, Gadamer, Habermas and Giddens (in 2001: 28). Whilst hermeneutics, since Dilthey and Weber, was always regarded as part of the study of *human* societies, it is now also understood as part of the *natural* sciences as well. In Feyerabend's book *Against method* (1975, discussed in Connole, 1993: 15) he argues for anarchy in science – that 'anything goes'. Science, he says, has more to do with myth than we might like to admit and has become a kind of new religion (1975, ibid). Following this view, it is now possible to see a convergence, or unity, between the natural and social sciences on the basis that both are seen to lack objectivity and both have exactly the same non-epistemic status (Flyvbjerg, 2001: 29). Flyvbjerg, however, does not agree with the new form of universalist thinking that such a position would imply: there is still no "Great Book of Nature" that applies equally to the social and natural worlds (ibid: 30). He says: "It can be phenomenologically demonstrated that the natural sciences are relatively

cumulative and predictive, while the social sciences are not and never have been ... it is incorrect to underplay the differences" (ibid: 29).

Below I will show that in the context of this debate Bhaskar *does* affirm significant linkages between scientific and social epistemologies but qualifies the linkages in such a way as to take into account the subject matter of the social sciences – "i.e., the self-determining moment of human agency and the irreducibility of social institutions" (Harvey, 2002: 166). His philosophy of science – Transcendental Realism – becomes 'Critical Naturalism' when applied to the study of humans and societies but they emerge from the same ontological framework. A realist position argues, therefore, that "*in some central respects* society can be studied in the same way as nature" (Carter and New, 2004: 3).

#### **2.2.4 The Emancipatory tradition: Criticalism**

This tradition draws inspiration from Marxism so the aim of a critical researcher is the critique and transformation of the under-the-surface social, political, cultural or economic structures that exploit and constrain human beings. According to Marx, these constraining structures (or mechanisms of society) are usually camouflaged, or hidden from view, and a Marxist analysis would aim to expose them and bring them to revolutionary consciousness (Sim and Van Loon, 2004: 20). The work of the critical social researcher, therefore, is to surface the hidden, underlying structures in her research field, exposing the ways in which unjust practices are reproduced and sustained. Hegemony (an idea developed by Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci) works by persuading the whole of society that these unjust structures are perfectly natural and normal so that the dominant classes can maintain power by consent, not by overt coercion (ibid: 37). The "false consciousness" that perpetuates hegemonic practices of this kind might be the researcher's own, so critical research often involves processes of self-reflection and dialectical interaction with the research participants and others in the field (Guba and Lincoln, 1994: 113). In this meta-theoretical formation, therefore, the researcher carefully scrutinises reflections of reality, including her own reflection, and is distrustful of the seeming naturalness and innocence of the image she sees there.

This is markedly different from the either positivist or hermeneutic kinds of research I have described in the earlier sections of this chapter which essentially do the work of

describing or interpreting reality. Critical theorists would never be satisfied with merely increasing knowledge. On the contrary, they understand themselves as activists, advocates and instigators for social change (Guba and Lincoln, 1994: 113). Kincheloe and McLaren suggest that critical research can produce “dangerous knowledge, the kind of information and insight that upsets institutions and threatens to overturn sovereign regimes of truth” (1994: 138).

Critical Theory usually refers to the tradition developed by the Frankfurt School which was founded in 1923. Although the early critical theorists (such as Horkheimer, Benjamin, Adorno and Marcuse, and, later on Habermas) were ideologically rooted in Marxism, they defied orthodox, ‘grand narrative’ Marxism, reinterpreting it to address the context of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century period in both Europe and in America (where they lived as refugees from Nazism during the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War). They focused their attention on the changing nature of capitalism and “analysed the mutating forms of domination that accompanied this change” (ibid: 138). A central idea was that capitalism was moving into new levels of ideological sophistication through what Horkheimer termed *the culture industry* – “an ever expanding mass culture whose basic tendency is to the banal and mediocre”, and which is “insidiously political ... feeding into a self-perpetuating milieu of docility” (Daly, 2006: 32). They moved away from traditional Marxist notions of how revolution was supposed to come about: the working classes could no longer be relied upon to bring about revolutionary change, so new constituencies for the struggle would need to be identified. Marcuse found himself an icon of the ‘New Left’ in 1960s America, a ‘guru’ in anti-Vietnam war protests, student militancy, desegregation, and so on (Sim and Van Loon, 2004: 45). Habermas, however, argued that the Enlightenment project, although flawed, should not be entirely jettisoned. Reason should not be considered the enemy and he defended the idea of a foundation for ethics in his notion of an ‘ideal speech situation’. He posited the notion that “consensus seeking and freedom from domination are universally inherent as forces in human conversation” (Flyvbjerg, 2001: 93) and he holds out the possibility of judgemental rationality.

It is impossible, in this very short survey, to do justice to the complexity and variety of critical theories that derived from first generation ‘Critical Theory’ as it is described

above. But Kincheloe and McLaren have bravely attempted to sum up the onto-epistemological assumptions of the tradition in the broadest terms, as follows:

We are defining a criticalist as a researcher or theorist who attempts to use his or her work as a form of social or cultural criticism and who accepts certain basic assumptions: that all thought is fundamentally mediated by power relations that are socially and historically constituted; that facts can never be isolated from the domain of values or removed from some form of ideological inscription; that the relationship between concept and object and signifier and signified is never stable or fixed and is often mediated by the social relations of capitalist production and consumption; that language is central to the formation of subjectivity; that certain groups in society are privileged over others and ... the oppression that characterises contemporary societies is most forcefully reproduced when subordinates accept their social status as natural, necessary or inevitable ... and finally that mainstream research practices are generally, although most often unwittingly, implicated in the reproduction of class, race and gender oppression (Kincheloe and McLaren, 1994: 139–140).

Bhaskar's philosophy is *Critical Realism* and I can discern no major ontological disjunctures between 'broad church' critical theory, as it is represented in the definitions above, and Bhaskarian thinking. However, Bhaskar would not concur with later developments in critical theories that I will describe in the next section. But both 'upper case' Critical Realism and 'upper case' Critical Theory hold with a qualified form of realism, both envisage an emancipatory agenda for research, and, in Habermas at least, there is a commitment to judgemental rationality, that is, "there are rational, intersubjective bases for determining the relative merits of competing knowledge claims" (Maton and Moore, 2010: 4). Bhaskar's ideological roots are also in Marxism, but he too, like the early critical theorists, reinterprets the Marxist legacy for a new generation of social researchers. Derrida argues in *Spectres of Marx* (1993, quoted in Sim and Van Loon, 2004: 127) that Marx continues to be a spectral presence in our consciousness and culture. Political injustices and economic oppression are still rife, though in new forms and contexts, and although much of the content of classic Marxist doctrine has been largely discredited, there will be "no future without Marx" (ibid).

### **2.2.5 Post-structuralism**

The major turn of post-structuralism is its rejection of any kind of realism – it is essentially 'non-realist' or 'anti-realist' denying that there is anything knowable that is independent of mind (Collier, 1994: 12). Strictly speaking, therefore, post-structuralist meta-theory is 'non-ontological' in the sense that it reduces what is (or exists) to what we can know about it – a version of what Bhaskar terms "the epistemic fallacy" (1979/1998: 36). Benton and Craib suggest that post-structuralism has very little to do

with establishing formal bases for knowledge, leaving us instead, with “absence, difference, fragmentation and rhetoric” (2001: 168)<sup>7</sup>. It is distinguishable from Critical Theory in that it is “decidedly limited in its ability to transform oppressive social and political regimes of power” (Ebert, 1991, 115 in Kincheloe and McLaren, 1994: 143). Post-structuralism is often called “ludic” in the sense that it “generally occupies itself with a reality that is constituted by the continual playfulness of the signifier and the heterogeneity of differences” (ibid). Meaning becomes “self-divided and undecidable”, (Ebert, 1991: 115, in Kincheloe and McLaren, 1994: 142). It tends to focus on “specific and local enunciations of oppression” whilst failing to analyse “larger, dominating structures of oppression”, thereby “reinscribing the status quo” (ibid: 144).

Post-structuralism was a French intellectual movement, and is associated with writers such as Derrida, Barthes, Foucault, Kristeva, Lyotard and others, writing from the 1970s onwards. It is called ‘post-structuralism’ because it was a critical response to the ‘structuralism’ of the 1950s and 1960s which argued that human cultures could be understood by means of inherent structural systems underlying the local variations of surface phenomena. Structuralists focused on language as a primary structure, drawing particularly on the work of Ferdinand Saussure in linguistics. Saussure’s theories suggest that, “People are not the speakers of their language; rather there is a sense in which they are spoken by their language” (Benton and Craib, 2001: 161). Saussure’s development of the idea of language as a system of ‘signs’ – combinations of ‘signifier’ (a material element, such as a mark on paper or even a noise) and ‘signified’ (the concept or idea to which the marks or sounds are attached) – was particularly influential (Benton and Craib, 2001: 161). In Saussure’s scheme, ‘the signified’ has no final, predictable, one-to-one relationship with the ‘the signifier’ – meanings are always unstable and contingent. A ‘sign’ has the value that it does by virtue of its place in a network of other possible choices deriving meaning from “systems of differences” (ibid). As Levinas elegiacally puts it: “Every verbal signification lies at the confluence of countless semantic rivers” (2002: 11).

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<sup>7</sup> Bhaskar responded to this philosophical environment by describing his experience as a post-graduate student in the early 1970s: “Because I wanted to be able to say something about the world, I went back to philosophy and lo and behold discovered that it [was] actually a dictum in philosophy that thou shalt not commit ontology, that you [couldn’t] say anything about the world” (2003: 98).

Post-structuralists rejected the idea of pre-existing, underlying structuration such as in Saussure's notion of *langue* and the systems of binary oppositions associated with it. But the associative, shifting meanings given to utterances in context were of central interest. Post-structuralists also took up the concept of meaning as located in systems of differences. There was a celebration of difference or "differance", a term coined by Derrida which is described by Malpas and Wake as the designation of "the relation between signifiers as one of difference *and* deferral – a slippage from word to word, in which each word keeps a trace of the words that differ from it" (2006: 173)<sup>8</sup>.

Post-structuralism is the orientation underlying modern discursive idealism and the 'linguistic turn' played out in Discourse Theory and the like. The focus on language and discourse owes much to Foucault who argued that human beings are constituted within discourses which are changing and contingent (ibid: 175). Language communities share cultural meanings and norms that make up their discourses. Each discursive field contains implicit, institutionalised rules governing language use within the community and certain usages are prohibited or excluded. By examining the historical formation of particular discourses, Foucault's "archaeologies" or "genealogies" of knowledge probed under the apparent layers of hegemonic consent to uncover the structures of power at work in cultures (Sim and Van Loon, 2004: 94). Using discourse analysis, Foucault showed that the rules governing acceptable language use amount to *discursive regimes* which determine not only what can be said, but also what can be known. Language is, therefore, the crucial site of power, domination and resistance: "It is in discourse that power and knowledge are joined together" (Foucault, 1984: 100). Above all, therefore, researchers in a post-structural framework will explore power relations constituted in discourse because, apart from language, there are no fixed, axiomatic points of reference for the development of knowledge (Degenaar, 1997: 21).

The post-structuralist outlook is characterised by an attitude of incredulity towards grand narratives or *grand recits* (such as Marxism) of all kinds, seeing them as authoritarian and leading to the suppression of what Lyotard called "differends" (Sim

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<sup>8</sup> Alice's encounter with Humpty Dumpty expresses this position perfectly: 'When *I* use a word,' Humpty Dumpty said in a rather scornful tone, 'it means just what I chose it to mean – neither more nor less.' 'The question is,' said Alice, 'whether you *can* make words mean so many different things.' 'The question is,' said Humpty Dumpty, 'which is to be master – that's all.' (Carroll: [1871]/2010: 297).

and Van Loon, 2004: 97). Lyotard's use of the term 'differends' is unlike Derrida's 'différance': it refers to irreconcilable disputes between groups in which neither side can accept the terms of reference of the other (Sim and Van Loon, 2004: 97). A 'differand' occurs when meanings within one language regime collide with meanings in another (Malpas and Wake, 2006: 175). Consensus, according to Lyotard, is impossible and one language regime is inevitably imposed upon another. So unless the "little narratives" of the marginalised groups in society are heeded, we lapse into forms of totalitarianism in which many voices are silenced and excluded. "To guard against this we must 'activate the differends' – bear witness to the irreconcilable differences of culture" (Malpas and Wake, 2006: 175). In post-structuralism, therefore, there is not only an acknowledgement but a celebration of plurality, indeterminacy, variance and multiplicity.

Post-structuralist perspectives are inclined to dissolve the individual human subject, thus, for example, Lyotard says, "a *self* does not amount to much" (1984: 15, in Archer, 2000: 12). People are products of discursive formations and the flux of socio-historic forces which implies, as Archer points out, that they become mere "sites" or "grammatical fictions" (2000: 4), and are thus "perfectly uninteresting ... [possessing] no personal powers that can make a difference" (2000: 12). In Foucault's world, "man would be erased. Like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea" (1970: 387 in Archer, 2000: 12). Instead, they would conceive of a 'self' as constructed in multiple contradictory identities – within class, age, gender, race, profession, and so on – shifting from one identity to another in ways that are neither coherent or consistent: this was Kristeva's field (Sim and Van Loon, 2004, 155). Taking up again the metaphor of research as a kind of mirroring, post-structuralism would reject the implications of hierarchy and dominance in the binary concept of 'researcher/researched': rather both would be understood as fragmented images in a shattered mirror.

This issue is granted particular attention by the Social Realist, Margaret Archer, who showed that the human power of acting on *reasons* is irreducible and that concepts like beliefs, desires and intentions carry emergent powers. She argues that human beings have a "*continuous sense of self* ...that we are one and the same being over time" (2000: 7). This 'sense' (rather than 'concept') of self develops through our embodied

interactions with the world, rather than only through language and discourse (Archer, 2000: 12). I will discuss this further in Chapter 3.

The outline of onto-epistemological frameworks presented in the first half of this chapter has given me a sense of the range of ways in which researchers position themselves or have been positioned by their communities, societies or historical periods. The account of conducting research which I will present in Chapter 4 seems to demonstrate that I drew on theories and ideas grounded in a variety of these different ways of being and knowing, sometimes concurrently. To make sense of this “bloomin’, buzzin’ confusion” (Kuhn, 1970: 113) I needed to encounter ontology, asking myself such questions as: Were my investigations founded in an authentic or principled understanding of knowledge of any kind? Was my research truly ‘critical’, as I claim, or was this an assumed, superficial posture? Did the ‘bloomin’ buzzin’ confusion’ mean that I was perhaps finding resonance in postmodern position? Did the adopting of an action research approach (for example, from Paper 2, Appendix B, onwards) imply that – unconsciously – I was located in a liberal, modernist paradigm that assumed that the steady application of reason could really improve my social context? Were any of these postures authentic and principled or simply intuitive?

I will argue that the turn to a realist philosophical position was not simply the putting on of another ‘mad hat’, nor was it yet another move around the tea table. As I began to take a principled meta-view of my earlier research, I found that concepts in realist ontology and in Margaret Archer’s realist social theories set up the scaffolding for a retroductive analysis of the controlling ideas and generative mechanisms that had given my research its particular ‘shape’ or ‘shapes’. It afforded a frame in which I could examine the interplay between a fairly coherent sense of self and the shifting cultural and structural contexts which I had occupied at various times. Realism was a way in to the “structured mess” (Carter and New, 2004: 31) that I had observed in my earlier work. Reading in realist philosophy enabled me to set myself transcendental-style questions, such as: “What must have been the case for my research papers to be as they are?” or, “What must have been the case for AD research in South Africa to have developed the way it did?” In the next section I will present aspects of Bhaskar’s meta-theory that offer a means of finding answers these questions.

## 2.3 The 'ameliorative third path': Critical Realism

Critical Realism is a non-homogeneous, broad-based school of thought, what Maton and Moore describe as "a coalition of minds rather than a self-identifying or conscious group ... with differences of focus, emphasis, theoretical influence, affiliation and so on" (2010: 10). It represents a rather different kind of turn away from structuralism than the French post-structuralists had taken and was based, initially, in the work of a number of realist philosophers of science in the UK such as Rom Harré and Mary Hesse (Benton and Craib, 2001: 119). But the crucial impetus for 'upper case' Critical Realism was provided by Roy Bhaskar whose early work developed a philosophy of the natural sciences which he called *A Realist Theory of Science* ([1975]/1997). These ideas were reworked and applied to the social sciences in *The Possibility of Naturalism*, ([1979]/1998). Further refinements led to *Dialectic: The Pulse of Freedom* (1993) in which Bhaskar developed Dialectical Critical Realism including the Transformational Model of Social Activity (TMSA) and his concept of 'absence' which I describe later. The TMSA formed a basis of a social theory and it was taken up and further developed by Margaret Archer in *Realist Social Theory: The Morphogenetic Approach* (1995). But I will defer the methodological implications for realist social analysis until the next chapter. 'Critical Realism' is a hybrid term, a convenient shorthand, eliding Bhaskar's first two major philosophical conceptions.

My main interest is in Critical Realism's illumination of the nature of research in the social domain, but since its foundations were in science, and there are such strong links between Transcendental Realism and Critical Naturalism, I will need to refer extensively to both, starting with some of the fundamental ideas that they share. In keeping with the first half of this chapter, my focus will be on ontology and epistemology.

Bhaskar (1998a: xiii) describes the wide ontological variations described in the earlier sections of this chapter as an "overriding dichotomy ... between a *hyper-naturalistic positivism* and an *anti-naturalistic hermeneutics*". He offers, instead, an "ameliorative third path" (Harvey, 2002: 163) which, in its applications to the human sciences, is in the form of a "*qualified critical naturalism*" (Bhaskar, 1998a: xiii). Firstly, it is 'naturalistic' in the sense that it claims that there *is* an empirical, external world which

is independent of our perceptions or beliefs about it (Benton and Craib, 2001: 120). Secondly, the fact of our being able to discover fairly trustworthy knowledge about the world makes it possible for us to be able to change it, thus reinvigorating the idea of research as an emancipatory social practice in the post-Marxist tradition – the ‘critical’ element in Bhaskar’s ontology. Thirdly, Realism regards truth as ‘qualified’ and elusive – the surface appearance of things are potentially misleading, even counter-phenomenal (Collier, 1994; Benton, et al, 2001). Thus Bhaskar’s realism is neither a species of ‘shallow realism’ (as we have seen in positivism), nor is it ‘non-realism’ or ‘anti-realism’ (as in the various hermeneutic traditions), but rather a kind of ‘depth realism’.

### **2.3.1 The nature of ‘depth’ realism**

Collier describes depth realism by contrasting it with ‘actualism’, a view which, “while asserting the reality of things and/or events and/or states of affairs, denies the existence of underlying structures which determine how the things come to have their events, and instead locates the succession of cause and effect at the level of *events*: every time A happens, B happens”, (1994: 7). Depth realism, by contrast, asserts that entities (or ‘things’) have powers (or ‘capacities to bring about effects’) by virtue of their inner structures and the acknowledgment of these inner structures means we can continue to ascribe powers to entities whether they are exercised or not. In other words, we cannot assume that something does not exist on the basis of unexercised powers although consistent actualism does exactly this. Put quite simply, the fact that something *can* happen doesn’t always mean that it *does* happen (Collier, 1994: 9). Bhaskar directs our attention to the deeper structures that underlie entities of all kinds because they generate or constrain certain experiences or events and by identifying the nature of these deeper structures, and how they interact with each other, we can come to some fairly reliable conclusions about the nature of reality.

### **2.3.2 The ‘Explanatory Critique’**

Bhaskar’s idea of the ‘explanatory critique’ asserts the need for research to expose false and enslaving phenomena that are concealed beneath the neutral, value-free appearance of things. If we can offer good explanations of the nature of the deeper structures that underlie entities or events, then transforming them becomes possible (Collier, 1994: 10). In fact, emancipation depends upon good explanations (Bhaskar,

1998c). So realism can also claim, therefore, that “knowledge is power” though not, Collier says, with the “sinister connotations [this] has in the covens of post-structuralism” (ibid: 12), but because it is better, other things being equal, to have true beliefs rather than false ones (Benton and Craib, 2001: 137)<sup>9</sup>. Collier gives the example of Marx’s analysis of labour contracts: they appear to be fair in terms of the surface structure of labour markets, but analyses of the deeper structures of capitalist economic relations show their fundamentally exploitative nature (Collier, 1994: 11). But Bhaskar’s explanatory critiques do not only expose unethical relations of production in the Marxist sense: they can be applied to any social context in which false beliefs pertain and which might constrain or frustrate societal or personal transformation. The explanatory critique, therefore, makes specific connections between the “is” (of a fact) and the “ought” (of a value) in contrast to Hume’s Law mentioned earlier in this chapter. The principle of the explanatory critique is that “Learning, as the reduction of illusion and ignorance, can help free us from domination by hitherto unacknowledged constraints, dogmas and falsehoods,” (Sayer, 1992: 252). I understand this thesis (taken as a whole) to be an ‘explanatory critique’ of sorts in the sense that it seeks to uncover the false beliefs or constraining social structures that could frustrate the emancipatory potential of AD research and practice in this country, first with reference to my own research and then by developing some insights for the community of practice more generally. I will return to this idea in the final chapter.

### 2.3.3 Critical Realism as ‘fallibilist’

Although realist philosophy asserts that reality does have an objective existence, our knowledge of it is always conceptually and contextually mediated: it is “necessarily perspectival and value-laden” (Carter and New, 2004: 4). This is not the same position adopted by relativism or constructivism, neither of which makes any objective truth claims at all. A realist ontology *does* make truth claims but acknowledges that these are always open to refutation and revision. Knowledge is a *process* and an *achievement* involving the necessity of hard work in which the researcher excavates or uncovers truths that lie beneath surface appearances (Benton and Craib, 2001: 120). Realist claims rely on *transcendental arguments*, as I will show in the section that follows, but

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<sup>9</sup> In Habermas’s social theory, there is also a close connection between knowledge of self and society and freedom from domination (Benton and Craib, 2001: 136).

whilst these kinds of arguments do account for the strong probability of phenomena, there are always rival arguments that offer alternative explanations for the same phenomena. However, realism's commitment to *judgemental rationality* affirms that not all knowledge is *equally* fallible and that one truth claim is usually stronger than another. Nonetheless our claims are still just "the best available account" (Collier, 1994: 23; Danermark, Ekstrom, Jacobsen and Karlsson, 2002: 15). Hence realism's characterisation as "fallibilist" (Benton and Craib, 2001: 121).

### 2.3.4 Transcendental arguments

Bhaskar's transcendental arguments are similar to Kant's but there are important distinctions. We have seen that Kant was interested in the kind of *a priori* knowledge which tells us about the world, but which is independent of our direct experience of it. He asked what *must* be so in order for the world as we experience it to be possible, (Collier, 1994: 21). Whilst provisionally endorsing Hume's radical empiricism, Kant took an epistemological turn and asked: "Given that our sense experience of the world is essentially correct, what *a priori* categories must one have at hand for a *coherent account of sense experience to be conceptually possible?*" (Harvey, 2002: 164, original emphasis). He located the *a priori* categories he sought in the structures of the human mind. But Bhaskar counters Kant's reasoning with an ontological turn by asking: "What must *the structure of the world* be like for scientific knowledge to be possible?" (ibid). In effect, Harvey says, he inverts the original order of Kant's questioning by asking about the enduring structures in a real, existing world that makes knowledge about it intelligible. Kant postulates that the categories for making sense of the world are located internally – within the minds of knowers. But Bhaskar's transcendental arguments locate these 'sense-making categories' in an external, obdurate world. The logic of Kant's transcendental argument leads to idealism, Bhaskar's to realism.

Transcendental arguments work in the following way:

[They] begin with ... an uncontroversial description of some phenomenon, *p*. The question is then asked, 'What must be the case for *p* to be possible?' Let us suppose that some condition or states of affairs, *c*, can be identified as a necessary condition for *p*. Since we have already accepted that *p* is *actual*, then it must be possible, and so the conditions that make it possible must be satisfied. So, *c* must be the case (Benton and Craib, 2001: 122).

This is *retroductive* reasoning and it is the distinctive *modus operandi* for a research practice that is constituted within a realist meta-theoretical framework. Modes of inferencing in positivist/empiricist frames are either by the well-established logic of deduction or induction (Danermark et al, 2002: 80 – 81). But retroduction works *backwards* in search of causation and is a less formal logic that requires the ability to abstract and to use imaginative or creative thinking, (ibid). It is a kind of “thought operation through which we can move from knowledge of one thing to knowledge of something else” (Danermark et al, 2002: 96). Retroduction is about advancing from a starting point, such as the observation of empirical events, and arriving, by degrees at a conceptualisation of “transfactual conditions” (ibid).

### 2.3.5 Transcendental naturalism

Scientific experiments are “the central procedure in practical research work in general” (Danermark et al, 2002: 18) and the starting point of Bhaskar’s transcendental philosophy. This was not arbitrary choice but a defensive response to sceptics (fellow academics of either the empiricist or anti-realist schools) by using a point of departure that *they* could accept as entirely non-controversial. In conversation with Marxist academic, Alex Callinicos, Bhaskar explains:

Well I say, tell me, give me something you think is really important, that you think is epistemically valid or significant, and they say to me well, experimental activity is, because that’s what scientists mean when they talk about experience: they don’t just mean Kantian generic sense experience, they mean experimental activity. That’s where I take my starting point: from something that *they* affirm (Bhaskar and Callinicos, 2003: 98).

So Bhaskar’s philosophy hinges on his analyses of scientific experimentation and why experiments are necessary. Scientific experiments are all premised on the idea that discovering the truth involves much more than simply recording passively how things happen or by collecting data about the appearance of things and reading it off. Some manipulation of reality is needed to find things out. One of the properties of reality, as we have seen, is that it is *not* transparent – it has powers and mechanisms which are unobservable but these can be inferred because they are responsible for making things happen in the world (Danermark et al, 2002: 20). Science often refers to empirically unobservable phenomena such as atoms, subatomic particles, fields of force, quasars, currents of electricity, black holes and so on and frequently calls on metaphors or analogies to explain the existence of unseen or ‘un-seeable’ phenomena (Benton and

Craib, 2001: 121). For example, genetic codes may be understood in terms of a 'sign system' or electrical currents in terms of 'waves' or 'flows of liquid' (ibid).

To ascertain the truthfulness of whatever is postulated, scientists set up experiments in 'closed systems' in which most of the generative mechanisms in a situation are temporarily disabled whilst the operation of a particular mechanism can be studied in isolation. These are the highly circumscribed, 'unnatural' conditions in which researchers can logically infer and then formally theorise the implied existence of underlying phenomena. Bhaskar says: "An experiment is necessary precisely to the extent that the pattern of events forthcoming under experimental conditions would not be forthcoming without it" (1975/1997: 33).

### 2.3.6 Three domains of reality

On the basis of his analysis of scientific experiments, Bhaskar provides us with an 'ontological map' of reality. He claims three structurally distinct 'layers' or 'levels' of reality: the *Real*, the *Actual* and the *Empirical*, (Bhaskar, 1975/1997: 41, 42), as follows:

1. The Real world of underlying mechanisms<sup>10</sup>, causal powers and tendencies<sup>11</sup> – "that which can produce events in the world" (Danermark et al, 2002: 20) and "that which science seeks to discover" (Benton and Craib, 2001: 124).
2. The Actual level of events – that which *may* happen when the powers and mechanisms in '1' above are triggered, for example, under experimental conditions. This domain is unpredictable and variable, consisting of that which is 'experience-able' but which may never be experienced at all. It refers only to what is *apparent*.
3. The Empirical level is based in our subjective experience of the world. This level is a subset of '2' above but is located squarely in our sense data. The Empirical level is tempered by our historicity and social location, and is therefore always

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<sup>10</sup> Collier explains that this term does not refer to the 'mechanical' as such: "It could be an animal instinct, an economic tendency, a syntactic structure, a Freudian defence-mechanism" and so on (1994: 43).

<sup>11</sup> They are 'tendencies' in the sense that the relation between causal powers and their effects cannot be determined. Mechanisms only operate when activated and multiple conditions and circumstances will determine whether they are activated or not, so they remain tendential (Danermark, et al, 2002: 55).

mediated by our theoretical conceptions of the world, the most fallible of the domains.

The levels are structurally distinct, thus irreducible to one another, yet loosely nested and “*reciprocally interactive*” (Harvey, 2002: 165, original emphasis). The strata are “*emergent realities*” and “each level is the product of the reproductive mechanisms inherent in the more basic strata that grounds it,” (ibid). Causality flows up and down this hierarchy of levels, “often taking the form of non-linear feedbacks that operate in staggered rhythms to produce a world of historically constituted, evolving constellations” (ibid). Thus Bhaskar presents us with an open-ended, complex account of reality which Harvey describes as “an interactive world of things and contingent tendencies” (2002: 165).

So the kind of research ‘mirror’ that realism offers is one in which we need to view the reflected image in the glass as merely the Actual. To find out what the image means, or to find out what makes it appear as it does, we need to make our way behind or beneath the image where we can locate the counter-phenomenal domain of the Real.

### **2.3.7 The transitive and intransitive dimensions of reality**

Also emanating from his analysis of the nature of scientific experimentation, Bhaskar advanced the idea of knowledge in two dimensions, the transitive and intransitive. He derived this concept from what he calls “the central paradox of science”, explaining it thus:

Men in their social activity produce knowledge which is a social product much like any other, which is [not] independent of its production and the men who produce it ... and which is no less subject to change than any other commodity. This is one side of ‘knowledge’. The other is that knowledge is ‘of’ things that are not produced by men at all: the specific gravity of mercury, the process of electrolysis, the mechanism of light propagation. None of these ‘objects of knowledge’ depend on human activity. If men ceased to exist sound would continue to travel and heavy bodies fall to earth in exactly the same way, though ... there would be no-one to know it (1975/1997: 21)<sup>12</sup>.

Bhaskar argues here that science deals with certain entities that exist independently, irrespective of whether science or scientists discover them or not. These are the *intransitive* objects of science and the ultimate content of our investigations.

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<sup>12</sup> Ironically, Bhaskar demonstrates his own socio-historic ‘situatedness’ in his use of gendered language in this quotation.

Intransitivity means essentially that “things exist and can act independently of our descriptions” (Outhwaite, 1998: 283). The transitive dimension, on the other hand, refers to the ‘situatedness’ of scientists and scientific discoveries. Science always has sets of theories about the nature of intransitive reality but these are fallible and might be superseded by better theories at any time: new studies may show that former theories were false or inadequate (Danermark et al, 2002: 23). In this way (following Kuhn and Feyerabend) realism acknowledges the social and historical character of science as a *social practice* and a *social product* yet it also has the capacity to refer to mechanisms outside the knowledge-seeking process, that is, the intransitive dimension. By contrast, a positivist meta-theory would hold that both the objects of knowledge and the means by which they come to be known are *intransitive*. In hermeneutic traditions both knowers and knowledge are understood as *transitive*. But the originality of Bhaskar’s philosophical conception is to reconcile both kinds of knowledge in a single philosophical frame.

### **2.3.8 Critical Naturalism**

Although the conceptions of knowledge described in the section above are derived from science, Bhaskar carried the same principles over into the study of social world in *The Possibility of Naturalism* (1979/1998). He started by asking: ‘Is society the sort of thing that can be studied scientifically?’ In contrast to both the hermeneutic and positivist traditions Bhaskar argued that it is indeed possible to have a ‘science of society’ in the same sense as the natural sciences though not in the same form and not by employing the same experimental methods, (ibid). There is an *epistemological limit* to naturalism in the sense that there can never be experimental closure in the study of the social sciences. The ‘unnatural’ interventions of formal, scientific experimentation are unavailable to those who study people, societies and their mutual interactions. Societies are always ‘open’ systems. Nevertheless social structures *are* intransitive in the sense that they can “exist and act independently of the knowledge of which they are the objects” (Archer, 1998: 368). The complexes of causal mechanisms that underlie events in the social world are “relatively independent and enduring” (Bhaskar, in Archer, 1998: 368) so they too can be empirically inferred through principled, systematic analysis, as I explain in the next chapter.

Despite the distinctions Bhaskar draws between open and closed systems, he argues that transcendental argumentation can also be used in the study of society. This time, however, the arguments have rather different starting points. These could be empirical observations of familiar social activities and practices, or, as in the case of this study, the social practice of academic research in the field of Academic Development. From observable events in the domain of the Actual, he moves 'backwards' (retroductively) to infer the complex of generative mechanisms, powers and tendencies at work in the Real domain of the social world. Bhaskar says that "Explanation of social matters requires the generic assertion that there is a state of the matter which is what it is, regardless of how we view it, chose to view it or are somehow manipulated into viewing it" (1998: 195). The task of the realist researcher is to identify the transfactual mechanisms or tendencies that render social practices, actions or events intelligible.

However, whilst affirming the possibility of naturalism, Bhaskar also notes its limitations ([1979]/1998). Firstly, social structures are maintained and perpetuated by people – so they are *activity-dependent*. This is not so with natural structures, (for example, weather patterns or laws of physics). Secondly, social structures are *concept-dependent*, which means that they are reproduced or maintained on the foundations of sets of beliefs, values, theories or ideas held by people. Societies are "necessarily peopled" and people are inherently "reflexive, creative, designing and re-designing ... capable of thought experiments and put[ting] them into practice" (Archer, 1998: 190). A third difference is that social structures, unlike those in nature, are only relatively enduring – they are always *space-time-dependent*.

There is also a *relational* limit to naturalism. Because social science is itself a social practice it becomes part of its own subject matter (Benton and Craib, 2001: 132). Realist researchers who are studying the social world need to consciously separate *what* is being studied from *the process of* studying it and there is the constant interplay between the subjective 'knower' and objective 'knowledge'. But, as Benton and Craib argue, this is not so much a limit as an enablement and a resource: "the self-referential character of sociology encourages a beneficial methodological reflexivity which is less evident in the natural sciences" (2001: 135). In this study of my own emergent research I have consciously sought to hold the transitive and intransitive dimensions apart whilst maintaining an acute awareness of both. So realist researchers strive to uncover and

describe more or less enduring 'truths' yet are aware of the limitations of an open, human system of complex causation in which there can never be final closure. Thus truths uncovered in realist research can never be *predictive*, only *explanatory*.

### 2.3.9 Bhaskar's theorising of structure and agency

In developing a social ontology Bhaskar interrogated earlier approaches to the theorising of the society/person connection in the work of Durkheim, Weber and Berger (referred to in Harvey, 2002: 166). Durkheim espoused a "Society creates Man" model which emphasised the role that institutions play in shaping individuals, downplaying the role of human agency in influencing social context and so reifying the deterministic powers of society. Weber's position, by contrast, inverted this model because he took a "Man creates Society" stance in his development of social action theory: individuals *can* act in ways that impact social institutions. Both these approaches, according to Bhaskar, are half-truths, overstating the causal powers of 'Man', on the one hand, or 'Society' on the other. Bhaskar turned to Berger who, during the 1960s, attempted a unification of these opposites by proposing that societies and individuals "reciprocally reproduce one another" in a "dialectically structured sociological whole" (Harvey, 2002: 168). This kind of non-dichotomous thinking was closer to Bhaskar's intentions but he argued that Berger's model was marred by the fact that it collapsed the irreducible elements of agency and society. Society and agency needed to be conceptualised as *both* co-determining *and* autonomous processes. In response to Berger, therefore, he proposed a *relational* model, as follows:

Society would not exist without human activity ... But it is no longer true to say that agents *create* it. Rather one must say: they *reproduce* or *transform* it. ... Concrete human praxis [...] can only modify it. It is not the product of their activity (any more, I shall argue, than human action is completely determined by it). Society stands to individuals, then, as something they never make, but that exists only in virtue of their activity.

Now if society pre-exists the individual ... conscious human activity consists in work on *given* objects and cannot be conceived as occurring in their absence ... For all activity presupposes the prior existence of social forms. ... Thus if the social cannot be reduced to (and is not the product of) the individual, it is equally clear that society is a necessary condition for any human act at all. ... Society is the ever-present *condition* (material cause) and the continually reproduced *outcome* of human agency, (Bhaskar, [1979]/1998: 37).

These notions embody an "irreducible unity in difference of the two processes that continually renew human agency and society" (Harvey, 2002: 170) and this led to Bhaskar's development of the Transformational Model of Social Activity (the TMSA) –

the archetypal realist conception of the society/person connection, later advanced and developed by Margaret Archer into the Morphogenetic approach (1995). I will describe her theories in detail in the next chapter, but the basic principle, in brief, is that the social world is always pre-structured and people act in a world of constraints and enablements which they did not themselves produce but in which they can still be causally effective. In contrast to constructivist conceptions of human agency, realism allows *actors* to be motivated by *reasons*, which Harvey explains as “symbolically formulated, self-directed intentionalities or spurs to action”, (2002: 173). In this way, therefore, realism conceptualises the relationship between *people* in society and the *parts* of society whereby the former is granted the ontological status to activate and mediate the latter.

### **2.3.10 The realist account of cause: Emergence and absence**

Emergence is foundational to a realist understanding of causation. At its simplest, emergence is the appearance of something new (Danermark et al, 2002:205). But the new object (or ‘whole’) has properties and powers that are not possessed by the ‘parts’ that originally composed it. The commonest illustration of emergence is water: the properties of water include its ability to extinguish fires but these are not the same as its components (or ‘parts’), that is, oxygen and hydrogen which are, in themselves, flammable (Elder-Vass, 2007: 317). In emergence, the relation or organisation between the parts is the important factor. The characteristics of the ‘parts’ may be very different from the ‘whole’ that they amount to. As Elder-Vass (2007: 321) explains “The point of emergence is that it is the way a set of entities is related to each other at a given point of time that determines the joint effect they have on the world at that moment”. Emergence, therefore, is the term used to describe the way in which qualitatively new objects come into existence, each with their own powers and mechanisms, and yet they cannot have been predicted on the basis of the powers or mechanisms of the entities that composed them (Danermark et al, 2002: 60).

In Dialectical Critical Realism, emergence is on the positive side of the continuum and absence is on the negative side so in later developments in realism there is a “bipolarity of absence and presence” (Collier, 1998: 689). Collier explains that Bhaskar rejects the “ontological monovalence” of traditional philosophy – that is the doctrine that there is

only *being*, but not *non-being* (1998: 689). Absences are part of the Real domain – we cannot see them but they have emergent properties. We can discern them through their effects. The identification and elimination of absences or “ills” in the form of mistakes or constraints is, for Bhaskar, at the heart of moral realism, and such absences or ills need to be absented: “Absenting absences which block needs is essential to axiological freedom” (Bhaskar and Collier, 1998: 564). I have claimed (implied in the title of this dissertation) that my own research history is characterised by *emergence* but it is also characterised by *absences*. An awareness of the absences offers a means of ‘absenting’ them and this is one of the ways in which I understand this thesis as an ‘explanatory critique’.

\* \* \*

At the beginning of this chapter I set myself the task of mapping out the meta-theoretical landscapes in which researchers take up their labours. I have focused exclusively on “presuppositions about the nature of the world” (Bhaskar and Callinicos, 2003: 98). I have used Peake’s illustration at the head of this chapter as a heuristic device for the concept of ‘meta-theory as overview’ describing various onto-epistemological orientations rooted in positivism/empiricism, interpretivism, relativism, post-structuralism, critical theories, and realism. I am well aware that I have risked reductionism in the adoption of this very wide lens as I have been able only to provide the most salient features of each. But I have given Critical Realism much closer attention because it is in this meta-frame in which I have found ontological resonance and a pathway through densely forested terrain into analytical and conceptual coherence for this study. Yet an overview of *all* of these landscape-types has been necessary because the research papers that this study examines drew theories from a variety of ontological and epistemological orientations and AD research itself has been variously meta-theorised at different stages as I will show in the chapter that follows.

In *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*, Carroll, ([1871]/ 2010) offers another useful analogy – that of research as different kinds of mirrored reflections of reality. I have suggested that empirical/positivist research is a kind of *one-way mirror* in which a detached observer is separate from the object of her study; that interpretivist approaches reflect the researcher back on herself so that she becomes integral to

whatever is being viewed; that critical research considers the potential falsity of the surface image and often involves close self-study; that post-structuralist images are fragmentary, ephemeral and inherently distorted. But Critical Realism's particular affordance is the philosophical access it provides to *the other side* of the mirror. Alice climbs *through* the mirror into a reflected room where she explores the counter-phenomenal world that lies behind the apparent image. On entering this world she attempts to make sense of authoritarian queens, eccentric duchesses, giddy shifts in scale, cryptic caterpillars, Mad Hatters and ambiguous, disappearing cats.

In the following chapter I move on to an account of the explanatory programmes that I employ in this study in the hope that these will provide practical access to Alice's 'wonderland' domain beyond the looking-glass.

## Chapter 3

### The explanatory programmes: 'Climbing through the looking-glass'



"Oh, Kitty, how nice it would be if only we could get into the Looking-glass House! ... Let's pretend there's a way of getting through into it, somehow, Kitty. Let's pretend the glass has got all soft like gauze ... Why, it's turning into a mist now, I declare! It'll be easy to get through..." (Carroll, [1871]/2010: 201).

"The link between the posited abstract ontology and the shape and texture of the research findings must be systematic and explicit. ... If the link – all that terrain between the two ends of the research process – is loose, intuitive and unsystematic, then claims for the realist nature of the research that is produced will be highly dubious" (Stones, 1998: 15).

#### 3.1 Introduction

In this chapter I hope to identify explicit and systematic links between the abstract realist ontology that I have described in the previous chapter, and the research narratives that I will present in Chapter 4. With reference to the Alice image and quotation above, I need to find the means by which I can climb through into the Real domain of the 'looking-glass house' behind the mirror: the glass division needs to become "all soft like gauze" and "turn into a mist" – which implies, in practical, non-metaphorical terms, the identification of appropriate social theories, analytical frames, explanatory programmes or examples of related or relevant research to guide me as I attempt to account for the story of emergence represented in the data in Chapters 4 and 5. Although Critical Realism is "ontologically bold", it is "methodologically cautious" (Outhwaite, 1987: 34) yet, confusingly, also accommodates "methodological pluralism" (Danermark et al, 2002: 150).

Critical and Social Realism are relatively new frames for research in the South African academy although Boughey has used them for a re-analysis of the history of AD in this country (in press) which I will refer to extensively later on. There have been a number of PhD theses in AD using realist frames, including those of Quinn (2006), Wright (2008), Vorster (2010) and Kotta (2011). Some research articles are beginning to use realism for interpretations of experiences and events in AD (e.g., Lockett and Lockett, 2007). So this is not entirely uncharted territory.

Speaking at the plenary of a Critical Realism conference in 1998, Archer claimed that "In the beginning transcendental realist philosophers under-laboured for social theory and now things have moved on sufficiently for realist social theorists in their turn to be doing some under-labouring for practical social analysts – that is, people actually going out to discover things about society" (Archer, Sharp, Stones and Woodwiss, 1998: 13). Critical and Social Realism, she was arguing, are now more than ontological or analytical formalisms but also need to develop some plausible social theories that are useful for the conduct of research in concrete, social contexts. Practical social analysts "want a user-friendly tool-kit although it cannot come pocket-sized with an easy reference manual" and they "have every right to complain [if] handed an unwieldy device without any instructions" (Archer, 1998: 356). So Archer has developed "tool-kits" and "instructions" of a kind, and even Bhaskar's Transformational Model of Social Activity

(TMSA) can claim to be a useable social theory in its own right<sup>13</sup>, although Archer argues that it is incomplete (ibid: 357) and complements and supplements his model with her own morphogenetic/static approach. The morphogenetic approach and the TMSA are similar and in fact either model would serve the purposes of this study – both systematically and comprehensively account for the emergence of social phenomena and interlink agency and structure in the same way. But I prefer to use the morphogenetic model for several reasons. Firstly, it is directly related to Archer's experience of conducting practical research, both early on in her career, in her study of the national education systems of England, France, Russia and Denmark<sup>14</sup> and more recently in her ongoing study of human reflexivity and its impact on social mobility<sup>15</sup>. Secondly, whilst Bhaskar understands his work as essentially that of philosophical under-labouring, Archer has long been concerned with developing useable, practical methodologies that are founded in realism. Thirdly, she offers the research student an extensive range of new (or revived) terminologies, interpretive concepts and specific methodologies for analysing the social world. Fourthly, she explicitly theorises the distinctions between cultural and structural systems, as well as personal and social identity, and the role that all these elements play in emergence. So in Archer, it seems, there is more explicit and accessible guidance for researchers like me who endorse a realist ontology but who are unsure of how to apply it in the practical analysis of a particular body of data.

Thus Archer's conception of *analytical dualism* will play a central regulative role in the conduct of this research. It will allow me to disaggregate and critically examine each of the various social, cultural and agential elements that influenced my research over time and how these were interlinked. Her theorising of *the fallacy of conflation* will prevent me from sinking each of these elements into each other, avoiding or ignoring the impact of any one of them. My research projects, and AD research in SA more generally, shifted focus and direction over time and *the morphogenetic approach* will help me to make sense of these changes and why, in some cases, change stalled. Finally, Archer's focus on

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<sup>13</sup> Harvey agrees that the TMSA moves Bhaskar's ontological formalisms towards a substantive social theory in which "historically embodied agency working within a concrete set of cultural traditions and within the material and ecological boundaries of an actually existing community" finally becomes possible (2002: 175).

<sup>14</sup> In *The Social Origins of Education Systems*, (1979) Archer studied educational interaction and change.

<sup>15</sup> An initial report on this research appears in *Making our Way through the World: Human Reflexivity and Social Mobility* (2007).

agency, the role of *reflexivity* and *the internal conversation* will be particularly useful in this study because they will enable me to narrate the emergence of my social identity as AD practitioner and researcher, the role played by my own intentions and deliberations, and how I was both constrained and enabled in wider contexts and networks. In the sections below, I will describe these explanatory frames and begin to delineate the ways in which I can put them to use.

In the second half of this chapter I offer a realist account of the history of AD in South African universities referring mainly to Volbrecht and Boughey (2004) and Boughey's extensive work in this field (2005; 2007; 2009; 2010) as well as the more recent analysis in press. Their theorisation of the changing discourses in the AD field over almost 30 years offers another interpretive lens for analysis and critique of the ways in which knowledge and knowing emerged in this terrain. Finally Wenger's *community of practice* theory (1998) helps me to account for the ways in which academic networks of various kinds were being generated in different parts of the country, each producing particular kinds of research at different times, and how I drew on the values and practices of particular communities as I came to conduct my own research projects.

But first of all, I will employ Bhaskar's three domains of ontological reality as a broad, interpretive frame to plot out the field that this PhD study seeks to encompass.

**Table 1: Bhaskar's ontological map as an interpretive frame for the PhD study**

<b>Bhaskar's three domains of reality</b>	<b>This research journey in three domains</b>	<b>The researcher's role in each domain</b>
<i>The 'Real'</i>	The PhD study explores this domain (2011-2012)	To infer the generative mechanisms, causal powers or tendencies that generated kinds of data and the writing of research papers
<i>The 'Actual'</i>	Several research projects (2006-2011) occupy this domain, including the body of data generated by the researcher's activity	To examine the research papers as particular kinds of 'events' in the research journey: they are the points of departure for the PhD study
<i>The 'Empirical'</i>	The AD researcher's professional experiences in concrete institutional contexts are represented in this domain (2005-2011)	To trace and recall the conditions, circumstances, interests, pressures, concerns, emotions, impressions, ideas or influences that impacted the research choices that were made.

To explain Table 1 above, I understand the research papers that I wrote over six years as *events* in the domain of the Actual. These were rooted in conscious, subjective, immediate *experiences* in the domain of the Empirical, but, more significantly, they emanated from a range of *mechanisms* in the domain of the Real of which I was either unconscious, or less conscious. All research stories, I will suggest, are *stratified realities* in this way and the work of understanding any kind of research, its philosophical underlabouring, its claims and its effects, is in the careful excavation of the emergent properties and powers that occupy each of these different strata.

In order to disaggregate and examine these various, interacting properties and powers I turn to Archer's map of social reality as another interpretive frame, that is, her conception of *structures, cultures and agency*, each with sets of emergent properties – referred to as 'SEPs' (structural emergent properties), 'CEPs' (cultural emergent properties) and 'PEPs' (personal emergent properties). I interlink it with Bhaskar's three domains of reality in Table 2.

**Table 2: Archer's three social domains mapped onto Bhaskar's domains of reality**

Bhaskar's domains of reality	Archer's map of social reality		
	Structures (SEPs)	Cultures (CEPs)	Agency (PEPs)
<i>The 'Real'</i>	<i>Material conditions that impacted the research: (roles, institutions, hierarchies, policies, systems of funding, human resource allocations, curricular structures).</i>	<i>Cultural registers that impacted the research: (ideas, ideologies, discourses, theories, practices, values or beliefs held within academic communities or networks).</i>	<i>The researcher's sense of herself (the 'I') and her reflexivity: (goals, values, intentions, concerns, interests, desires, decision-making). The roles of corporate agents – 'We'.</i>
<i>The 'Actual'</i>	Particular structural effects are discernable in the papers, constraining and enabling the research trajectory.	Various cultural registers are discernable in the papers, usually drawn from academic networks.	The PEPs of agency are observable in the way 'I/We' activate, resist, ignore or negotiate the SEPs and CEPs that 'I/We' encounter.
<i>The 'Empirical'</i>	The structures presented the researcher with sets of material constraints and enablements.	The cultural systems presented the researcher with sets of ideas, theories and discourses.	The AD researcher/s reacted and responded to the various structural and cultural constraints and enablements, making research choices and decisions.

Therefore I understand my research papers as outcomes of personal concerns and interests, yet written within sets of cultural ideas and material contexts that profoundly impacted the way they turned out. So a central preoccupation of this thesis is the exploration of the society/person connection and how this transpires, in practice, in particular kinds of research. Preceding my own limited research story was an AD community in South Africa that had conducted diverse kinds of research over a 30-year period. This research history arose out of the broader, national scope of a troubled, emergent democracy in which the higher education sector was struggling to address issues of transformation and redress. Again I will also trace the kinds of agential, cultural or structural resources this body of research was drawing on. This wider research story formed the backdrop to my research and impacted it in ways that I can only now, in retrospect and with the affordance of a realist lens, begin to trace. Whilst I drew on some aspects of the broader AD history, I ignored, rejected or was ignorant of others. So I am interested in what was *present* in the papers, but what is also remarkable is what was *absent*. I have explained in the previous chapter (Section 2.3.10) that both presences and absences are causal mechanisms in realism.

The two tables presented above have employed Bhaskar and Archer's ontological maps of reality to conceive the terrain of this study. I now turn to specific methodological approaches that will set up closer analyses of the data. All of Archer's 'toolkits' described below are interrelated and are nested within each other but for explanatory purposes I will present them in turn, separately.

## **3.2 Archer's 'methodological toolkits'**

### **3.2.1 Analytical Dualism**

Following Bhaskar, Archer rejected two interpretive traditions in Sociology: one was "Methodological Holism" (represented by Durkheim, Talcott Parsons, Bourdieu and others), and the other was "Methodological Individualism" (represented by Weber or Popper) (Vandenberghe, 2008: 1–2). In the former tradition, individuals are understood as "indeterminate material" moulded entirely by society. In the latter, social reality is seen as comprised of nothing but the aggregated consequences of individuals' decisions and activities (Archer, 2000: 1). Both traditions attempt to address the problem of how to interlink the 'parts' of society with the 'people' who occupy it (ibid) and both are

examples of dualistic thinking with one or other side of the duality given undue prominence, resulting in 'epiphenomenalism'. Archer's Analytical Dualism, on the other hand, affirms that the 'people' and 'parts' of society are co-constitutive – without people there are no societal systems and vice versa. Yet both people and parts are distinct, autonomous entities each with independent properties and powers, each capable of exerting a shaping influence on the other. The causal powers of social and cultural systems are mediated through human agency, but in order to elucidate the interplay between each of these elements, they need to be separated for analytic purposes<sup>16</sup>, and kept constant. This is the "methodological trick" offered by Analytic Dualism: "the life-world and the system, as well as the relations between them, can be sequentially analysed in slow motion as it were". In this way we find out whether culture is more significant than structure or *vice versa* and we can tease out the ways in which their causal powers are mediated through agency (Vandenberghe, 2008: 2).

### 3.2.2 Conflationary theorising

One of Archer's innovations was her theorisation of "the fallacy of conflation" (2000: 5 – 6). She argued that in social analysis we need to avoid both "upwards conflation" (which privileges the role of individuals in shaping society – 'volunteerism'), as well as "downwards conflation" (in which society has the monopoly over causation – called 'determinism') (ibid). In analysing a social field of any kind, we need to avoid both. But there is a third form of conflationism that does not make one aspect of social reality reducible to another. For example, Giddens' structuration theory withholds autonomy from both 'parts' and 'people' because it sees them as inseparable and intertwined. This 'elisionist' approach transcends the duality of structure and agency and instead considers the two entities as "the simultaneous medium and outcome of action" (2000: 6). Archer describes this as "central conflation" (ibid) which prevents researchers from examining the ways in which the interconnections between the parts and the people in society play out in practice. It is important to be able to specify the precise conditions under which agents had greater or lesser degrees of freedom or constraint. As Archer says, we need to be able to investigate "*whose* conceptual shifts are responsible for *which* structural changes, *when*, *where* and under *what* conditions" (1998: 361).

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<sup>16</sup> This does not imply that Archer advocates philosophical dualism: her position needs to be understood as "an artifice of convenience" (Archer, 1988/1996: 143) for the purposes of practical analysis.

Applying the two principles described above to this study, I can avoid both 'upwards conflation' (telling my research story as though I was personally and exclusively responsible for it) as well as 'downwards conflation' as though it was merely the product of my social and cultural contexts. But I was neither "puppet-master" nor "marionette" in this 'research tableau' (Archer, 1988/1996: x). If I told the story without unpacking all the agential, structural and cultural factors that impacted it I could become a 'central conflationist' unable to account for emergence at all. It would be 'guesswork', partial and inexplicable. But if I can sustain Analytic Dualism, that is, the autonomy of each of the elements and their emergent powers, I can begin to see how they operated inter-relationally in context and over time. Analytic Dualism means that I can develop insights into the ways in which a research history emerges in the context of institutions and cultures that are powerfully formative but, at the same time, limited by the internal, evaluative deliberations of individual researchers who can speak back to the socio-cultural systems and institutions in which they are located.

### 3.2.3 Archer's concept of 'culture'

In *Culture and Agency: The Place of Culture in Social Theorising* (1988/1996) Archer argues that 'culture' is a very poorly developed concept in social theory and analysis (ibid: 1). Sociologists drew the concept from Anthropology which has traditionally seen culture as a "perfectly woven and all-enmeshing web ... the perfectly integrated system, in which every element was interdependent with every other – the ultimate exemplar of compact and coherent organization" (ibid: 2). Although sociologists have held profoundly different views on many other issues in society Archer claims that there is a "fundamentalist accord on the generic nature of cultural coherence" (ibid). Not only was this an *a priori* assumption amongst social theorists but there was also "a total reliance on inspirational grasp as the method of discovering it" – that the inner coherence of a culture could almost be "intuitively deciphered" or interpolated (ibid: 3)<sup>17</sup>. This myth, she says, was massively reinforced in western social theorising by the Marxist notion of "'hegemonic culture' and its offspring, the 'dominant ideology'" (ibid: 3). The general idea taken from Anthropology is that societies have *cultural patterns* which are

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<sup>17</sup> Although Archer does not directly mention this, I assume that here she is referring to the ethnographic methodologies which she describes as having a "strong aesthetic rather than analytical orientation, which led to an 'artistic' hermeneutics as a method for grasping the inner sense of cultural wholes" (1988/1996: 3).

observable in some kind of *uniform action* in members and together these result in *social homogeneity*, (ibid: 4). In Social Realism cultural ideas, and the ways in which people activate or resist them, need to be kept apart – people are not simply “cultural dopes” (Vandenberghe, 2008: 2): they have PEPs, can recognise CEPs and can act independently. So Archer argues that rather than there being “logical consistency” between the components of a culture, and “causal consensus” amongst its cultural members, there are divergences, inconsistencies and contradictions in cultural ideas, and either passive acceptance or outright rejection of these ideas by the individuals or groups who occupy any given cultural system (ibid: 5).

These realist challenges are of particular relevance to this study because I will argue that this very kind of *anthropological* orientation lies at the ontological heart of one strand of South African AD research and also informs much of my own research.

Archer argues that what is critical to the perpetuation of the myth of cultural integration is the concept of the “savage mind” or “primitive mentality” – “one in which the rules of identity and contradiction do not operate” (ibid: 10). Archer argues that this myth, a heritage of Anthropology, resulted in a weak concept of culture in Sociology. The myth, in fact, suffers from the conflation fallacy because it elides logical relations (which pertain to ideas in cultural systems) with causal relations (which pertain to people on the socio-cultural level) and this means the interface between what people choose to think or do and the cultural ideas in the societies around them is never predictable or systematic.

Instead, Archer understands culture as an objective phenomenon, in the same way as Popper’s concept of ‘Third World Knowledge’, that is, as “constituted by the corpus of existing intelligibilia – by all things capable of being grasped, deciphered, understood or known by someone” (Archer, 1988/1996: 104). “By definition the cultural intelligibilia form a system, for all items must be expressed in a common language (or be translatable) [...] this is a precondition for them being intelligible” (ibid). At its most basic level, therefore, a cultural system consists of whatever is logical or intelligible to people, groups or classes and what they make of them epistemologically. Archer understands cultural systems as *ideational terrain*, the world of ideas, beliefs, theories, values or arguments (ibid: 107).

However, although the 'parts' of a social system, i.e., the cultures (the ideational terrain) and the structures (the material conditions) refer to different, irreducible elements with different kinds of emergent properties, Archer contends that the same conceptual, theoretical and analytical framework can be used to investigate both. 'CEPs' and 'SEPs' work in an identical way as mediatory mechanisms, despite their differences (1995: 229). While CEPs represent the emergent powers of ideas and theories, as I have explained above, SEPs represent the emergent powers of physical and human material resources. Archer describes SEPs as "distributions, roles, institutional structures, social systems" (1995: 176). Although this distinction is not as clear as it looks – there is considerable interplay between, for example, the roles that people occupy and the ideas that sustain them in these roles – the morphogenetic cycle works in the same way for both. Thus both have three phases: the cycle of *structural conditioning* > *social interaction* > *structural elaboration* has a direct parallel in the realm of culture: *cultural conditioning* > *socio-cultural interaction* > *cultural elaboration*. For this reason, and without conflating them, the following section explores the ways in which cultural ideas and structural conditions play out in cycles of change or stability.

#### **3.2.4 The Morphogenetic cycle**

Archer's explanations of the Morphogenetic cycle employ a particular set of terminologies. She refers to the 'parts' of society as the Cultural System ('CS') and the Structural System ('SS'). 'People' in society interact with the 'parts' and she refers to these as Socio-Cultural interactions and Structural interactions (often as 'SC' and 'SI').

Archer argues that at any moment in time, society sets up systems (structural and cultural) that *precede* people. These already-existing systems both constrain and enable agents in various ways. Agents are shaped by them and respond to them but are also motivated by their own concerns and interests. They then act (or 'interact') in ways that produce both intended and unintended consequences and these can lead to the systems being either changed ('elaborated' or 'transformed') or unchanged ('reproduced'). But whatever the outcomes, new cultural and structural contexts are set up. Agents again act in ways that either elaborate or reproduce them. The social world consists of endless arrays of these morphogenetic sequences or cycles, some at macro levels of

society, (such as in the history of AD in South African universities), some in micro-contexts, (such as when a teacher institutes some change in her classroom practice).

The morphogenetic sequence has a starting point, a point in time in which a particular configuration of structural and cultural systems pertain (at T<sup>1</sup>). These condition, but do not determine, the practices of people in a life-world (at T<sup>2</sup>). People's practices, decisions or activities lead to T<sup>3</sup>, outcomes of which either reproduce or transform the structural or cultural systems. T<sup>4</sup> represents the new set of conditions at the beginning of the next cycle (T<sup>1</sup>). But the new conditions can be contested or modified in ongoing cycles of systemic conditioning, social interaction and systemic elaboration or reproduction (Archer, 1998: 376; Vandenberghe, 2008: 2). The core notion of the morphogenetic sequence is that systems and agency operate *over different time periods* (Archer, 1988/1996: xxiii). The systems always *predate* agential interactions and systemic transformations logically *postdate* the interactions (ibid).

However, these three-phase cycles sometimes generate very little change or no change at all – systems can be repeatedly reproduced, sometimes over long periods of time. Archer terms this *morphostasis*. I have claimed in Chapter 1 that despite my best emancipatory intentions, I cannot claim *morphogenesis* in the structural or cultural systems I researched. To understand why this was so, I need a closer account of the processes of morphostasis and morphogenesis – why agential activity can indeed be authentically emancipatory in some contexts though not in others. I will first explain how the cycles play out at the levels of culture and structure and then move on to describe Archer's understanding of personal morphogenesis.

### **3.2.5 Morphogenesis or morphostasis?**

In Section 3.2.3 above, I have explained Archer's argument that the components of cultural systems consist of logical propositions or relations. The relations between these components can be either contradictory or complementary. If they are contradictory they mould problem-ridden situations for agents. If they are complementary they mould problem-free situations for agents (Zeuner, 1999: 80). Cultural systems, therefore, set up various kinds of situational logic for agents, but the logic does not follow a predictable pattern of 'contradiction = constraint' or 'complementarity = enablement'. On the contrary, Archer's model allows for contradictions in cultural systems to result

in *either* constraints *or* enablements for agents who interact with them; similarly, logical relations that are complementary can *either* stimulate change *or* limit it by maintaining the status quo. I will not explicate this model in very great detail but will only present the potential permutations as they relate to the analytical requirements of this study.

Firstly, it is important to recognise that the systems, or 'parts', are not the only stimulus to change or lack of it: they are only the starting point. Agents are the holders of cultural ideas and as well as the occupiers of particular positions in society. They can act autonomously to protect or increase their vested interests, material or otherwise, and some, depending on how power is distributed in any given social context, can deliberately suppress change. So the decisive factor influencing whether morphostasis or morphogenesis prevails is in the *relationship* between the parts and the people (Zeuner, 1999: 80). A cultural system can be full of logical inconsistencies which clearly need to be changed, but it is possible that the powerful people in a given community may not want change and they can prevent it. In the same way, a system can offer complementarities and opportunities for adding new ideas and generating better systems, but again powerful people with vested interests can be decisive in whether change occurs or not. The distribution of power amongst agents in an institution is the crucial factor. According to Archer, cultural elites with vested power interests can hold up change for months, years or centuries (Zeuner, 1999: 80), but sooner or later even the most dominant cultural elites will be overcome by the logic of whatever situational inconsistencies may pertain and be forced to accept a revision of culture or structure. An obvious South African example would be the way in which the logical inconsistencies of the apartheid system eventually overcame the long-term resistance of cultural and political elites in this country and morphogenesis (political change) eventually transpired but only after many decades of morphostasis.

Furthermore, people within structural and cultural systems can have either orderly or conflictual relationships with each other (as individuals or as groups) and these relationships can also generate various kinds of morphostatic or morphogenetic effects. People who hold cultural ideas that are incompatible can attempt to correct or convince each other, often by re-interpreting, synchronising or unifying conflicting ideas. They debate, repair and make ideational accommodations, and this kind of process can often result in fruitful change. But sometimes the accommodations may be fairly superficial, a

'let's-just-keep-the-peace' kind of compromise. Alternatively, there might be too much disharmony at the interactional level and some agents might desert or withdraw from the system altogether, pursuing alternative interests and identities. Yet others within systems can become schismatic or sectarian, compete with those who hold different ideas and positions and in-fighting occurs. In this case there may be a progressive increase in disorder and conflict which is insoluble and morphostasis is the more probable outcome.

Cultural systems in which the logical relations are complementary or compatible create a congenial environment for the exploration of new ideas, a situation which "far from being fraught with danger, yields a treasure trove of reinforcement, clarification, confirmation and vindication – because of the logical consistency of the items involved" (Archer, 1988/1996: 153). Although this kind of environment may be conducive to change, ironically enough it can easily constrain change and innovation. Because people do not have to confront ideational conflicts, they work comfortably within the situational logic and this "stimulates nothing beyond cultural embroidery" (ibid: 158). Complementarities seem felicitous, but they "guide thought and action along a smooth path, away from stony ground, but over time this wears a deeper and deeper groove in which thoughts and deeds become enrutted" (ibid: 154). So there is *protection* of the status quo rather than a *correction* of it (ibid: 158). As ideas in a cultural system become systematised, and more and more people are drawn into "cultural embroidery", there is increased "density" of the cultural system so there is often an impetus to reproduction rather than elaboration (ibid: 211).

For complementary conditions in cultural systems to generate morphogenesis some degree of disorderliness at the interactional level seems to be necessary. Some people may want to disrupt a very well-established, systematised cultural system. It can now consist of "hierarchies of knowledgeability" (ibid: 212). In a research community, elite groups or "academic barons" (ibid) may emerge, those with more knowledge of the prevailing cultural ideas, those who have developed vested interests and wish to maintain their status. But people on the margins of such a system recognise the hegemonic operations of power – often "the intellectual hegemony of old men" (ibid: 201) – and see that they are not receiving the rewards that those who are better established are receiving. Unlike the "masses" who more or less accept their lot,

“marginals” (as Archer refers to them) are “in the know” and they become frustrated (ibid: 215). Marginals often become “migrants”, that is, “they venture to the source of a new variety to increase their benefits” (ibid: 217) and in so doing they can become catalysts for change. Using ideas from within the cultural system these ‘marginals’ can become champions for change, challenging the hierarchies from within the system thereby advancing morphogenetic change.

In the sections above I have explained how structural and cultural morphogenesis play out in social and socio-cultural interactions. I now turn to the third kind of morphogenetic cycle that follows a similar pattern to the first two, but because it refers to people and their properties (PEPs), there are significant differences.

### **3.2.6 Archer’s theory of agency**

In *Being Human: The Problem of Agency* (2000) Archer investigates *the morphogenesis of agency*. Archer maintains that human intentionality, self-reflection and a capacity for self-change carry significant emergent powers and they are key mechanisms at the level of the ‘real’. Because PEPs are so generative in systemic morphogenesis I need to grasp the nature of these profound causal effects and how they can illuminate my understanding of researcher emergence. The following section outlines Archer’s account of the emergence of personal and social identity in the human life-world.

First of all, Archer emphasises the *non-social* aspects of human development, granting priority to *practice* over linguistic or societal influences: “Our continuous sense of self, or self-consciousness, emerges from our practical activity in the world ... our sense of selfhood is independent of language” (2000: 3). Following the work of Merleau-Ponty, she subscribes to the theory that it is our embodied encounters with the world that instill the sense of self and otherness. For Merleau-Ponty it is our embodied *memories* which give us the sense that we are one and the same being over time (ibid: 8). Our self-consciousness is a crucial human power because it means that if we know ourselves to be the same ‘self’ over time, we can think about it so we are reflexive beings. Archer also refers to Piaget’s experiments which suggest that it is children’s practical activities that instill their capacity for identity and non-contradiction. Piaget showed that our early powers of thinking and reasoning have to be enacted – in practice. But this isn’t only the case in early childhood development – throughout our lives we interact with the natural

world and with material culture: “We never cease, and never can cease, to sustain relations with all three orders of reality – natural, practical and social” (ibid: 9).

As bearers of a *continuous sense of self*, acquired early on in our lives, we go on to develop a *personal identity* as we mature. This ‘self’ is unique but is largely constituted by the things that happen to us in the three orders of reality – firstly, in the natural environment, secondly in work or activity, and thirdly in social interactions. We cannot always choose the things that happen to us in the world but we can take a reflective overview of them and we can prioritise our predominant concerns whilst making accommodations for our other concerns. Archer claims that: “It is the distinctive patterning of these concerns which is held to give people their unique personal identities” (ibid: 9). Our emotions are the commentaries that we make on our welfare in the world – emotions that relate to the “trinity of inescapable human concerns” in which we conduct our lives: physical well-being in the natural world, achievements in the practical order, and self-worth in the social order (ibid: 10). The ways in which we balance the three orders is achieved by means of the *inner conversation*. Through *self-talk* we explore and determine our ultimate commitments. What emerges from this reflexive inner dialogue is a unique personal identity, an achievement which is not attained by everyone. “In short”, says Archer, “we are who we are because of what we care about” (ibid: 10). This gives us an “internal personal integrity”, “the shape of our lives”, “the pattern which is recognisable by others as our concrete singularity” (ibid). The rich inner life of reflection is “the generative mechanism of our most important personal emergent property” (ibid). In the ongoing process of identity formation, new “imports” constantly arise (Archer, 2004: 34) and periodically we need to interpret and articulate the new imports in the light of the earlier commitments by which we defined ourselves. So we continue to develop and elaborate new commitments and concerns. “The internal conversation is never suspended, it rarely sleeps ... throughout the endless contingent circumstances it encounters” (Archer, 2004: 36).

Archer says that at birth “we are assigned to positions on society’s distribution of resources ... we become members of *collectivities* who share the same life chances”. These life chances locate us as privileged or non-privileged (Archer, 2004: 37). So our lives start out with our involuntary placement as “Primary Agents” – individuals embedded in circumstances not of our own choosing, what Archer describes as the

conditioned 'historical 'Me', an object of society. The subject of our self-consciousness – the 'present I' – reflects on the 'historical Me' and in the process of inner reflection, 'I' orders her ultimate concerns. In the process 'I' forges a 'future 'You', the self that she wishes to become. But there is another dimension: as Primary Agents subjectively reflect on their position, they *may* seek to take part in re-shaping society's resource distribution, but in order to do this they need to "realise collective action and transform themselves into Corporate Agents" (ibid) – the 'I' needs to become 'We'. So there is a temporal, historical process in personal morphogenesis which I sum up as follows:

- There is a prior 'historical Me' formed within the constraints of existing social structures;
- The 'Me' becomes an 'I' as she reflects on her social and cultural conditioning and develops an autonomous personal identity;
- If she attempts to transform such conditions or structures, the present 'I' must develop a corporate identity, becoming 'We';
- Corporate Agency is the bridge into fully fledged social identity, the 'You';
- Through corporate agency, 'I/We' develops a social identity, taking on social roles;
- As she does so she may become a fully-fledged Social Actor. Social actors are generative in societal morphogenesis or morphostasis.

These are nested identities, each stratum emergent on the basis of deeper ones.

In the summary above, it can be seen that Archer's stratified model of agency progresses in continuous cycles of transformation or reproduction over the course of our lives. The morphogenesis of agency parallels the cultural and structural cycles, but it is never automatic: "These processes are anchored in individuals who can assess and choose" (Zeuner, 1999: 21). Some people never develop coherent personal or social identities becoming what Archer describes as "fractured reflexives" (Archer, 2007: 93). Although almost all of us develop a continuous sense of self, not everyone goes on to develop a coherent personal identity, nor, through corporate agency, do we all develop social identities, with social roles, becoming social actors. Yet it is only in the role of social actors that people can have any significant impact on structural or cultural change: only social actors can become key agents of change.

Archer's theorising of personal morphogenesis is useful to this study in several ways. Firstly, I understand myself as a present 'I' reviewing a past 'Me' who wrote a set of research papers over six years. I was hoping thereby to develop a social role and identity as 'practical change agent' or 'AD-practitioner-with-a-research-voice'. But I will explain later on that there were failures in corporate agency – the 'I/We' stage stalled and it is now little wonder to me that my research efforts failed as a critical projects.

The second point of application for Archer's theory of agency will refer to the ways in which I represented groups of students in my research papers. I seem to have conceptualised them as primary agents, products of collectivities, "Society's Beings" or "indeterminate material" in Durkheim's terms (in Archer, 2000: 12). I clearly conflated culture and agency, ignoring issues of personal identity and social agency. By the time I wrote Event 6 (Appendix F, page 235) which employs Becher and Trowler's notion of 'academic tribes' and 'territories' in a study of a group of Political Scientists, I had begun to recognise, in the data-collecting/reading/writing process, the limitations of an ontological frame for research that ignores complex variations at levels of socio-cultural interactions – this was another 'absence' in my research story. Archer's theorising of agency allows me to account for the very different ways in which individual people interact within cultural and structural conditions and how they can chart personal histories that deviate widely from the symbolic patterning of the 'tribes' or 'territories' they started out with. These points will be taken up again in Chapters 4 and 5.

### **3.2.7 Some reservations on Archer's theorising of the 'internal conversation'**

Vandenberghe (2008) offers two useful points of critique of Archer's theorising of the internal conversation. Firstly, he claims that she undervalues Mead's theory of the mind which is more *social* in character. Whilst Mead affirms the significance of the inner conversation he suggests that it is not a dialogue that one has with oneself but with society. Mead's 'Me' is in fact a 'We' so the internal conversation becomes inter-subjective rather than intra-subjective (ibid: 5). Vandenberghe also understands the internal conversation as a kind of *narration of the self*. He draws on more hermeneutic theories of personal identity and authenticity (such as those of Ricoeur) which claim that "It is through self-narration of their life-stories that actors order their concerns and make their life coherent. Narration is what 'emplots' and directs the internal

conversation" (Vandenberge, 2008: 5). Self-narration is both a conversation with "oneself as another" as well as with "the other as oneself" – the 'other' understood as a kind of "inner witness" of the personal identity to which the subject is committing herself (ibid).

These ideas illuminate my own experiences of the internal conversation in the conduct of this study, itself a limited kind of self-narration. It was in the process of describing events and experiences that I was able to surface the mechanisms that had guided and directed my story – the 'emplotting' came later. Debates with others as 'inner witnesses' in many ongoing (sometimes imaginary) dialogues enabled the sense-making processes. Meaning developed as much through action (for example, in the external, physical activities of writing or talking with others) as through independent, private reflection. So the emergence of researcher identity is constructed discursively, both *monologically* and *dialogically*, and it seems to be as much the outcome active participation in social or collegial conversations as in the product of a kind of decontextualised inner reflection.

A related point of critique that Vandenberge offers refers to the way in which Archer's internal conversation foregrounds individual agency as a causal power and ignores the ways in which the morphogenesis of structure often occurs through collective, political action. Archer's theory, he says, "is about the ethics of existence but fails to address the politics of life" (ibid: 5). He argues that this emphasis follows logically from Archer's "excommunication of intersubjectivity" (ibid). If we are concerned with social movements and democracy, he claims, "dialogues with ourselves simply won't do ... we need to talk to others, with others, about others and about society ... we need to extend the community of communication" (ibid). Unless the internal conversation becomes less intra-subjective and more inter-subjective, change is limited to the individual and fails to impact the structural and cultural domains.

Because I subscribe to both these critiques of the limitations of Archer's theory of the inner conversation, I turn, later on in this chapter, to Wenger's community of practice theory and use it to complement accounts of researcher emergence in the field. In the final sections of this dissertation I will again draw on the implications of Vandenberghé's critiques to reach some conclusions about the ways in which authentically emancipatory knowledge can emerge and become better recognised or

established in universities. Frustratingly, while individual researchers seem almost always to be changed by their own research experiences, their research efforts may often fail to have a wider impact on the societal structures or cultural milieu of the institutions in which they are conducting their studies. But I believe I will be able to respond to this failure by turning to Wenger and by emphasising the role of *corporate* agency in Archer's understanding of personal morphogenesis.

I move now to a discussion of the political and cultural contexts that have informed AD history in South Africa over the past 30 years. Volbrecht and Boughey (2004) and Boughey (2005; 2007; 2009; 2010) have comprehensively documented, reviewed and theorised the cycles of change in AD practice and research in the South African academy – changes that have emerged in the complex interplay of national, global and ideological constraints and enablements. The following section summarises their accounts of this wider, more public story and I begin to insert my own practical research experiences into this complex, shifting, political and historical context.

### **3.3 The history of AD in South African universities**

This dissertation is framed by Volbrecht and Boughey's (2004) identification of three phases in the history of the AD movement in South Africa: Academic Support, Academic Development<sup>18</sup> and Higher Education Development/Institutional Development. Boughey points out that these phases do not fit neatly into fixed time periods and there are no marked transitions between them. They are better understood as "conjunctures", "relatively stable sets of social practices" or "dominant discursive formulations" (in press: 18). Although each phase can be loosely related to historical and political conditions in the country at different stages, all three discourses have often co-existed, even within institutions, in a kind of "hotchpotch of typologies" (see Niven et al, in press: 43). There is evidence of the remarkable persistence of ideologies and practices underlying earlier formulations of AD as student-focussed, small-group, 'support-style' work – despite some high-level, structural attempts to challenge such ideas. There are still many Academic Support courses operating across the country, though in various different guises. I will also show that much of the innovative, cross-disciplinary AD work that grew out of the second 'Academic Development' stage was either lost or ignored

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<sup>18</sup> I will refer to the second 'Academic Development' stage in full in order to distinguish it from 'AD' which I use to refer to the field of practice more generally.

later on in the movement, mostly during the 2000s. So the AD narrative is not one of even, clear, developmental trajectories in stages.

Although Boughey has presented her theorising of these complex shifts in the field in various papers and reports for different bodies and interest groups in Higher Education, her most recent analysis presents the historical shifts from a Critical and Social Realist standpoint. It was written as a book chapter during 2011 but as the editors of this book have not yet finalised publication details I will refer to a draft that was originally prepared for publication ('in press'). It is clearly the analysis that provides the most useful model for this thesis. Boughey examines each of the three main AD discourses in relation to the cultural and structural systems or understandings of agency that pertained at the time of their emergence. But I will argue later in this chapter that her 2011 analysis does not offer substantial enough accounts of the mobilising, mediating properties and powers of individual and corporate agents in directing (or even obstructing) the course of AD and I will attempt to address this absence in Chapter 5.

### **3.3.1 Academic Support**

Academic support initiatives arose in the historically 'white', 'liberal' universities in the mid-1980s when small numbers of black students began to be admitted in defiance of apartheid legislation. In terms of the *cultural system* underpinning such initiatives, there was a concern for equity: the black students needed to be assured of equal opportunities for academic success. The assumption was that the apartheid legacy meant that they had been denied access to quality education and it was therefore incumbent on the institutions to offer courses that would bridge gaps in, for example, world knowledge, reading or writing skills, language development, (i.e., English), critical thinking, academic literacy, basic numeracy, basic computing, or even 'life skills'. But the values and ideas underlying these practices were riven with logical inconsistencies, in Archer's terms (see Section 3.2.5). The early Academic Support initiatives might have appeared noble and sensible, and were certainly well-intentioned, but students were understood in terms of 'deficit'. They were seen as weak, vulnerable, lacking, in need of remediation from tutors or the specialised psycho-social support of counsellors or social workers. Boughey reminds us that Access or Foundation programmes often

appointed their own psychologists<sup>19</sup> (2010: 4). Unsurprisingly, the students resented these constructions of themselves. One of my own research papers (see Event 5: Appendix E, page 222) demonstrates the ways in which new students from 'disadvantaged' backgrounds are much more likely to understand themselves as sturdy survivors of poor schooling, deserving of hearty admiration rather than pity – their self-concept is that of “learning warriors or heroes” (Niven, 2011: 650). So despite its best intentions, this approach had the effect of increasing the new students' sense of alienation rather than enabling their access<sup>20</sup>. They experienced these support initiatives as marginalizing and 'voted with their feet' in the sense that this model of support was prone to poor student attendance and low levels of participation (e.g., Yeld, 1986; Dison and Selikow, 1992).

The Academic Support phase was largely an un-theorised position, drawing on common sense ideas that prevailed in the cultural system at the time, on popular rather than academic writers, such as Tony Buzan or Edward de Bono (Boughey, 2010: 3) or on ideas based in the burgeoning “ELT industry” (Volbrecht and Boughey, 2004: 61). For example, there was an unquestioning assurance of the rightness of the western, middle-class values and practices of the academy and that assimilation was inevitable and useful. Another 'natural' assumption was that those students who were intrinsically intelligent (i.e., 'with potential') or well-motivated would do well and those who were not would inevitably fail (McKenna, 2004b). The notions of language that prevailed understood it as “an instrument of communication” in which meanings could be unproblematically encoded and decoded, simply a neutral skill, which, when mastered, would be the key to academic access, (McKenna, 2004c: 282). Because students' difficulties were understood to reside in low language proficiency, the issue could be dealt with in adjunct language classes organised by language specialists outside of the mainstream curriculum. These language classes would focus on form rather than function – on technical, grammatical issues – and the problem of student 'illiteracy' would miraculously disappear. This was a pervasive assumption amongst all the

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<sup>19</sup> This is still a fairly common practice in some institutions, for example, at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (Niven, Jackson and Tyson, in press: 44).

<sup>20</sup> In contrast to the 'Academic Support' model adopted in HWIs in the late 1980s, the HBIs seem to have offered a different model. For example, Mqgqwashu (2009: 300–301) offers a personal account of his experiences as a 'disadvantaged' student at UDW (a 'HBI') in the early 1990s. He recalls the thrill of encountering full-on literary theory in English classes in which his learning was *scaffolded* and *mentored* but he was not granted any special, separate treatment.

stakeholders: university managers, lecturers, students, even AD practitioners, and indeed it is still a dominant, persistent discourse in the academy (McKenna, 2004c: 283). The usefulness of this idea *at the time* resided in the way it assigned the problem of student failure to language and not any other more intrinsic or unmanageable deficit, such as the cognitive consequences of Bantu Education – a politically expedient notion in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Bradbury, 1993). But the idea that student under-preparedness is caused by low proficiency in the medium of instruction continues to be a very useful construction because it means that both mainstream lecturers and many AD practitioners can continue to distance themselves from the uncomfortable responsibilities of ideological or pedagogical change. So, as Archer has suggested, vested interests at the level of socio-cultural interactions lie at the heart of cultural morphostasis (see Section 3.2.5 above). In the *structural domain*, a number of issues were salient. Firstly, it is not difficult to see how ideas dominant in the domain of culture led to the structuring of the early programmes outside of disciplinary, or even faculty environments<sup>21</sup>. If learning is viewed as essentially disembodied from the context in which meanings are being developed, then student development can also occur in isolation from mainstream contexts. Adjunct programmes, mostly located in special units or even in buildings located off campus, often serviced the perceived needs of students across an institution (Boughey, in press). Thus, in my own experience during the early to mid 2000s, I found myself teaching the same courses (such as ‘ELAP’ or ‘Academic Literacy’) to both Humanities, Commerce and even some Science students. Although attempts were made to find broadly relevant content – around issues such as ‘Language and Power’, ‘Human Rights’ or ‘Ecology’ – it was impossible to avoid a generic curriculum that taught generic skills (Reynolds, 2008: 85). Another important issue of structure was the way in which such programmes were staffed. Practitioners were appointed as ‘support’ rather than academic staff, often on the basis of their expertise as teachers or whilst they were ‘in transit’ to other more secure or prestigious employment.<sup>22</sup> This had very damaging consequences for the profession. As Boughey says, this severely limited its voice in broader academic structures such as senates or

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<sup>22</sup> In my own experience at UKZN, AD staff fell into three categories: (1) ex-teachers; (2) post-graduate students financing their studies whilst completing higher degrees; (3) tenured lecturers re-deployed from other disciplines (such as Classics or Arabic) which had been discontinued at the time of the merger at UKZN (See Niven, et al, in press: 48). The first two categories of employee were all on short-term contracts.

faculty boards (in press: 21). Most AD practitioners were generally not in possession of higher post-graduate qualifications and were often on short term contracts. This meant that, "Over the years the South African Academic Development movement has consistently failed to develop a strong cadre of practitioners ... and this can be attributed to a lack of permanent positions in the field ... a structural failure" (Boughey, in press: 21). Although many AD professionals did go on to gain Masters and PhD degrees, this was not necessarily an expectation, and short-term contracts, often with no sabbatical time, signalled AD's marginal, non-academic status in institutions. A third very significant issue in terms of structure was funding. From the beginning AD initiatives were mostly donor funded outside mainstream university budgets. Because of AD's early characterisation as equity-related, or as having a transformation or social justice agenda, external funds were often available although these supplies were often for limited periods only and (disconcertingly, in my own experience) often dried up.

Boughey's interpretation of *agency* in the Academic Support phase assigns it to individual students, their intrinsic motivation or ability, and to the individual practitioners who worked with them. There was little awareness of the kinds of systemic constructions in which these agents were operating, other than in an awareness of the detrimental effects of apartheid education. Individual AD practitioners understood themselves on the side of the students and in favour of social equity (Clegg, 2009: 413). For example, I often understood my role as one of 'activist' representing and defending the rights of the students in a 'heartless' institution in which they were new and vulnerable, assisting them with many bureaucratic struggles, financial aid applications, even with issues of hunger, illness or bereavement. All this, I now recognise, is in keeping with the liberal, modernist ontology which imbued earlier AD practices (Land, 2004 in Boughey, in press). However, these strong agential commitments failed to recognise that "marked inequality in economic distribution cannot help but imply unequal recognition or render attempts at equal recognition shallow and illusory" (Sayer, 2005: 172, in Clegg, 2009: 413).

However, agency also played a role in shifting these liberal, modernist conceptions. None of the structural or cultural formations described in the paragraphs above was conducive to morphogenesis, nor to the continuing relevance of AD work in the South African academy. Commonsense predictions at the start of the 1990s might have

forecast that the profession would become gradually redundant in the post-Apartheid university. But, as Archer theorises, structural and cultural conditions are the *points of departure* in morphogenetic change – they condition but do not determine outcomes. In the following paragraphs I will show that the ‘disorderly’ socio-cultural interactions of corporate agents, and a few key social actors, impacted ideologies and structures in many university institutions, influencing policy development and shifting the ways in which AD came to be conceptualised and practiced. The opportunities provided by the various political and ideological shifts that characterised the 1990s in South Africa and abroad were strongly generative but I will argue that it was *agency* that was crucial in carrying forward these radical shifts, changing the ways in which AD was practiced.

### **3.3.2 Academic Development**

‘Academic Development’ discourses conceptualise student ‘disadvantage’ or ‘under-preparedness’ differently, locating them less in the agency of students and more in the universities themselves, in their academic and administrative practices and values. The institutions themselves began to be seen as ‘under-prepared’ for the task of building non-racial, democratic communities that could meet the educational needs of the majority of students: *they* were the ones that needed ‘fixing’. This radical refocusing of the problem was first offered by Vilakazi and Tema (1985) and later by Mehl (1988) and Moulder (1991), Ndebele (1993) and others.

In 1985 SAAAD was formed by a group of AD practitioners working mostly in historically black campuses (HBIs). SAAAD ran alongside SAAAHE – an organisation from the historically white (HWI), mostly Afrikaans universities, illustrating the ways in which apartheid was structuring the early movement. SAAAD ran an annual conference, a newsletter, published papers in its conference proceedings and an early journal, ASPECTS. During the late 1980s and early 1990s many AD practitioners from the white liberal universities joined SAAAD which then became a rallying point for intellectual opposition to the Academic Support model, effectively shifting beliefs and values about the nature and conduct of AD in South African universities (Boughey, in press: 23). There were attempts to bring about changes in mainstream practices and embed or “infuse” educational initiatives within faculty structures. Walker and Badsha, in an important paper in 1993, were largely responsible for this influential

reconceptualisation of AD's project<sup>23</sup>. Ideas such as the embedding of support tutorials within disciplinary structures, tutor development, the introduction of more responsive forms of curriculum and pedagogy, language across the curriculum projects and the idea of the 'extended curriculum' gradually became AD orthodoxies as a consequence of these ideological and theoretical shifts (Boughey, in press: 23).

The Academic Development phase was much more systematically theorised than the earlier 'support' discourses. Some AD practitioners began to turn towards more *social* understandings of teaching and learning and away from individualised, cognitivist conceptions, interrogating the extent to which students could be individually responsible for their academic success (Boughey, in press: 24). Drawing on an international shift in understandings of the nature of language and literacy (such as in the New Literacy Studies which began to emerge in the 1980s in the work of Brian Street), some AD professionals in South Africa took on board insights offered in such seminal texts as *Literacy by Degrees* (edited by Taylor, Ballard, Beasley, Bock, Clanchy and Nightingale, 1988<sup>24</sup>), *Ways with Words: Language, Life, and Work in Communities and Classrooms* (Heath, 1983), *Social Linguistics and Literacies: Ideology in Discourse* (Gee, 1990), or the theorising of the 'autonomous' or 'ideological' models of literacy (Street, 1984). With their roots in anthropological understandings of language and identity<sup>25</sup>, the New Literacy theorists understood 'Discourses' as ways of being in the world and 'literacies' as embodying or actualising those ways of being<sup>26</sup>. Gee, for example, challenged the notion of literacy as a monolithic, neutral set of reading or writing *skills* – acultural, apolitical or asocial. He offered conceptions of literacies as sets of *practices* that are profoundly implicated in the beliefs, values, attitudes and histories of the socio-cultural contexts in which they are acquired. Literacies are also political – some are powerful and influential, such as the literacies of the western academy – and

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<sup>23</sup> The name of this paper was: 'Academic Development and the challenge of curriculum change at the University of the Western Cape; an overview'.

<sup>24</sup> This book was of enormously influential in the early AD movement in South Africa, especially Ballard and Clanchy's chapter *Literacy in the university: An 'Anthropological' approach*. I located this book in the RU library recently and was interested to note that, whilst it had been extensively used during the 1990s, it had been taken out only three times during the 2000s. Its yellowing pages were full of pencilled notes and interleaved with small scraps of paper used as markers.

<sup>25</sup> Both Heath and Street are anthropologists. Gee is a socio-linguist but draws insights from anthropological understandings of literacy.

<sup>26</sup> Relating Bhaskar's Critical Realist ontology to Gee's understanding of Discourses, I would understand the latter as operating at the level of the Real, whereas literacies are 'events' at the level of the Actual. I would also suggest that Gee's 'Discourses' as causal mechanisms operating in the domain of *culture*.

some are invisible and powerless, such as the many working-class, Western Cape literacies described in Breier and Prinsloo's *The Social Uses of Literacy* (1996).

This very brief account of a complex theory will need to suffice at this point: I describe it in more detail in Events 1, 5 and 6 (See Appendices A, E and F). Gee's theory of 'Discourses', Street's notions of 'autonomous' and 'ideological' literacies, and Heath's ethnographic approach to the study of literacy were the theories I drew on for my Masters dissertation. This was surely because of my *location* at Rhodes University at the time where the agency of such figures as Boughey and Quinn, and the corporate agency of the 'ADC' unit, had introduced the New Literacies to that community of practice. Boughey wrote a number of influential papers applying these theories to the South African higher education context, such as 'Multiple metaphors in an understanding of the acquisition of academic literacy' (Boughey, 2000) and 'Naming students' problems: An analysis of language-related Discourses at a South African university' (Boughey, 2002).

However, when my institutional location shifted, and I was employed at UKZN, it was difficult to sustain these conceptions of literacy in structural and cultural contexts where few had grasped these theories and their implications. I will explain later in Chapter 4 that I became 'theoretically disorientated' in my new institutional context and there is some evidence of 'betrayal' of NLS concepts in my own research story. Colleagues in my new institutional environment were not working with the NLS. They were rather differently theorised as I will describe later on.

Besides the NLS, there were other commonly cited theories in the Academic Development discourse of the 1990s. For example, Bourdieu's notion of 'cultural capital' was powerful. Thus middle class parents, unlike working class parents, pass on the kinds of knowledge and skills that help their children to succeed in schools thereby maintaining hegemonic control of the education system and ensuring the reproduction of their own cultural values and not those of other classes (Mandew, 1993, in Boughey, in press: 26). In the South African context, class is often conceived in racial terms (see also Chapter 4, Paper 4) and "the relevance of the notion of 'cultural capital' to the position of black students entering universities which were informed by western, masculine and essentially middle-class traditions is obvious" (Boughey, in press: 26).

Another *social* understanding of schooling and learning that was much used and quoted was that of Vygotsky and the 'Zone of Proximal Development' (ZPD) which refers to "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through independent problem solving under adult guidance or more capable peers" (1978: 86, in Boughey, in press: 25). This notion of the teaching and learning space as a kind of 'ZPD' helped AD professionals to conceptualise their role in mainstream curricula, and evidence of this theory appears in my account of 'Event 4', (see Appendix D) in which I use Socio-cultural theory (SCT) which is based in Vygotsky's original ideas.

Boughey also mentions the work of Geisler (1994, in Boughey, in press: 26) as particularly influential. Her explorations of the qualitatively different reading and writing practices between schools and universities, and the extremely divergent understandings of 'text' in each of these different contexts, implies that very few students entering universities, whatever their 'cultural capital', can be prepared for the kinds of epistemological expectations of the new knowledge environment. Geisler was important because she helped AD professionals to conceptualise their work in much broader terms – *most* new students need 'lower-case' academic development, not just the 'disadvantaged' ones<sup>27</sup>. Thus 'under-preparedness' needs to be understood as a majority phenomenon.

Another highly significant ideological influence in the cultural system of AD, particularly at UKZN where I was located from 2005 onwards, was that of Systemic Functional Linguistics and Genre Theory in the work of Martin (1993), Rothery and Stephenson (1994), and particularly Rose (2003; 2004). The Academic Literacy course that I taught at UKZN was unequivocally based in Genre Theory and it required that students recognise and use at least some of the meta-language of SFG as well as applying its principles. Rose's ideas about the scaffolding of academic literacy, especially reading, were much in evidence in curricula in the various Access courses that were being offered in the Humanities and Education faculties on the Pietermaritzburg campus, though not on the other campuses at UKZN. David Rose had visited the

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<sup>27</sup> This is borne out by the results of the first National Benchmark tests in February, 2009. Of the 11 500 students entering the universities who were participating in the tests at this time, half were deemed 'underprepared' for university study in mathematics, academic literacy and quantitative literacy, thus in need of academic development programmes to support their learning (Saunders, 2011).

Pietermaritzburg campus on two occasions during the early 2000s and had developed strong collegial ties with some UNP Education academics. He had offered workshops in his (in my view) rather exacting and prescriptive version of literacy teaching. Some of these Education department academics had attended several SFL conferences and had had sabbatical periods in Australia and had imported these ideas, often wholesale, into their own curricula (C. Thomson, Personal communication, October, 2011).

I had also attended David Rose's workshops in Port Elizabeth in 2004. But probably because of my lack of theoretical grounding in SFG I was always ill-at-ease in the theory and with some of my colleague's passionate commitment to it. I remained unsure about the explicit use of the meta-language of Genre Theory in Foundation Year modules.

Other theories that I encountered at UKZN were based in North American approaches to the teaching of writing and composition, such as in Faigley (1992), Johns, (1997)<sup>28</sup> and Elbow (1994), including conceptions of process writing and free writing, although some of these were fairly widespread AD pedagogies across the country. Volbrecht and Boughey maintain that the South African AD community often took on practices that "were not deeply rooted in social context and were fragmented by ... diverse imported theories" (2004: 61) largely as a consequence of the lack of academic confidence that characterised the relatively new and under-qualified AD profession.

Both AD discourses described in the sections above – those of Academic Support and Academic Development – continued, and indeed still continue, to exist alongside each other in the cultural system of AD in South Africa. But as the 1990s drew to a close, the important theoretical debates about TLA in HE with which AD had been engaged seem to have been marginalised by more pressing and immediate *structural* shifts in universities. The two discourses have both persisted in an ongoing, largely contradictory relationship that has remained unresolved in the profession. The collapse of SAAAD (in 1998)<sup>29</sup>, as well as a cessation of funding for various 'transformation' and 'infusion' projects (Boughey, in press: 28) contributed to cultural morphostasis in AD during the late 1990s and into the early years of the 2000s. During this time higher education was being increasingly dominated by the discourses of efficiency and performativity and these seemed to be superceding the equity discourses with which

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<sup>28</sup> Ann Johns was also a visitor to the UKZN campus in mid-2005.

<sup>29</sup> SAAAD collapsed as the result of an internal financial scandal.

the AD movement had long been associated (Boughey, 2007). I will explain in the next section that there were complex economic and political pressures, some global, along with the realisation that the HE sector was practically failing to meet the needs of a democratising society (for example, see Scott, Yeld and Hendry's 2007 report on throughput rates in higher education in Section 1.4). These pressures were impacting the ways in which HE was being conceptualised in the new South African dispensation. There were profound education policy shifts which I will describe in the next section. So structural issues were the main drivers of what Volbrecht and Boughey termed the 'Higher Education Development' or 'Institutional Development' discourses that began to emerge in the AD movement.

### **3.3.3 Higher Education Development**

The most dramatic shift in the understanding of AD work in this third phase was that it became "a resource for institutional efficiency in relation to teaching and learning" (Boughey, in press: 28) and there was a clear movement away from the discourses of equity (however these had been conceived in the profession) into discourses of efficiency, performativity and delivery (Boughey, 2007). In an economic and political climate in which the new ANC government was under pressure to take on more neo-liberal rather than social democratic positions and policies (Fataar, 2001; Kraak, 2001), university managers were under increasing pressure to pay much closer attention to such issues as success rates, graduation/throughput rates, or on tracking students' performances for a variety of managerial uses (Boughey, 2010: 13). South Africa needed to participate in the global economy and "globalisation as a macro-economic structure thus came to be experienced in the way Higher Education came to be constructed as a provider of a skilled workforce for a global economy" (Boughey, in press: 29). A number of structural innovations reflected this change as follows.

Firstly, SAQA (South Africa, 1995) established the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and Outcomes Based Education (OBE)<sup>30</sup>. These structures were not so much problematic in themselves as in their tendency to expose the lack of capacity in mainstream teaching staff in HE institutions, their ability to respond to curricular and

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<sup>30</sup>OBE aligns "entrance criteria, learning outcomes, associated assessment criteria, assessment tasks, pedagogical approaches, learning resources, credit values ... in order to allow the programme to fulfil its purpose and produce the kind of graduates/diplomas/certificated individuals described in its purpose statement and indicated by its location on the NQF" (Boughey, in press: 31).

pedagogical issues, or to expose their lack of willingness to engage with them (Boughey, in press: 31). AD professionals began to be used to mediate these far-reaching changes and therefore needed to develop their own capacities to advise and assist mainstream staff with issues in TLA. So during the 2000s many of those who had stayed in the profession found that they needed to be alert and responsive to the new demands that universities were facing and some began to improve their qualifications in order to accommodate the new national educational climate and its implications for HE. Many began to work much more in areas of staff development, quality assurance, policy development or strategy, and institutional evaluation. Thus, for some of them, there was “movement away from the margins of institutional life to the more prestigious fields of sector, curriculum and staff development” (Volbrecht and Boughey, 2004: 67). This shift in the status of AD can be observed in the introduction of Deanships or Professorships with teaching and learning portfolios in some institutions. At UKZN, in 2008, for example, a ‘Deputy Vice-Chancellorship of Teaching and Learning’ post was established in a very well-resourced UTLO – the University Teaching and Learning Office. AD, it would seem, has now become part of the establishment, a role that SAAAD would probably never have envisaged for itself. Thus Clegg, enumerating the range of roles AD now includes, says that “academic development has insinuated itself into the pores of institutional life” (2009: 404).

A second major structural shift was an outcome of the National Plan for Higher Education (NPHE) (South Africa, 2001). This legislation set up new kinds of tertiary institutions such as Universities of Technology and comprehensive universities (which mix vocational and traditional programmes) as well as traditional universities. In a number of centres tertiary institutions with diverse histories and affiliations were merged becoming much larger, multi-campus universities. The implications of these complex structural reformations were to become significant causal mechanisms in my own research story later on. This was the time that the University of KwaZulu-Natal was conceived, merging two universities and a teacher training college in Durban, Westville and Pietermaritzburg in 2004. This meant, in practice, that five widely divergent campuses – both HBIs and HWIs – were merged. This macro-structural change, as I will show in Chapters 4 and 5, had a profound impact on the nature of the AD project at UKZN.

Thirdly, after some delays, the new Higher Education Qualifications Framework (HEQF) was eventually published in 2007. Many institutions have now begun to review their qualifications and programmes to ensure that they are aligned within the new framework (Boughey, in press: 32). Again, the need for mainstream staff and AD practitioners to develop the capacity to support these review processes has been significant in re-aligning AD's role in tertiary institutions.

The establishment of the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) has also been formative and has recently completed its first round of national, institutional audits. Quality assurance frameworks and mechanisms are now in place in most institutions although, Boughey maintains, they probably need ongoing revision and there is great variability in how well they are being implemented (in press, 33). The HEQC also accredits new programmes and has reviewed some already established ones, such as the MBA and Education degrees.

It seems that this series of 'top-down' mechanisms for ensuring the quality of TLA in South African universities are fairly well established and it remains to be seen how generative they will be in fulfilling this purpose. But in terms of my own story in AD, it is important for me to recall that during most of my years as an AD practitioner, even when conducting research, I was mostly unaware of these higher order structural developments, apart from the introduction of OBE. Though had I known about them I would probably have seen them as largely irrelevant to my work. I was absorbed in my life as a teacher-practitioner and the kind of research I was doing related almost exclusively to student learning 'on the ground' or 'at the coal-face'. One structural mechanism, however, of which I did become aware, and which did directly impact my practice and research, related to funding. The DoE's Foundation Programme Grants and three-year rolling plans (which began in 2000 although there was only significant uptake of these grants by institutions in time for the second tranche in 2003) required that the curricula of 'Extended Programmes' should articulate with mainstream programmes – Badsha and Walker's 'infusion' model that I have already described (Boughey, 2010: 12). This policy structure had the effect of shifting aspects of the Access programme at UKZN (see Niven, et al, in press: 51). In order to make better use of the DoE funding, plans to develop materials to augment student learning in a range of mainstream Humanities disciplines were put in place and a 4-year 'Extended

Curriculum' was planned. My own post as the coordinator of this initiative, and the costs of employing disciplinary tutors to develop and deliver the materials, were in fact funded (for 2 ½ years) by SANTED<sup>31</sup>. The DoE (later DoHET) funding was used to finance other aspects of the programme. Nevertheless, the 'top-down' effects of this funding formula did, at least, have the effect of galvanising some changes in the ways in which student support was being conceptualised in the faculty. Thus was an instance of a causal mechanism at the level of the Real domain being quite effective in dislodging the practices of decontextualised Academic Support.

In sum, the Higher Education Development discourse has generated new forms of AD practice. I have shown that shifts in policy and funding acted as causal mechanisms in the domain of the Real. However, as Boughey says, "Critical to the success of these structural developments are conditions in the domain of culture which have the potential to block emergent practices" and to resist change (in press: 36). I would add that the role of agency in activating or obstructing change also needs to be considered. The final section of the chapter turns to this issue.

### **3.4 The socio-cultural interactions of agents in AD**

Realist accounts of cause argue that the domains of culture and structure condition but do not determine social outcomes (see Section 3.2). An analysis of the morphogenetic shifts in AD requires that I give close attention to the personal emergent properties (PEPs) of agents who were interacting with both structural and cultural conditions in HE, either reproducing or transforming the AD project at various times. As Clegg claims: "In theorising about teaching and learning, and change in higher education, we need a clear focus on agency as the impact of macro-level changes are mediated through the understandings of specific actors, and their creativity and resistance" (2005:419). I believe that the contributions of agents – both corporate and individual – is an absence in accounts of AD's history. Yet the *people* are as significant as the *parts* in stories of researcher emergence.

Archer's theorising of agency and personal morphogenesis accommodates the role of individuals who generate social change. Some people, in filling social roles, *may* become fully-fledged social actors who are effective 'change agents' (see Section 3.2.6 above)

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<sup>31</sup> This is the South African-Norway Tertiary Education Development plan.

and I have already mentioned some of their names in preceding sections. But I have also argued for the importance of the *social* mind in generating truly emancipatory effects (see Section 3.2.7). In order to conceptualise the role that *corporate* agency has played in the emergence of AD research, I turn now to Wenger's (1998) concept of community of practice. This framework understands learning as occurring in social contexts and is thus another example of theories emanating from the 'social turn' mentioned in Section 3.3.2 above. It understands knowledge as developing dialogically in our interactions with groups of people who are engaged in a shared enterprise.

In Wenger's theory, meaning evolves within two complementary processes: participation and reification (Pallas, 2001: 7). Participation necessarily implies local<sup>32</sup> settings in which learners come to participate at first peripherally, then more fully. They share experiences, converse and negotiate among members of a purposive community and become accountable to them (Pallas, 2001: 8 – 9). Reification, on the other hand, is the process by which communities produce concrete representations of their practice. These could be "tools, symbols, rules, and documents (and even concepts and theories)" (ibid: 8). Other reifications could include books or articles distributed amongst an academic community or network (ibid: 9). Wenger argues that learning occurs in the intertwining processes of reification and participation (ibid: 8).

Various communities of practice can be broadly connected to each other and Wenger (1998) uses the term "constellations" to describe groupings of discrete communities of practice that are related by some form of continuity of meanings – whether these meanings reside in purpose, identity, history or environment (Pallas, 2002: 8). South African AD, by this definition, has always been more of a *constellation* of interacting communities rather than a single, coherent community. Campus-based, local communities of practice, within this broader constellation, have emerged as corporate agents at various times over the past 25 years and some have produced bodies of knowledge and characteristic kinds of research. Each AD community interacted with the history of its institution and with other disciplinary communities (often Linguistics, Psychology or Education) and these interactions have meant that on different campuses the AD project developed distinct styles, orientations and permutations. Nevertheless a

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<sup>32</sup> Although *local* would usually refer to physical distance, communities of practice can now operate online in virtual spaces despite the participants living in many different locations.

*constellation* of AD communities in South Africa has gathered at annual SAAAD or HELTASA conferences<sup>33</sup> where they have shared many texts, experiences, histories, concerns and values.

Within each community there have often been key agents – social actors – who have been either transformative or, indeed, obstructionist. Some communities of practice developed stronger affinities with each other, often sharing theoretical resources, reading each others' books or articles, attending each others' workshops or seminars, examining each others' students, and so on. I will argue that my own exposure to some of these distinct communities of practice and my interactions with key social actors within them was strongly formative in shaping the nature of my research products. The next chapter demonstrates this clearly.

As I came to consider the powerful roles played by certain actors and agents who were operating in different academic localities at different stages I soon recognised the limits of my own knowledge of the field and its characters. Although I knew some of the agential story by virtue of my own participation in AD communities over the years, this was partial knowledge and I was a relative latecomer to the field. So I began to consult a number of people who had had much longer histories in the profession. Initially these conversations were fairly informal – I talked to whoever was available, whoever was generous enough to offer me their time or whoever seemed to have links with my own research story, directly or indirectly. Yet these encounters became a very rich and intriguing source of ethnographic data and I started to record and formalise what I was hearing, basing the conversations on the schedule of questions in Appendix H. Some colleagues responded to the questions by email and some face-to-face: some conversations were ongoing up to the final stages of the in the writing, editing and correcting of this dissertation. I quote these colleagues' comments as 'personal communications', mostly in Chapter 5. As I sent my correspondents the written sections of the thesis that related to them<sup>34</sup>, they followed up with further comments on my claims or observations, guiding or advancing my analysis. So these later responses became a resource for extra detail, alternative perspectives as well as validation.

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<sup>33</sup> I have explained that these were AD's professional bodies: SAAAD ran from 1985 to 1998 and HELTASA was constituted in 2004. See Abbreviations on page ix. HELTASA still runs annual AD conferences.

<sup>34</sup> This had an ethical purpose – 'member checking'.

I cannot, of course, offer a full account of AD's agential history in one study and I found that I needed to retain the focus on my core research purposes, that is, to develop the background to my own autoethnographic accounts of conducting research, to locate causal mechanisms and to draw closer attention to the issue of agency, above all "*whose* conceptual shifts [were] responsible for *which* structural changes, *when*, *where* and under *what* conditions" (Archer, 1998: 361). But realist analyses acknowledge their own fallibility and there is, inevitably and even necessarily, an inclination to focus on the people who had played a formative role in my own professional development. Nevertheless, going forward, I would argue for the need for a more rigorous, comprehensive and objective account of AD's agency over the years although this dissertation cannot provide it.

\* \* \*

When the glass melted away and Alice "had jumped lightly down into the Looking-glass room" she encountered the White King and White Queen who she rescued from the cinders in the hearth, an experience that had utterly terrified them (Carroll, [1871]/2010: 201). The White King then took an enormous memorandum book out of his pocket, and began writing about the experience. But Alice "took hold of the end of the pencil, which came some way over his shoulder, and began writing for him" (ibid: 206). The story continues thus:

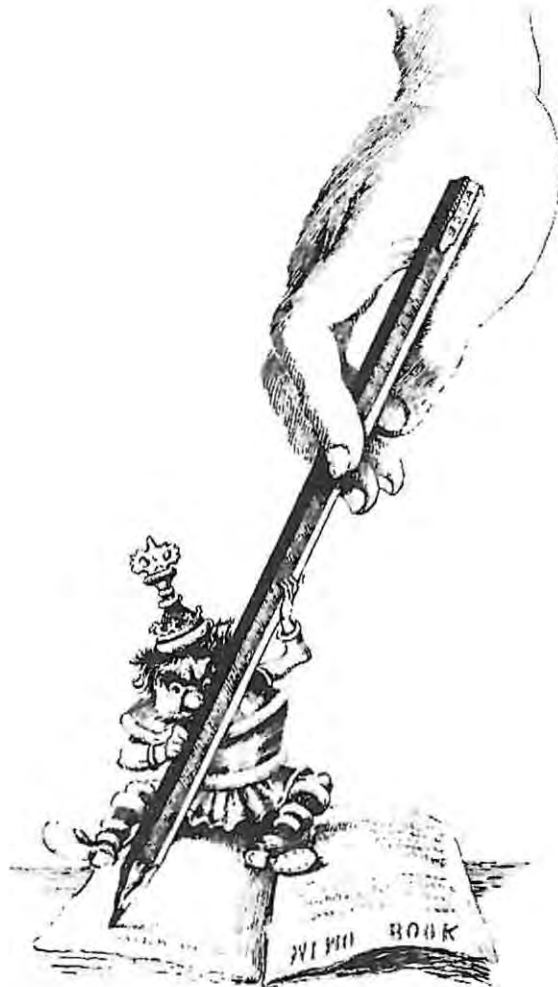
The poor king looked puzzled and unhappy, and struggled with the pencil for some time without saying anything; but Alice was too strong for him, and at last he panted out, 'My dear! I really *must* get a thinner pencil. I can't manage this one a bit; it writes all manner of things that I don't intend -- '. 'What manner of things?' said the Queen, looking over the book [...] 'That's not a memorandum of *your* feelings' (Carroll, [1871]/2010: 207/8).

At this mid-point in the thesis, as I now turn to events in my own research story, I am inclined, like the White King, to claim that *the pen* wrote all manner of things that I did not intend, or like the Queen, protest that these events were not a memorandum of *my* feelings or experiences. The authorship of the research papers in the following chapter is poised between a historical 'Me' who struggled to make sense of cultural ideas and material contexts that seemed overwhelming, and a present 'I' who reflects on those ideas and contexts and on how, as an independent evaluative agent, I responded to them. There are three 'witnesses' to the White King's act of writing: the King himself, but he is struggling to sustain a sense of agency; Alice's disembodied hand, representing

larger systemic constraints and enablements; thirdly the 'unseen' voice of the White Queen offering a critical commentary on what the King is writing, representing, perhaps, corporate agency – the voice, or presence, of wider AD communities and their cultural practices? In order to make sense of the events that follow in the next chapter, I will need to account for the *all* the interacting mechanisms that were guiding the pencil.

## Chapter 4

### Narrating the phenomenon: The historical 'Me'



"My dear! I really must get a thinner pencil. I can't manage this one a bit; it writes all manner of things that I don't intend" (Carroll, [1871]/2010: 201).

"I propose that the field of educational development, in South African anyway, has largely operated from a craft-like knowledge base. It is that kind of deep knowledge that develops out of years of experience of grappling with complex and messy problems in an apprenticeship fashion of learning-by-doing, through trial and error, but in this case without the benefit of the 'master'. The principles informing this practice are often tacit, for example, the much noted but never elaborated 'theories' ... which inform educational development work" (Shay, in press: 9).

#### 4.1 Introduction

In this chapter I focus on past research papers as a series of *events* and on the *experiences* of writing them in particular kinds of material and cultural settings. What follows below is a personal narration of professional experiences in the field of AD over ten years and how these experiences formed elements in the emergence of distinctive kinds of research events. Thus my concern at this stage in the study is mostly with Bhaskar's domains of the Actual and the Empirical. In the next chapter I turn to the Real domain where I will work towards retroductive analyses of what must have been the case for these events to have transpired as they did. I will seek to uncover the options that were available to me/us as researchers within broader narratives of AD research and practice. But in order to provide a full, non-conflationary account of researcher emergence I first need to offer an ethnographic record of the research story as it unfolded over time, describing the *transitive* conditions of its emergence. Carter and New paraphrase Archimedes: "Give me a place to stand and I will see the world", arguing that "there is no view from nowhere, so whilst our perspectives are necessarily partial and relative ... without somewhere to stand no knowledge is possible" (2004: 4). The papers offer 'somewhere to stand' and thereafter I can tackle the "articulated ensemble of ... relatively independent and enduring structures" which were operating as independent causal mechanisms and tendencies in the *intransitive* domain of this research history (Archer, 1998: 368). Archer explains that:

Because the emergent properties of structures and the actual experiences of agents are not synchronised ... there will always be a need for a two-part account. Part 1 seeks to disengage the properties ... *per se* of social structure: part 2 conceptualises the experiential, namely that which is accessible to actors at any given time in its incompleteness and distortion and replete with its blind spots of ignorance (Archer, 1988/1996: 369).

Following Bhaskar's discussion of the retroductive process, I am reversing Archer's ordering of these two parts: this chapter is effectively 'Part 2' (the experiential and agential) and Chapter 5 deals with 'Part 1' (the emergent properties of the social structures that were generative in this research history).

Between 2004 and 2011, I wrote a number of small-scale research articles, often based on an action research model, some of them on my own, others with colleagues. Some of them "operate from a craft-like knowledge base" as in Shay's quotation above (in press: 9) and others work with more systematic theoretical knowledge. But I will refer to them *all* because the authenticity and integrity of this study requires that I do not exclude

aspects of the history that were less successful – there were “trials” and “errors” as Shay’s quotation above suggests. I present them chronologically – from Event 1 to Event 6. Each is a morphogenetic cycle in itself, each setting up the conditions for the next cycle – the T<sup>4</sup> of one cycle becomes the T<sup>1</sup> of the next and so on. I have explained in Chapter 1 that the focus of this chapter is not on the old research papers in themselves but rather as sets of data, artefacts of an earlier time, each representing different and changing kinds of frames for knowledge and knowledge-building in AD.

Each research Event is represented by at least the Abstract and the Reference List<sup>35</sup>. Although not every name in the list at the end of a research article is theoretically significant, I will show that scanning the lists and tracing them over time, from paper to paper, provides evidence of a writer’s shifting philosophical foundations or burgeoning knowledge of a field. Scanning a reference list is an interesting exercise as much for the names that are absent as for those that are present. A critical examination of my own lists over time shows some names that are more or less constant from paper to paper, others making entrances at particular stages and some being dropped as I move on. So I include my reference lists in full, not because I believe that they need detailed reading, but for the objective evidence they provide of my uneven, incomplete, but maturing awareness of the AD field. So this chapter includes a discussion of reference lists. I note, for example, that it is only in the final two papers (Appendices E and F) that I begin to engage with the international field of Higher Education Studies in the referencing of names like Haggis, Trowler or Clegg for the first time.

Besides the Abstracts and references lists, I will also include short sections from each paper, selecting the parts that can advance and illustrate the narrative of emergence. Complete versions of each paper can, of course, be referred to in the Appendices.

What follows then is my own “enormous memorandum-book” of research events and experiences (Carroll, [1871]/2010: 201):

1. Niven, P. (2005). Exploring first year students' and their lecturers' constructions of what it means to read in a humanities discipline: A conflict of frames? *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 19(4): 777–789.

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<sup>35</sup> I have reproduced the reference lists for each paper as they appeared in the journals and have not standardised the formatting. There are some inconsistencies and errors in these lists which I have retained.

2. Meyer, W. and Niven, P. (2007). Critical Reflections on the role of identity in two respondents' formative assessment practices. *English Academy Review*, 24(2): 121–133.
3. Niven, P., and Meyer, W. (2007). Understanding the impact that principled formative feedback has on first year students' writing: Is it useable or not? An action research project. *The International Journal of Learning*, 14(8): 13–22.
4. Niven, P. 2009. 'Quit school and become a taxi driver': Reframing first-year students' expectations of assessment in a university environment. *Perspectives in Education*, 27(3): 278–288.
5. Niven, P. 2011. Intersecting epistemologies: First-year students in a Political Science module. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 16(6): 641–653.
6. Niven, P. Teaching Political Science to first-year students in a South African University: challenging 'taxi-rank' analysis? In press.

I will also refer to a book chapter that colleagues and I wrote at UKZN during 2009/2010. This chapter was to be part of a book that dealt with issues of student access in this institution. We were required, as employees of the institution, to write a chapter on the history of the Humanities Access programme. The book has not yet secured a publisher and is in draft form, but the manuscript we wrote has also proved a useful point of reference for this study:

Niven, P., Jackson, L., and Tyson, D. The Humanities Access Programme at UKZN: Interrogating the Cycles of Curricular Change over Ten Years. In press.

## **4.2 The research papers as Events**

### **4.2.1 Event 1: Masters dissertation and first published paper**

In 2000, armed with nothing but an Honours degree in English Language Teaching, I was fortunate enough to secure a junior lectureship in the Department of Language and Linguistics at Rhodes University. My main responsibility was to teach an EAP course alongside a more experienced colleague, Helen Alferts. But I also ran a 'Professional Communications' module for a very large number of Commerce students. Both courses were skills-based, adjunct-style courses which understood literacies, whether academic or professional, as divorced from their contexts of use. Ironically enough, Helen Alferts and I also ran an Honours course titled (somewhat vaguely) 'Issues in Language and

Literacy'<sup>36</sup> which included readings in the New Literacy Studies (eg, Heath, Gee, Street, Baynham, Barton and others). Gradually, over several years, I grasped the concept of literacies as embedded in socio-cultural contexts, along with the realisation that some literacies were much more powerful than others thereby maintaining their hegemonic dominance over less elevated forms. Chrissie Boughey was the director of the Academic Development Centre (ADC) at Rhodes University at that time and her applications of New Literacy theories to the South African higher education context were formative texts and part of this Honours course.

In 2004, with Helen Alfes and Lynn Quinn as my supervisors, I was awarded a Masters degree entitled "*Acquiring academic reading practices in [a Social Science discipline]: An ethnographic study of a group of foundation year students at Rhodes University*" which followed ELAP students as they read the academic texts required for this first-year course. On the basis of this dissertation I had developed theoretical allegiances to principles in the New Literacies movement and to the sense of myself as essentially a *critical* ethnographer of literacy practices in academic learning. I wrote an article based in this Masters research and submitted it to the *South African Journal of Higher Education* later in 2004 and, encouragingly, it was accepted for publication in 2005 without much ado. Scanning through the Abstract, some of the Concluding Remarks, and the Reference List from this paper will be enough to confirm the critical interests and theoretical orientations in the New Literacies that drove this research, as follows.

**Reference:** Niven, P. (2005) Exploring first year students' and their lecturers' constructions of what it means to read in a humanities discipline: A conflict of frames? *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 19(4): 777-789.

**Abstract**

This article reports on a critical, ethnographic investigation into the reading practices of a group of 14 foundation year students at Rhodes University in 2002. The university had identified all the students as 'underprepared' for university learning. They were from poor, socio-economic backgrounds, used English as an additional language, and had been educated in township or rural schools. Using the Socio-cultural model of literacy (Gee 1990; Street 1993), the study explored the culturally-shaped attitudes and assumptions about reading that the students brought with them into a tertiary learning context from their homes and schools. It reported on their subsequent efforts to become academic readers in a Humanities discipline. Framing Theory (Reid and MacLachlan 1994) was employed to analyse the kinds of mismatches that arose between the students' frames about the nature and purpose of reading, and those implicitly accepted as normative by their lecturers. It accounted for the students' difficulties in achieving epistemological access in terms of a conflict of frames: both the students and their teachers failed to recognise each others' constructions about the nature and purpose of 'reading for a degree'. Whilst the lecturers had 'Expressive' frames for reading, the students' reading frames were primarily

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<sup>36</sup> I was as much a learner as a teacher on this course.

'Cognitivist'. The paper concludes that both the students and the lecturers were 'underprepared' for the learning and teaching tasks they undertook and recommends that a more 'Socio-cultural' understanding of literacy would facilitate a rapprochement of frames.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Ascribing student failure to cognitive or linguistic rather than socio-cultural factors means that lecturers can avoid their responsibilities to teach in imaginative and accessible ways: if students have 'language' or 'literacy problems' then language or literacy specialists must be called in to address them. But understanding student failure as a mismatch of socio-cultural frames implicates lecturers much more radically in the learning process because it requires that they reframe their assumptions and address issues of their own practice before they can expect the radical reframing they require of students. It is dangerous and alienating to assume that "osmosis pedagogy" (Starfield 1994, 17) would work equally well with all the diverse socio-cultural groups that typify the South African academic environment. Expressive ideas of literacy, which, as I have shown, inform the discipline I studied, assume a Western, middleclass view of literacy where reading in a print-rich environment for many and varied purposes is a cultural norm. Therefore Expressivist ideologies must be surely characterized as elitist. Delpit refers to the 'insidious benevolence' of Expressivism which in fact 'promote[s] a situation in which only the brightest, middle-class, monolingual students will benefit' (1997, 14).

I believe that it would be unhelpful to valorise or romanticise the frames that the students bring with them into the academy: they are clearly underprepared for academic reading tasks. But a critical response to the data must surely result in lecturers recognizing their own underpreparedness as teachers unless they realign their own frames. There needs to be a rapprochement of frames.

I also do not believe that the lecturers in this discipline were deliberately obstructive of their students' learning. I would suggest, rather, that they had simply failed to denaturalize or deconstruct the practices that had served them well in the past. Nevertheless this denaturalization needs to be undertaken with some urgency if we are to serve our diverse student population more honourably and usefully. When we do so, the students' potential to become better academics will be realized. But even more importantly, the deliberate and creative accommodation of diverse literacies within the academy could result in the development of a more authentically indigenous South African academic culture.

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Most of the theorists that I refer to in the list above are drawn from a critical, socio-linguistic or New Literacies framework, whether local or international, the exceptions being Devine (1988) and Pretorius's articles (2002a; 2002b). Dr Lilli Pretorius was based in the Department of Linguistics at UNISA and she was, at this time, the external examiner for the Linguistics department including the Honours course that Alfery and I taught. She introduced me to her extensive, rigorous work in reading processes and reading assessment which was in a strictly cognitivist paradigm: reading was an encoding/decoding 'skill' or 'ability' that could be measured. I refer to her research work as a point of comparison with the socio-cultural approach to literacies but it is important to recall that while I was writing my Masters dissertation, current, high-quality, local research into academic reading was available to me<sup>37</sup>, yet I turned aside from it on the grounds that it was 'too cognitivist'. The stronger call of theories based in my community of practice based at Rhodes University was positioning me differently.

The MacLachlan and Reid (1994) and Tannen (1993) references in the list above recall the interest I had developed in Framing Theory during my Masters study. Because of my location in a Linguistics department I was aware of Deborah Tannen's socio-linguistic research into the ways that socio-cultural 'frames' set up particular kinds of interpretive processes (1993). MacLachlan and Reid's book, *Framing and Interpretation* (1994),

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<sup>37</sup> Dr Lilli Pretorius is a kind, engaging person and communicated her passion for reading research. I still have many of the articles she sent me at this time. She was warmly prepared to mentor me in my own reading research.

offers a broad account of the theory in several disciplines and then relates it, innovatively, to reading. I had been unable to locate a copy of this book in South Africa and had written to the authors to make enquiries about it. Ian Reid had kindly posted me a signed copy from Australia. In a later paper (Event 4) I describe frames as “structures of expectations” and Framing Theory thus:

Socio-cultural ‘frameworks’ form around what we have already experienced and we only acquire new frames by making connections with old ones. This idea is not unlike theories of ‘schemata’ or ‘scripts’, (Brown and Yule, 1983; Minsky, 1980; Schank and Abelson, 1977, in MacLachlan and Reid, 1994). But these terms, from cognitive psychology, are understood as units of background knowledge stored in the memory and used for interpretation, (MacLachlan and Reid, 1994). The differences between ‘schemata’ and ‘frames’ are rather subtle, but frames are, “... more of an *act* rather than a stable given” (MacLachlan *et al*, 1994, 6) and they assume a recognition of genres and discourse types which are used to make sense of oral and written texts. The idea of framing emerges from more socio-cultural understandings of interpretation so frames are “... organised bundles of related world knowledge: they represent our generalized experiences of stereo-typical activities, conventional processes, syntactic and linguistic structures ... and so on”, (MacLachlan *et al*, 1994) (Niven, 2009: 282).

Framing Theory proved a very useful theory both for this paper and for later research. Initially, when I was studying reading, Schema Theory seemed inadequate given the more socio-cultural posture I had adopted for my study<sup>38</sup>. But I continued to use Framing Theory, for example, for making sense of students’ responses to formative feedback on their written assignments. MacLachlan and Reid re-appear in later reference lists but are discarded when I encountered the idea of ‘epistemology’ which seemed a more powerful heuristic for understanding the ways in which students and lecturers make meaning.

It was also interesting for me to note, six years later, when I returned to Rhodes University as a PhD student, that the department in which my Masters study had been originally based was still offering the same popular, well-subscribed module with few curricular alterations, despite the earnest (somewhat ‘preachy’) advice I had offered the lecturers in the concluding remarks of the article above. As a sense of myself as a critical researcher bent on emancipatory change, I had offered the department my Masters thesis to read, but unsurprisingly, they had read it without comment, or did not read it<sup>39</sup>.

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<sup>38</sup> I have since discovered that ‘Cultural Models Theory’ (D’Andrade and Strauss, 1992; Holland and Quinn, 1987) might have suited my purposes even better. It is a more social version of Schema Theory.

<sup>39</sup> In a serendipitous encounter with the lecturer of this course on the RU campus recently I was able to confirm that the department was teaching the same curriculum I had studied and that he had no recollection of ever reading my Masters research into this curriculum, nor the paper emanating from it.

#### 4.2.2 Event 2: Collegial action research

My family and I moved to KwaZulu-Natal at the beginning of 2005. In that year Rhodes University was moving into a semi-integrated, discipline-specific Extended Studies programme in which two mainstream courses (e.g., Politics and Anthropology) would be taught alongside an Academic Development lecturer (Reynolds, 2008). But relocation meant that I missed this development. After some part-time contract tutoring at UKZN, I applied for the post of coordinator of the Humanities Access programme on the Pietermaritzburg campus and started this job in the middle of 2005. In the context of a very ambitious and complex institutional merger (in 2004), the curriculum of the Access programme for the newly-forged UKZN had been re-designed in consultation with representatives from three of the campuses: the former University of Durban-Westville, (UDW); the former University of Natal: Durban (UND); and the University of Natal: Pietermaritzburg (UNP). The curriculum I 'inherited' from this process of re-curriculation was as follows:

• First Semester	• Second Semester
English Language Development A <sup>40</sup>	English Language Development B
Academic Literacy A	Academic Literacy B
Africa in the World A <sup>41</sup>	Africa in the World B
Basic Numeracy	Elective from mainstream
Basic Computer Literacy	

(Niven, Jackson and Tyson, in press: 46)

This foundation programme also employed full-time psychologists on each campus and offered weekly classes in 'Life Skills'. This curriculum is a classic of the 'Academic Support' model (see Section 3.3.1).

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<sup>40</sup> The design of this new English course was a combined effort by staff from all three campuses. There were differences in approach, and strong inter-campus contestation, but it retained its essential character as an English Second Language course based on the idea that students primarily need 'more English' to manage their academic studies. The fact of academic literacy and language being taught in separate courses is interesting enough in itself.

<sup>41</sup> 'Africa in the World' was a well-established course in the old UNP. It was designed by the History department to supplement the general knowledge of students in the Access programme and offered a broad sweep of African history, politics and geography. It is still a part of the foundation curriculum on the Durban campus of UKZN.

In the short history that Dr Leonora Jackson, Dean Tyson and I recently wrote on the UKZN Humanities Access programme we describe the genesis of the curricular model above as follows:

A shared planning process began. It included staff from the PMB [UNP] programme as well as interested staff from HC [UND] and UDW. It was envisaged that the accumulated wisdom of all three campuses could be utilised to develop a more effective model of foundational provision for the Humanities in the new university. [Although] the revised curriculum was informed by consultation amongst all the former teachers and researchers from the earlier modules across all three campuses ... what appears to have actually happened is that the new curriculum became an uneasy compromise amongst various competing stakeholders, each with somewhat different interests, traditions and discursive positions. In the complex sensitivities of the merger environment, real debate around current ideas and literature about foundational provision seems to have been side-stepped in the interests of maintaining institutional collegiality and the opportunity for more radical curricular innovation in line with current thinking was therefore lost. Consequently the 'all new' Access/Foundation Programme became a modified version of the PMB structure ... not substantially different from their earlier model. ... The curriculum still was, in terms of 2005, quite 'old-fashioned' in the sense that by then several universities in South Africa had already initiated more integrated, discipline-specific academic support within mainstream disciplines. For some of the tutors it was 'too conservative' but for others it was 'too innovative' (Niven, Jackson and Tyson, in press: 46).

I taught the Academic Literacy course with one other colleague on the Pietermaritzburg campus, Dr Billy Meyer. The same course was taught by five Howard College tutors, some inexperienced, others ill-at-ease in the theories and ideas that underlay the course. These were strongly founded in Genre Theory, David Rose's reading approaches and in process writing (as I have explained in Section 3.3.2) and the new tutors had had no exposure to these pedagogical approaches, nor to the language theories that underpinned them. The AD practitioners from the old UNP were more theorised than either those from the former UDW (which had run some English Second Language-type courses for all 1<sup>st</sup> year students) or those from the old UND which had never had a generic foundation programme at all<sup>42</sup>. But UNP, as a formerly 'liberal' HWI, had run bridging programmes of various kinds since the early 1980s as well as an 'Access' programme since 2000. The UNP practitioners were confident of their theoretical ground (mostly in Genre Theory and SFG as I have explained) and they were more vocal. Their ideas dominated the design of the Academic Literacy course. In the longer term, however, this meant that managing the coordination of the new course across campuses

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<sup>42</sup> However, members of the Psychology department at the old UND had offered extensive theoretical support to Academic Support practitioners in the later 1980's and early 1990's and had run their own, discipline-based academic support programmes. Their knowledge and expertise does not appear to have been referred to in the development of the new foundation curriculum in 2004. I will describe these contributions more fully later in this chapter.

became very difficult. The Academic Literacy tutors on the other campus were polite but uncomprehending: they needed extensive support in ideas and methodologies that were alien to them and we soon discovered how taxing it was to hold this project together across campuses where building collegiality was arduous. Those with cultural knowledge of foundational work were caught up in higher-level, administrative roles in the new institution and problems with what appeared to be curriculum delivery or course coordination were not in their ambit: these were *our* problems.

This frustrating set of conditions were the point of departure (at T<sup>1</sup>) for the paper that Billy Meyer and I then planned and wrote together (Event 2: Appendix B). The decision to locate our research within an action research paradigm, starting with a study of our own practices and with the express aim of exploring their limitations was one attempt to build the small teaching community from the grassroots up. By being honest about our own modes for giving formative feedback on students' essays and how these modes were based in issues of personal identity and theoretical orientation, we hoped to engage colleagues in conversations about our shared responsibilities for developmental assessment. The choice to focus on such a narrow, praxis-orientated topic must be understood in the highly politicised context of an institutional merger. The Access curriculum was a 'given' condition: it predated me. As a newly appointed staff member with little sense of agency, I felt like the 'White King' in Peake's illustration at the head of this chapter – the pencil was simply too big to manoeuvre. I started by building a research partnership with an immediate colleague and selected the only research area in which I felt we *could* make any kind of professional impact: our own classrooms.

This paper was offered to the *Southern African Journal of English Studies* for a Special Edition dealing with issues of 'Language, Identity and English Education in South Africa.' Apart from the Abstract and References, I quote from parts of the theoretical section and from sections at the end of the paper.

**Reference:** Meyer, W., and Niven, P. (2007). Critical Reflections on the role of identity in two respondents' formative assessment practices. *English Academy Review*, 24(2): 121–133.

#### **Abstract**

This article reports on a research project that two lecturers on an Academic Literacy course at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (Pietermaritzburg) conducted into their own assessment practices. Noting the contrasting ways in which they had responded to a set of students' essays, they reflected analytically on these differences in terms of a conflict between their professional and personal identities. Using

Elbow's notion of 'free writing' (P. Elbow, 1973. *Writing without teachers*) they explored their underlying, implicit motivations as respondents and realized that these were sometimes in conflict with their espoused, conscious ideologies. They had assumed that their shared ideological approaches, centred on Genre Theory and Process Writing and on a Socio-cultural model of writing in which students are apprenticed into a new discourse (J. Gee, 1996. *Social linguistics and literacies: Ideology in discourses*). In fact, while recording in detail the comments that they had made on the students' essays, it became evident that much of the feedback did not reflect these theoretical approaches, but had more to do with less conscious wishes, processes, and identities (J. Kristeva, 1999. Revolution in poetic language). Some of their comments reflected models that were either 'traditionalist' or 'progressivist' (B. Cope and M. Kalantzis, 1993a. The Power of literacy and the literacy of power). Using a Critical Action research model, they revisited the research into formative assessment and developed a number of principles of good formative feedback. In the light of these principles and ideologies about literacy, they reflected critically on their assessment practices, and resolved on future directions for research into an improved, more theoretically grounded 'praxis' (W. Carr and S. Kemmis, 1986. *Becoming critical: Education, knowledge, and action research*).

From the theoretical section of the paper, I have selected the part that shows the paper's strong orientation to praxis, as follows.

#### **Good assessment practices: An overview**

The following ten points were developed as an overview of some of the general principles of good assessment practice. They are based on a variety of research initiatives into this topic from the past 15 years: some are from within Genre Theory and some are not. We have numbered them, and used them as a template, to make our data easier to analyse and refer to later on. They are based on reading extensively around the kinds of feedback practices that support learning: Macken and Slade (1993), Elbow (1994), Boud (1995), Ofsted (1996), Black and William (1998), Torrance and Pryor (1998), Ivanic, Clark and Rimmershaw (2000, 51-65), Lockett and Sutherland (2000), Weeden, Winter and Broadfoot (2002).

1. Good formative feedback builds and protects students' self-esteem and confidence. It should be *task-involving* (focusing on the writing) rather than *ego-involving* (focusing on the writer).
2. The criteria for evaluating the task must be shared openly with the students at the outset of the assignment. Tutors must make sure that students fully understand the criteria.
3. Feedback on the assignments must target only these pre-planned criteria: extraneous issues or superficial errors can be temporarily ignored.
4. Feedback should occur *quickly* if it is to be helpful to the student.
5. Feedback should 'feed-forward' - it should inform future drafts or tasks. It is assessment *for* rather than *of* learning. It should give constructive, realistic, staged advice on how to improve the next draft or assignment and on how to close the gap between what they wrote compared to an ideal answer.
6. It should identify misconceptions. Therefore, it should be *meaning* or *content* focused, identifying the substantive issues, and being selective about which surface errors to correct.
7. Feedback should develop a sense of *partnership* with the student: it should be dialogic and democratic (Ivanic, Clark and Rimmershaw 2000). Facilitative, supportive, collegial feedback deconstructs the image of the tutor as powerful, all-knowing judge. Ivanic, Clark and Rimmershaw (2000) suggest that engaging in dialogue and debate with the student in a collegial manner 'should be the major function of tutor's responses, [but] we have found it to be surprisingly rare' (2000, 57).
8. Elbow (1994) says that feedback in the form of 'descriptive, observational responses ...' helps students to gain a meta-cognitive awareness of their own writing and thinking processes.
9. Good feedback avoids 'final vocabulary' (Boud 1995). Comments such as 'disappointing', 'you can do better than this' or even 'excellent work' should be avoided.
10. It also avoids overgenerous and unfocussed praise because it can actually reinforce under-achievement. Black and William's (1998) research into feedback says that feedback that provides only a grade, or 'praise and a grade' not only fails to improve students' writing, but also sometimes actually deteriorates it.

The Conclusions section quoted below demonstrates the paper's interest in the ideologies that underlay our praxis and in our commitment to the improvement of our own and colleagues' "craft knowledge" (Shay, in press: 9) for the benefit of our students' learning experiences.

### **Conclusions**

To sum up, it would seem our assessment practices are located within a number of conflicting principles and identities. It is important not to simplify or bi-focalise these identities. It appears that a 'syncretism' is at work: sometimes we work in one mode (a more professional, tutored mode) and sometimes in another (a personal, even sometimes 'parental' mode) and sometimes in both. There appear to be multiple identities informing our feedback. We have observed the shifting nature of our 'subject identities' (Kristeva 1999). Whilst we recognize that we enact a number of helpful and positive practices in the ways in which we respond to students' writing, in the heat of responding extensively to some 35 essays within a working week, our intuitive, untutored responses became embarrassingly evident in places. (There were even some examples of unfinished sentences, confusing abbreviations and unreadable scrawls in our feedback, clearly generated by the pressured circumstances.) Therefore, although we do indeed share many of the ideas of Genre Theory and Process Writing, and are influenced by some ideas from a Socio-cultural model of literacy, we also have quite distinct and different personal identities and models which drive other aspects of our feedback practices.

At this stage in our action research cycle, we are only dealing with our input into our students' written texts. We recognize the limits of this perspective. In the next stage, we hope to address the students' experiences of our comments and what they take up into subsequent stages of the writing process. We plan to interview a new set of students at the same stage in the essay process in the next academic year. We need to ascertain what they found helpful or hurtful, expected or unexpected, useful or useless, discouraging or transformative. We also need to track in detail the kinds of changes that students make in their essays in subsequent drafts and why they chose to make those kinds of decisions. We have also planned a workshop with tutors and colleagues to encourage them to engage in similar reflections and discussions about their own feedback practices, thereby enriching their professional practice as respondents.

We believe that we can assume that there have already been some 'transformations of consciousness' (Carr and Kemmis 1986) in our roles and identities as tutors. There is also some evidence in our plans for the assessment workshop with tutors and for further cycles of research with the students, that this initiative will gradually make a more general impact on the quality of the assessment practices within our module, thereby generating 'transformations in social reality' (1986) as well.

I also include the 'Notes' at the end of the article because they are explicit about Meyer's theoretical orientations, and those at the heart of the course we were teaching together.

### **Notes**

1. Billy is most strongly influenced by Genre Theory, which in itself is a product of systemic functional approaches to language. The attitude of Genre theorists to writing instruction is summed up in the following quotation:

A genre approach to literacy teaching involves being explicit about the way language works to make meaning. It means engaging the students in the role of apprentice with the teacher in the role of expert on language system and function. It means an emphasis on content, on structure and on the sequence in the steps that a learner goes through to become literate in a formal educational setting (Cope and Kalantzis 1993b, 1).

2. Our course is located most fully within a process based approach to writing in which the students are expected to draft and redraft their writing tasks at least once and in this way take more responsibility and ownership of the process of getting their writing into an acceptable format.

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- Weedon, C. (1997) *Feminist practice and poststructuralist theory* Blackwells , Oxford.

The list above represents an ontological departure from the first one, demonstrating the paper's shared authorship. Despite a reference to Gee (1996) and Ivanic, Clark and Rimmershaw (2000), there is little evidence of the New Literacies approach that informed the previous paper, suggesting that this was a superficial, fragile, 'tutored' identity anyway<sup>43</sup>. Genre Theorists are more in evidence, eg., Macken and Slade, (1993a); Cope and Kalantzis, (1993b) and Macken-Horarick, *et al* (1996) and we uncritically assume the values of a process writing pedagogical frame (See Notes 1 and 2 above). Meyer had used Kristeva in his doctoral thesis and her theories about identity

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<sup>43</sup> In this I was probably quite correct. The paper suggests that the kind of pedagogical identity that emerges in some of the feedback comments that I was offering students, far from affirming (or extending) their literacies, suggests rather a protective, 'motherly' teacher- identity.

are 'lent' to this study, but not explained – one of the “the much noted but never elaborated ‘theories’ ... which inform educational development work” that Shay refers to in the quotation at the beginning of this chapter (2011: 9). It was only as I came to read for Chapter 2 of this doctoral study that I realised who Kristeva was, the broad outlines of her complex psychoanalytic theories of identity, and her location in a post-structuralist ontology.

Also evident is the paper's location in an entirely different cultural and structural environment to Event 1. Its orientation to *praxis* and to *improvement* is seen in the development of the deliberately accessible “Ten Good Principles” and in the commitments we make in the final paragraphs to assessment workshops and to ongoing cycles in the research endeavour. But the other interest of the paper is the attempt to make sense of the incoherence we had observed in our pedagogical practices. It consciously models self-reflexivity, inviting readers to trace and interrogate their own ideological orientations and teacher-identities and how these are evidenced in respondents' commentaries on students' essays. So it is concerned with 'false consciousness'. Both of these interests were deliberately emancipatory in intent, both grounded in the tenets of critical action research. In their introduction to the edition the journal's editors recognise these interests, describing the paper as a “*refreshingly honest account and analysis of [the lecturers'] own practices*” hoping it would “*provide inspiration to other teachers of writing*” (McKinney and Soudien, 2007: 5). But although Billy Meyer and I did indeed offer a workshop in formative assessment to our colleagues, as well as expositions of the ‘Ten Good Principles’ on several occasions, these efforts did not have any discernable or ‘inspirational’ impact. The tutors were incredulous and the issue of feedback practice on students' written work remained problematic for all the years I taught on the programme.

I have argued that the choice to work in an action research paradigm was a response to structural constraints at T<sup>1</sup> of this cycle. But the choice was also linked to my personal identity. Action research has its ontological roots in a liberal, modernist paradigm and I seem to have been (unconsciously) comfortable in this ideological space – the transitive domain is, as Archer argues, “replete with its blind spots of ignorance” (1988: 369). Action research embodies the “liberal, meliorist sense of the infinite perfectibility – through the application of reason – of humans and their institutions” (Brown and Jones,

2001: 23). Paulo Freire's *Cultural Action for Freedom* (1972) had occupied my bookshelves since early studenthood, largely unread, but iconic<sup>44</sup>. The 'historical Me' was invested in notions of the self as 'literacy activist' or 'change agent'. I was idealistic and liberal by socialisation: in terms of "society's distribution of resources" (Archer, 2000: 11) my family of origin were middle-class, conventionally religious and politically 'liberal'. I believed that change could begin with small initiatives, in groups of good-hearted, committed individuals, evolving slowly and cyclically from the bottom up in shared, community-based endeavours that really could improve "society's distribution of resources" (ibid). But this belief came to seem hopelessly "utopian" (Freire, 1972: 46) given the overwhelming structural constraints of the new, multi-campus 'mega-institution', and given what happened next in the agential domain.

#### **4.2.3 Event 3: 'Cocktail party' research and a failure in corporate agency**

As the previous paper had promised, Billy Meyer and I took up the action research project at the same stage in the Academic Literacy course in the following year – 2007. This time we conducted semi-structured interviews with our students about the usability of our (hopefully now improved) formative feedback on the first draft of their essays. Our initial findings were presented at 'The Learning Conference' in Johannesburg in July, 2007. I was unable to attend that conference but Billy Meyer presented an early version of the paper (mostly a set of findings) and submitted it to *International Journal of Learning* for possible publication. The journal is not accredited and submitting the article was an unfortunate mistake. As novice researchers, we were certainly naïve about reviewing and publishing processes. But I was more distressed by the fact that the paper was unready for submission, a view that was confirmed when one of the peer reviews came back with the comment: "I wonder – was this paper written at a cocktail party?" We were humiliated by this remark and the reviewer's school-style rating of the paper as '31/100'. But on the basis of another more positive peer response, we were offered the opportunity to rewrite it. We hurriedly shaped it into some sort of research article, under considerable pressure in terms of a submission deadline. It was

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<sup>44</sup> Freire writes (rather grandly): "The pedagogy which we defend ... is itself a utopian pedagogy. By this fact it is full of hope, for to be utopian is not to be merely idealistic or impractical but rather to engage in denunciation and annunciation. Our pedagogy ... formulates a scientific humanist conception which finds its expression in a dialogical praxis in which ... the act of analyzing a dehumanizing reality, denounces it while announcing its transformation in the name of the liberation of man" (1972: 40).

accepted for publication without any further reviews but, as it stands, it is overlong, diffuse and unfinished. But these painful experiences disrupted our research partnership and thereafter Billy Meyer and I determined to write separately. Interestingly, in the next paper (Event 4) – which I wrote on my own – I make a tentative case against ‘imported’ pedagogies based in Genre theory and process approaches (to which Meyer was personally committed, though I remained sceptical) and I seem to have been closing a ‘theoretical door’ of sorts.

Event 3’s Abstract, the Reference List and a section from the Findings will be enough to demonstrate its a-theoretical character.

**Reference:** Niven, P., and Meyer, W. (2007). Understanding the Impact that principled formative feedback has on first year students’ writing: Is it useable or not? An action research project. *The International Journal of Learning*, 14(8): 13–22.

#### **Abstract**

This paper reports on the second cycle of a broader critical action research project that is investigating the uses of formative assessment in an academic writing course for first-year students at a South African university. This stage in the project explores the impact that lecturers’ written comments had on twelve students involved in producing early assignments. The students’ prior experiences of assessment are investigated, their emotional responses to the formative comments and whether the lecturers’ comments were useable or comprehensible or not. Following Black and Wiliam’s extensive review of the generally positive effects that improving formative feedback can have on learning (1998), the researchers assumed that careful, principled formative comments on students essays’ would inevitably be developmental. In fact their comments were often misunderstood or misinterpreted. Possible reasons for this are suggested by the data. The findings led the researchers to conclude that their mode of giving formative feedback on students’ assignments needed re-evaluation and re-design and a way forward into the next phase of the project is envisioned.

#### **Findings**

[...] The first question in our interview questionnaire (see Appendix A) explored the students’ previous experiences of assessment at school. The responses that students gave us largely confirmed our intuition that the feedback they had received on their assignments had been meagre and primarily summative in purpose. The teachers’ interventions had been largely confined to correcting superficial errors of grammar, spelling and punctuation. There is also an indication that they understood teachers’ comments and interventions as negative judgments on their work: no comments at all implied success and approval, that ‘... I was doing fine’.

- *Actually, in high school I did not get a lot of comments [on my written work] because I think I was doing fine ... maybe I got comments like I need to structure my essay in a good way;*
- *They said my language is a little bit poor and there is a problem with punctuation. They did not make much comment about my ideas or explain any problems in person;*
- *just corrected the spelling and the punctuation;*
- *[In English] it was just commas and grammar and he put the mark on and he did not explain why we got the marks. In other subjects we did not even get commas;*
- *Usually it was about spelling, punctuation; he didn’t explain it to us; you just take your work and put it in your file;*
- *They just gave marks and sometimes ticks;*
- *They used to write ‘give examples’ or ‘try to be clear’ and ‘correct spellings’;*
- *They used to say ‘good work’, ‘keep it up’ ‘excellent’ and stuff like that.*

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The Reference List above indicates that although we were trying to find out more about action research, for example, in Wadsworth (1998), Dick (2002) and O'Brien (1998) and we had continued to read in issues related to assessment, for example, in the new references to Hyland (1998), Reinneke (1998) and Torrance and Pryor (1998) there is no substantive theory in this list – even Framing Theory has temporarily disappeared. Besides, many of the references were almost ten years old. This paper does not even “note” let alone “elaborate on” any foundational theories of language or learning, “tacit” or otherwise (Shay, in press: 9). We collected extensive data on the students' past and current experiences of assessment and this was not without value in terms of “craft

knowledge" (ibid). We had developed a clearer picture of our students' mostly negative and confused responses to formative feedback on their written work and the data offered interesting clues as to why this was the case. But this is a data-driven paper with very little systematic analysis and, in my view, should not have been accepted for publication. T<sup>4</sup> in this cycle was a low point.

Although I am inclined to ascribe the morphostasis of Event 3 to a failure in corporate agency, Archer prompts me to explore the structural constraints that were at play as well. For example, there were particularly explicit institutional pressures to 'publish or perish' and "the deathly excesses of the accounting logic of performativity" (Grant, 2007: 41) had frightened some academics. Yet I would argue, based in the 'rudderless' experience of writing Event 3, that if research (in any given field) is an institutional expectation, then consistent, principled mentoring based in an explicit, coherent set of theories, values and beliefs must also be in place otherwise the expectation cannot be met. I will return to this idea in the final chapter.

The inherent, situational logic of this research-writing context was replete with an array of "constraining contradictions" (Archer, 1988/1996). For example:

The Access programme operating in the Humanities faculty was beset by structural anomalies. For instance, whilst the titular location of the Access Programme was in the School of Languages most of the actual, 'hands-on' practical leadership of the programme, including the organization of its funding and curricula, initially came from the office of the Executive Director Access; this was disbanded in 2008. Thereafter, the leadership of the programme was shifted about amongst various Deputy Deans often with quite divergent discursive positions and ideas about the role of the programme. Clear, stable lines of communication were often difficult to establish (Niven, Jackson and Tyson, in press: 48).

Given these structural conditions, it is in fact surprising that Billy Meyer and I were able to conduct any published research at all.

#### **4.2.4 Event 4: In search of new theories**

At T<sup>1</sup> of the next research cycle, I had realised the dangers of my a-theorised position. I began to call up old theories and was on the lookout for new ones. Alice is stuck down the rabbit hole, experimenting with little golden keys and dangerous looking potions in bottles beautifully inscribed with the words "DRINK ME" (Carroll, [1871]/2010: 11). She is working on access into new theoretical gardens: "How she longed to get out of that dark hall ... but she could not even get her head through the doorway" (ibid: 10).

The quotation in the title of the next paper was taken from the data and represents the kinds of feedback comments the students may have had from their former school teachers<sup>45</sup>. It reports on a practical curricular intervention, using peer assessment, to enable students to make better use of developmental feedback on their writing. Apart from the Abstract and References I quote from parts of the theoretical section of the paper.

**Reference:** Niven, P. (2009). 'Quit school and become a taxi driver': Reframing first-year students' expectations of assessment in a university environment. *Perspectives in Education*, 27(3): 278–288.

#### **Abstract**

The context of this research is an academic writing course for first-year Social Science students on a four-year extended curriculum at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. This course traditionally uses a Process Writing model whereby the lecturers provide written formative feedback on drafts of students' assignments. But the lecturers were disheartened by the students' negative, minimal responses to the extensive advice that they were offering. Drawing on a wide range of perspectives and theories this study explores the reasons for the students' reactions and implements a curricular intervention to address them. A series of classes introduced the students to some basic principles of assessment which were then applied in a peer assessment task. The data that emerged suggests that students' school-based understandings of assessment were substantially reframed and that this, in turn, had an impact on how they conceptualized the writing process for a new academic context. The lecturers' assumptions about the intrinsic value of written formative feedback on students' assignments was challenged. Rather, to be effective it needs scaffolded mediation within the particular socio-cultural environment in which it is offered. Another outcome was the lecturers' critical interrogation of another pedagogical 'orthodoxy' – Genre Theory's notion of feedback as 'expert' advice offered to 'novices'. Formative feedback may be more useable if novice writers are trained to peer-apprentice each other and they become more self-regulated in the process.

The following paragraph introduced the theoretical section of the paper and demonstrates my determination to be 'thoroughly theorised' and probably offers far too many theoretical perspectives on the topic of peer assessment and its usability.

#### **Theoretical perspectives: why good formative feedback can be un-useable**

The following review integrates a number of theories and perspectives to make sense of why even good formative feedback can be ineffectual. Firstly, it briefly reports on the most comprehensive review of the research into formative assessment and its potential benefits for learning to date (Black and Wiliam, 1998). It then employs Framing Theory (Tannen, 1993) to describe the mismatches in learning expectations between students and their lecturers. Seeing feedback as 'appropriation' (Tardy, 2006) was a useful notion in making sense of the students' resistance to written feedback on their texts. This section also reports on the research into peer reviewing by Villamil and de Guerrero (2006). They employ Socio-cultural Theory (Wertsch, 1979) to evaluate learners' 'stages of regulation' during peer learning. Similarly, although more superficially, this research employs notions of 'object', 'other' and 'self-regulation' to evaluate a peer assessment project. Hyland and Hyland (2006) offer an extensive review into the potential benefits and pitfalls of peer assessment, and Sadler's theory about the principles of effective

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<sup>45</sup> Interestingly, this sarcastic feedback comment from a former teacher echoes the reviewer's comment on my own previous paper, suggesting, perhaps, that the stinging 'cocktail party comment' at T<sup>4</sup> of previous paper became T<sup>1</sup> for the next event.

formative assessment (1989) were used in the design of the classes that were used as the framework for this project. These theories are discussed in turn under the subheadings that follow below.

Apart from other, more detailed accounts of research and theories that I had already used in previous research, (such as Black and Wiliam's report on the effects of formative assessment on learning and Framing Theory), this paper locates at least two 'new' theories as well. Wertsch's Sociocultural Theory (SCT) is based in Vygotsky's social and cognitive psychology and Tardy's appropriation theory presents a challenge to the classic 'apprentice/expert' models of learning based in Genre Theory, adopting a more socio-cultural perspective on respondent feedback. Amongst the welter of theories that this paper describes and uses, I will quote only my accounts of the main 'new acquisitions', as follows.

### **Feedback as 'appropriation'**

Another theoretical perspective that sheds light on why even good formative feedback can be unhelpful concerns the idea of *appropriation* (Tardy, 2006). Well-intentioned lecturers can be overly directive, appropriating students' essays, taking ownership of them, forcing new identities, meanings and ideologies in ways that become overbearing. Quantities of written feedback occupying the spaces and margins around a student's essay could panic and pressurise the recipient who may follow the directives whether they are understood or not. Tardy (2006) says that a student's attention can be drawn from 'this is what I want to say' to 'this is what you the teacher are telling me to say'. Furthermore, feedback is usually conceived of as *unidirectional*, from lecturer to student (Tardy, 2006). This also could generate resentment in students who may feel that their writing is being 'colonised'.

The notion of feedback as 'appropriation' challenged the lecturers' elevated sense of themselves as "... cultural informant[s] and liaison between the student-writer and the target discourse community ..." (Reid, 1994 in Tardy, 2006, 61). The lecturer is the 'expert' and the students are 'novices' who are 'apprenticed' (Cope and Kalantzis, 1993; Macken and Slade, 1993). But it seemed that frames like these could, in some contexts, encourage passivity, dependence, resentment and even resistance.

The advantage of peer feedback is that can side-step such reactions and encourage a more interactive, democratic mode for giving and receiving feedback. Students, enculturated into the traditional, hierarchical relationships of teacher/learner or lecturer/student, can more easily 'talk back' to a peer's feedback. By training students to own and share some of the responsibility for assessment, lecturers accord students a transitional space in which they can more freely and unself-consciously venture into new writing identities. The advice the peers offer might not be technically as helpful as those offered by the 'experts', but there may be other gains such as more investment, confidence and independence on the part of the student writers.

### **Socio-cultural Theory and 'stages of regulation'**

Research by Villamil and de Guerrero (2006) who use Socio-cultural Theory (SCT) to analyse the effects of peer conferencing in a group of Puerto Rican students studying English proved another useful source for making sense of the assessment relationship. Their research was extensive and long-term, but the idea from SCT that was most helpful to this project is that the mature mind is *mediated*, either through others, ('other-regulation'), or by the self ('self-regulation'), or mediation can be by artifacts ('object-regulation') (Wertsch, 1979,90 in Villamil *et al*, 2006). Villamil *et al*, (ibid) observed the students progress from object- and other-regulated behaviours, gradually becoming more self-regulated over many peer encounters. Object-regulated students demonstrated lack of interest, avoidance, frequently turning to jokes and other off-task behaviours. Other-regulated students demonstrated hesitancy, a need for help and even despair at times. But self-regulated learners showed increasing independence. Over a number of meetings students who had been fairly acquiescent and dependent became more self-regulatory,

incorporating or rejecting their peers' suggestions, making suggestions of their own and interrogating ideas from their advisors.

This project does not rigorously apply SCT in the way that Villamil and de Guerrero do. Instead, Wertsch's ideas about stages of regulation provide a broad template for evaluating the impact of the planned pedagogical intervention. In the giving and receiving of peer advice, students' responses could be observed in Wertsch's terms, and indications of more self-regulated behaviours could demonstrate some success because they would show that the students were behaving independently, taking control of their writing.

These expositions are not very much more than a "noting" of either of these theories, as Shay suggests (in press: 9). In fact, I refer to them as "useful notions" rather than deep, systematic ways of knowing and I encountered them primarily by means of a secondary source in Hyland and Hyland's 2006 book, *Feedback in Second Language Writing: Contexts and Issues* which was then a brand new library acquisition at UKZN.

However, my brief foray into theories based in cognitive psychology, such as Socio-cultural Theory, received some unexpected institutional support. Professor Ronnie Miller, from the Psychology department on the Howard College campus at UKZN, offered a workshop on Piaget and Vygotsky's learning theories at about this time. I then read Miller's article 'Conceptual issues in theorising about cognition' (1989), and other papers based in cognitive psychology from the same academic community at the old UND, such as those of Craig (1989) and others. These papers had originally been offered at a three-day workshop entitled 'New Students in Old Universities' in 1989. Lazarus, in his introduction to this set of papers<sup>46</sup>, described the workshop as designed to assist Academic Support practitioners "with a point of access to, and map of, the intellectual terrain, in order to enable them to make their own exploration of ... the knowledge field which underpins their daily practical commitments" (1989: 153). So even then, back in 1989, there was a concern to offer the South African AD community a framework for explanatory theory – this time in Piaget's theories of cognition, such as 'action as the source of knowledge construction', and Vygotskian theories of 'mediation' and 'stages of regulation'<sup>47</sup>. The fact that Miller was still offering this workshop to the newly appointed tutors of the Extended Curriculum on the Pietermaritzburg campus in 2008 is as much a

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<sup>46</sup> These papers were published in one edition of the South African Journal of Higher education as: Lazarus, J., Miller, R., Moll, I. and Slonimsky, L. and Craig, A. P. (1989). New students in old universities: Cognitive development in the South African tertiary educational context. *South African Journal of Higher Education* (1989) Vol 3: No 1. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 3(1), (Pp 153-159).

<sup>47</sup> Shay's quotation at the head of this chapter also shows the same concern about the often a-theorised nature of much AD research in South Africa, and she is writing over 20 years later.

testament to his professional dedication to a more rigorous theorisation of student learning programmes as to the fact that theories based in cognitive psychology were never enthusiastically taken up by the more prominent researchers in the South African AD community during the later 1990s, as I will explain in the next chapter.

In terms of my own research narrative, I use Wertsch and 'stages in regulation' in Event 4 but never again thereafter. I seem to have recognised my superficial, insecure grasp on such radically new disciplinary territory. In the next paper I write I return to more 'anthropological' conceptions of learning and the ethnographic methods in which I was more comfortable. But as Haggis says in her overview of student learning research: "The attempt to work with and across a variety of disciplines is fraught with difficulties and challenges, involving identity risks and the creation of endless and unforeseen vulnerabilities" (2009: 389).

Scanning through Event 4's Reference List below reveals a very oddly matched array of theorists, some with their roots in Genre Theory, socio-linguistics and second language acquisition, composition studies, Framing Theory, Socio-cultural Theory (SCT), the New Literacies as well as various assessment theories. When Alice tasted the contents of the bottle that was printed with the words 'DRINK ME', she discovered that "it had, in fact, a sort of mixed flavour of cherry-tart, custard, pine-apple, roast turkey, toffee, and hot-buttered toast" (Carroll, [1871]/2010: 12) rather like the reference list below. The T<sup>4</sup> of this morphogenetic cycle was a theoretical hotchpotch, as can be seen by scanning the following list.

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#### 4.2.5 Event 5: Rediscovering theoretical coherence?

There were a number of significant shifts in the structural and cultural domains that conditioned the revised research interests and theoretical orientations that drove the next two research events and I will attempt to unpack them systematically (at T<sup>1</sup>). Firstly, in mid-2007 – partly as a response to the DoE's funding formula for Foundation programmes that I discussed in the previous chapter and partly because one Deputy Dean on the Pietermaritzburg campus had recognised the need to shift ideas about Access/Foundation work to conform more closely with the national shift to a more integrated academic support model in mainstream disciplinary environments in universities. So the Humanities faculty at UKZN began to consider some limited re-circulation of their Access programme with the piloting of an 'Extended Curriculum'. Despite the resignation of the innovating Deputy Dean very soon after this process began

[Re-circulation] did get under way with the help of a grant from the South-Africa-Norway Tertiary Education Development plan (SANTED). The Extended Curriculum [was] implemented on the PMB campus and is in process at HC. Academic support materials [were] developed in a range of first level Humanities modules: Media and Communication Studies, Political Science, Ethics, Psychology, Sociology, Legal Studies and Geography. During 2007/8, these materials were piloted by trained disciplinary tutors mainly with Access students. Basically, small groups of students were provided with two extra tutorials per week in

order to extend and augment their learning within these modules. Their work and the materials were monitored by a coordinator (Niven, et al, in press: 51).

I was offered a 2½ year contract to coordinate and monitor the project on the Pietermaritzburg campus, appoint and train the disciplinary tutors, oversee the development of materials in each discipline and to track and observe the students' learning and the tutors' teaching in the range of mainstream modules selected for curricular augmentation. All the Extended Curriculum students were now required to register for Politics 101 and 102, a limited choice of one other mainstream discipline (such as Sociology or Psychology) as well as two generic Access courses such as English Language Development and Academic Literacy. This limited re-curriculation process, and the particular expectations of my new professional role in the Extended Curriculum, were both significant causal mechanisms in the structural domain which generated a shift from research events in an exclusively 'Academic Support' paradigm to ones in an 'Academic Development' paradigm. Although my research focus was still on student learning, and I was still conceptualising the research as ongoing cycles in an action-based project, I began to address the interface between divergent 'ways of knowing' in students and lecturers *within a mainstream discipline*. Event 6 is mostly interested in *teachers and teaching* in first-year Political Science.

Another enabling condition at T<sup>1</sup> of this morphogenetic cycle was the appointment of Dr Sioux McKenna to the Centre of Higher Education Development (CHED) at UKZN. I was exploring the possibility of doing doctoral research and she began to read and comment on my writing and to offer workshops to the Extended Curriculum tutors. Her strong theorisation in 'Academic Literacies' – she was Boughey's first PhD graduate – drew my writing back into formerly familiar territory and re-established a systematic theoretical frame for my research efforts. She gently interrogated my *ad hoc* adoption of theories and was helpful in guiding and redirecting my reading in line with more social and critical conceptions of literacy as the reference lists below show. These papers show the presence of a 'research mentor' or "master" (in Shay's terms, in press: 9). She became, in short, a key actor in my research story.

Events 5 and 6 were originally conceived as a single paper which explored the epistemological values of both students and their lecturers in Politics 1. When I submitted the paper to *Teaching in Higher Education* one of the reviewers responded

warmly to the descriptions of the students' epistemologies, describing the data as "*innovative and interesting, even inspiring*", yet felt that the claims about lecturers' beliefs were "*conservative and superficial*". S/he advised as follows: "*Take out some of the assumptions about what academic teachers think or appreciate and let the data about student epistemologies talk on its own*". In case I wanted to rewrite the sections about the lecturers, the reviewers offered practical guidance for further reading in disciplinary ways of knowing – hence the advent of Becher and Trowler (2001) and Trowler (2009) in the next reference list. The reviewers had offered useable advice: I did rewrite the paper focusing on the students (Event 5: Appendix E), it was accepted for publication, and I reconceived the paper about the Political Science lecturers and their ways of knowing (Event 6: Appendix F).

Interestingly, in terms of the "continuous sense of self" upon which Archer's social ontology is premised (2000) the central concern of the next two papers is a return to themes in my Masters dissertation in which I had been exploring literacy within a specific discipline and student/lecturer dissonances. In 2005 I had understood these dissonances in terms of a conflict of *frames*. I cannot now remember how or why I began to grapple with *epistemology* and *ways of knowing* rather than *frames* as a means of understanding these conflicts but I soon recognised the heuristic potential of *epistemology*. The seeming simplicity of Morrow's (1993) observation that new students need to be granted "epistemological access" to disciplines – that formal access to institutions of higher education was not enough – belies its profundity. I had never fully grasped the full impact of "epistemological access" though the phrase is common currency in the discourses of AD in South Africa. It seems that my revised responsibilities at UKZN required that I re-encounter the concept. They presented me with the context (or "complementary conditions") in which I could reclaim an "internal personal integrity" (Archer, 1988/1996), the persistent 'researcher-self' who had always been trying to engage with 'ways of knowing' though often without the theoretical depth, curricula structures or epistemological base that could enable or sustain this research interest.

**Reference:** Niven, P. 2011. Intersecting epistemologies: first-year students in a Political Science module. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 16(6): 641–653.

### **Abstract**

This paper identifies the epistemological values of novice students and their lecturers in terms of a 'farming' metaphor. It argues that each occupy essentially different kinds of epistemological 'farms', involving different 'crops' and 'methods', and lecturers often fail to provide effective access to their disciplinary communities because they do not recognise or respond to this fundamental epistemological disjuncture. This issue is explored in relation to a first-level Political Science module in a South African university. Using Discourse Theory as the primary means of interpretation, the project identifies the students' home, community and school-based discourses which construct their values and ideas about learning and knowing and therefore their ways of reading and writing in the academy. The data was collected in four workshops in which the students employed a variety of media to explore their past and current experiences of learning. The multiple perspectives afforded by this mode of data collection generated rich, ethnographic descriptions of the students' social epistemologies. Their values are contrasted with those that may be considered normative in a Social Science like Politics.

The following quotation is taken from the concluding sections of the paper and offers an account of the students' understandings of knowledge and knowledge building.

### **The dimensions of a social epistemology**

What, then, does the data above reveal of this cohort of novice students' epistemological frames? Firstly, we observe submissiveness or obedience as learning values. We observe an epistemology that sees knowledge as 'suffering' or 'brave endurance'. Students are not accustomed to finding knowledge intrinsically interesting or even comprehensible: learning has been boring and uneasy and participation in learning was limited to peer groups outside of classroom settings. Even in these settings it seems that someone (a 'genius') taught while the others in the peer group listened respectfully. Knowledge is passed down hierarchically, often orally, from person to person. There is a complete absence of the idea of learning from internet or library sources – most learning is, quite literally, 'by word of mouth'. Knowledge in this kind of epistemological farm is a final, objective product, (as from a factory), not a growing, organic process. It is usually not contested although teachers (the 'farm managers'), are implicated in a hierarchical, authoritarian system that is oppressive and an appropriate response of the learners (the 'farm workers') is sometimes aggressive resistance. Students who get to university do so under great duress and are worthy of respect – they are heroes or warriors, future political leaders of the country. Knowledge is often acquired by means of supportive peers, the 'comrades'. Peer groups have been a crucial, valued site for conceptual development. Learning is seldom conceptualised in individualistic, competitive terms and is more often understood as a shared, united effort – a struggle for a victorious outcome. In Poem 1, the praise poem, the learners have 'a variety of views', but these are subsumed by the need for a united front: 'We are of one mind'. In a community whose recent history was one of humiliating political oppression, knowledge implies empowerment and the development of social- and self-esteem.

Perhaps the most obvious difference between Event 5's reference list and previous ones is that it is almost twice as long. MacLachlan and Reid have made a final exit. The New Literacy theorists are again much in evidence, both the international figures and local researchers who have affinities with this tradition. Significantly, one researcher in higher education learning research (Haggis, 2003) appears on the list, indicating, almost for the first time, a dawning awareness of a Higher Education Studies field beyond the South African world of AD. Becher and Trowler's names (2001; 2009) show that I am starting to read about "academic tribes and territories" and I have explained that this

was a consequence of the advice of two international reviewers for *Teaching in Higher Education*. There are also popular books or media-based commentaries on ‘the state of schooling’ in contemporary South Africa (eg., Ramphela, 2008; Bloch, 2009) and Scott, Yeld and Hendry’s (2007) report on the formidable crisis in the throughput and retention of students in the South African higher education sector shows a new-found awareness of the national context. There is evidence of my attempts to understand ‘epistemology’ (mainly of the ‘social’ and ‘feminist’ varieties) from web-based sources. Kegan’s “Theory of Meaning Making” (1994; 2002) was the outcome of one rather unsophisticated web search, and this reference was regarded with some scepticism by one of my reviewers. Although this theory understands ‘meaning-making’ in staged, individualised, age-related terms (that are a-cultural and a-social) it was initially appealing and accessible, and I was engaged by Kegan’s metaphor of “epistemological farms”. It still took me some time, and a few supervisory prompts, to recognise its ontological incompatibility with Discourse theories. So whilst this reference list is longer than the former ones and seems to project more ‘academic gravitas’, it also tells a story of the rather *ad hoc*, contingent nature of a novice researcher reading for a paper in AD. Nevertheless, decoding the list that follows below suggests the presence and guidance of a supervisor who was challenging the narrow parochialism and ideological limitations that had conditioned and constrained my earlier research identity. Offering this paper to a respected international journal such as *Teaching in Higher Education* (with the encouragement of my supervisor) meant that I was finding a voice beyond that of *teacher-practitioner* and the critical feedback, few appreciative comments and useful interventions from the reviewers helped me to begin to understand myself as a participant in a much wider academic world.

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In the final section of this chapter, I describe my first experience of “studying up” (Nader, 1972), that is, studying the disciplinary experts and ‘insiders’ who had considerably more social and cultural capital than I, as an AD practitioner, had in the institution. I had, up to this point, been focussed on the most disempowered community in the university: first-generation, first-year students. But I was now studying an empowered community, academics with the considerable theoretical resources of their discipline to talk back to my research.

#### **4.2.6 Event 6: ‘Studying up’: Encountering academic tribes**

Although Events 5 and 6 were originally interlinked, my material and cultural conditions shifted dramatically *between* the times in which I wrote each of them. In March 2010 my contract at UKZN came to an end. The external funders that had been supporting the Extended Curriculum initiative were shifting their attention from educational to environmental issues and my post fell away. But I was keen to find the means to pursue my doctoral studies and so I applied for a Mellon Foundation bursary at Rhodes University. In this way I became a full-time doctoral scholar, joining a large cohort of scholars from across South Africa all engaged in or preparing for doctoral studies in a various aspects of higher education<sup>48</sup>. Sioux McKenna (now an ‘Associate Professor’) is responsible for this newly-conceived programme which offers several ‘Doc Weeks’ over the course of an academic year and a lively online forum on ‘RUconnected’ for heated debates, draft research proposals, new readings, reports and press articles, news from conferences, personal appeals from scholars struggling to read and understand in new theoretical ground – in effect, a vibrant community of practice. These rich resources in the cultural domain have nurtured the writing of this doctoral study and have led me into my first encounters with *ontology*, particularly in the work of the realist philosophies of Bhaskar and Archer.

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<sup>48</sup> This doctoral programme is based in the Education faculty but is run by the Centre for Higher Education Research, Teaching and Learning (CHERTL) at RU. There are currently 33 scholars registered with this programme.

Meanwhile, during 2010, as I was reading for my research proposal and attempting to make sense of radically new ideas in meta-theory and philosophy, I was also struggling to complete Event 6, which I conceived as ‘the other half’ of Event 5. I felt I needed to ‘complete the cycle’: the paper about the Politics lecturers was ‘unfinished business’. Besides, it was already half-written and I had collected data that seemed intrinsically rich and interesting. Another motivation to complete the paper was that I was planning, at that stage, to write a PhD ‘by/with publications’. Strategically, I felt that I needed another paper to build a more substantial research profile of publications.

But the logical relations within the cultural domain at T<sup>1</sup> of Event 6 were a ferment of theoretical contradictions. Firstly, Becher’s theories of disciplinary “tribes” and “territories” (Becher and Trowler, 1989/2001) represented the main cultural idea at the starting point of the paper. Secondly, I have argued that the previous paper (Event 5) had returned me to the ‘New Literacies’ fold. However, my early encounters with readings in Archer’s social theories led me to suspect (uncomfortably and tentatively) that the New Literacies and Becher’s ideas, both based as they are in anthropological orientations to knowledge-building, might fall into “the fallacy of conflation” by making the cultural domain “epiphenomenal” (Archer, 2000). Later ‘member checking’ meetings with the Politics lecturers seemed to confirm this suspicion. With the ongoing sense of myself as a critical researcher I had deliberately invited the lecturers’ input on the paper, encouraging them to interrogate my findings and interpretations<sup>49</sup>. I had even presented the department with a conference-style poster to explain the research I was doing. But they also seemed to reject the paper’s “epiphenomenalism” (ibid). In the same vein as the first reviews I had received from *Teaching in Higher Education*, they politely indicated that they thought that the findings were superficial and simplistic. For example, one young lecturer (‘NL’ in the paper) had been a part of the Pietermaritzburg Access programme in the early 2000s and he challenged the notion that he was a product of ‘enculturation’, neither in terms of his home and school literacies, nor in the disciplinary sense either. His school and family background had not prepared him for university study: “I knew no one who had been to

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<sup>49</sup> Although I had gained ‘official’ ethical consent from UKZN to conduct this research, I was still concerned about the ethics of publishing this paper without the lecturers first reading and commenting on a research account that so closely concerned their professional activities. So I was seeking a more personal level of consent which was eventually granted.

*a university, absolutely no one, not even the teachers ... I was a 'walk-in' student. I walked in to the university and said I wanted to come"* (Niven, in press). So his argument was for a much stronger focus on *agency* in my interpretations of the data. His socio-cultural conditions had *not* determined his future prospects. So despite his 'enculturation', he had become a fully-tenured academic in a respected Political Science department. Another lecturer ('D1' in the paper) also resisted the idea of socio-cultural or disciplinary enculturation, citing *structure* as an equally important conditioning influence, claiming that "the department sets parameters within which lecturers operate regardless of their backgrounds: *"There is an institutional and procedural ethos to which we defer"* (Niven, in press). The 'M' figure in the study also destabilised my cultural stereotypes. Despite the fact of her strongly Marxist and feminist beliefs, she was surprisingly willing to allow herself to be constructed as 'mothering' the students, the 'mother' in the departmental system, or as being concerned for the students' sense of 'comfort' in Politics 1. Thus she says: *"If I look at my course evaluations and I see responses that speak of discomfort or alienation I feel I have failed"* (Niven, in press).

I experienced this range of conditioning influences as fundamentally contradictory. My renewed confidence in anthropological orientations to the study of teaching and learning in higher education was being disrupted at T<sup>2</sup> and T<sup>3</sup> of this morphogenetic cycle: firstly, the newly-digested ideas and concepts I was meeting in Archer's social theories, the lecturer's resistance to the idea of themselves representing 'tribal' or 'territorial' norms of any kind, the data themselves – these all seemed to be interrogating the socio-cultural approaches that I had re-adopted. I began to reflect on my own tendencies to essentialism and was, yet again, experiencing ontological doubt. On the face it, Event 6 retains its anthropological orientation and is certainly an ethnographic study of Political Scientists reflecting on their teaching of 1<sup>st</sup> year students, but the data that had seemed rich and intriguing at the outset had begun to daunt and confuse me.

Reading further in the field of teaching disciplines in HE, particularly in *The University and its Disciplines* edited by Carolin Kreber (2009), I discovered that ideas of academic 'tribes' and 'territories' are now highly contested and are challenged by Trowler himself, and others in this publication (such as McArthur, Pace, Fanghanel, and Roxå and

Mårtensson). So I eventually rewrote the paper using Trowler's ideas of 'Teaching and Learning Regimes' (2009). But although I wrote and rewrote the paper several times, responding to further critique from the lecturers in Politics and from my supervisor, I believe this paper fails to analyse the data satisfactorily and the concluding remarks, quoted below, clearly display a fundamental doubt about what the data mean. There was even a stage during this process when my supervisor suggested that I needed 'just a bit of Bernstein' to account for the 'vertical' and 'horizontal' discourses (represented, respectively, by the disciplinary discourses of Political Science and the "taxi-rank analysis" of novice students) which were emerging clearly in the data. But, probably unwisely, I drew the line at Bernstein and finally submitted the paper to a local South African journal, *Perspectives in Education*, for review<sup>50</sup>. I quote from the Abstract, Concluding Remarks and Reference List as follows.

**Reference:** Niven, P. Teaching Political Science to first-year students in a South African University: Challenging 'taxi-rank' analysis? In press.

#### **Abstract**

This paper explores the situated and contested nature of the epistemological values of a social science discipline as it finds expression in the context of a particular department. Using an anthropological approach, it analyses the disciplinary "territory" of Political Science as it is inhabited by "tribes" of disciplinary experts, in this case the lecturers (Becher and Trowler, 2001). It provides an ethnographic account of a disciplinary community doing the work of inducting first-year students into new ways of knowing with a particular focus on the lecturers' perceptions of the resources and capabilities that first year students bring with them into the academy. The study also describes some of the "teaching and learning regimes" (Trowler, 2009) that characterise the department and the ways these appear to shifting. Finally, the impact of these insights on the epistemological access of newcomers to the discipline is considered.

#### **Concluding remarks**

Teaching Political Science is a subtle balance between a range of competing discursive regimes, those of students, lecturers and of the discipline itself. We have observed lecturers making wise and fruitful links across discursive boundaries facilitating the beginners' access into new disciplinary territory. This department was not a 'tribe': there were dramatically different approaches and attitudes although these may have been complementary: the tough disciplinary expectations have been mediated by discourses of support and nurture. Nor is the epistemic order of this discipline unitary and uncontested. There are also competing assumptions about the nature of student learning: lecturers recall their own learning histories to frame current students in a different world. The use of Marxist concepts of class and competition for 'knowledge capital' was a humane interpretation of students' apparent maladjustment to university learning. The concept of "*knowledge grasping elements*" was particularly helpful. "*Taxi-rank analysis*" was seen to be a useful point of departure into the discipline, as was the notion of Political Science's links with issues of practical social justice although both ideas needed re-configuring in the context of academic

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<sup>50</sup> This paper has now been formally revised and accepted for publication in *Perspectives in Education* in 2012. But here I offer the unrevised paper that was originally submitted to the journal. One reviewer suggested that I make clearer recommendations on the basis of the analysis, responding, I believe, to the lack of clarity in the final sections of the paper. In fact I will present the revised version of this paper at the HECU conference in July 2012.

study. Some of the students' prior literacies are recognised: students' orientations to oral learning are acknowledged and deemed useful. Yet lecturers appeared unrealistic about the students' preparedness for academic reading. Most students, whatever their class or background, come into universities under-prepared in this regard and require explicit guidance in the location and appropriate use of academic reading materials. It was not, in my view, "spoon-feeding" or "spoiling" to offer help with libraries and online searches as in the training offered to the students in 2009: it was excellent, necessary pedagogy. New students need disciplinary experts who dive into turbulent disciplinary waters with them to model and explicate the values and identities of Political Scientists, showing them ways of completing tasks, assigning and mediating relevant readings and giving them frequent opportunities to practice the peculiar ways of thinking, reading, speaking and writing that characterise the discipline. Without experts, disciplinary dialogues degenerate into superficial, generic 'chatter' and opportunities for growing confidence in a new disciplinary discourse are lost to unchallenged "taxi-rank analysis".

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The reference list above is most interesting in terms of its absences. Although it cites several New Literacy theorists and the recent research into teaching in disciplinary environments that I have already mentioned, I was by then reading extensively in Critical and Social Realism, yet no realists appear on this list. In fact, Archer's social theories would have helped me to make better sense of the data by enabling an analysis of the interacting domains of culture, structure and agency in this departmental context. Bernstein's conceptualisation of discourses as 'vertical' and 'horizontal' would also,

doubtless, have clarified the nature of the problems with 'taxi-rank analysis' and may also have helped the lecturers to meta-theorise their own responses to new students' language and literacy practices. But these were new theoretical frames and I felt vulnerable in the vast, new theoretical territory of Critical and Social Realism – the "identity risks" (Haggis, 2009: 398) were too great – and so I stuck with Trowler's 'Teaching and Learning Regimes' thereby displaying an uncharacteristic theoretical conservatism.

However there was some affirmation of this paper from the Politics lecturers. Not only did they formally agree to allow me to try and publish the paper, but I received the following email from 'M' in the department:

*Hi Penny*

*Marked my very last essay ( ...Oh frabjous day! Calloo! Callay!<sup>51</sup>) and then found myself whipping through your very engaging discourse although had planned to switch off and go home. I found parts of it giggle inducing, doubtless because it's me and [ ... ] you're talking about as G and M! Perhaps it should be MM - Marxist Mother!*

*It looks as if, thanks to you, [D1's] 'taxi-rank analysis' will go down in history. You do write nicely. Suitably scholarly but very human. Makes a nice change from the dry, boring stuff.*

*If you want more comment, let me know. I have a few days to catch my breath before exam marking starts.*

*'M'*

My first incursion into "studying up" (Nader, 1972) had been extremely taxing but I understood this friendly email as a 'reward' of sorts, especially in its serendipitous reference to Alice in *Through the Looking-Glass*. Although the paper was 'giggle-inducing' and 'nicely written', the lecturer had recognised herself and her department in the ethnographic portrait I had drawn. I had been granted insight into the exhausting task of teaching the 'taxi-rank analysts' and I was grateful for the rigour and generosity that all the lecturers in this department had displayed in developing an AD 'outsider' in her research into the teaching of their discipline. I had travelled some distance from the marked silence with which the lecturers in the Social Science discipline at Rhodes University had greeted the somewhat callow sermonising (in the name of 'criticality') that I had offered them in my Masters thesis and in the first paper I had written. Grant (2007: 42) meditates on the nature of the relationship between the academic developer and the colleagues with whom she works, asking: "*How are we to be together?*" [my italics]. At least I had started to ask this question.

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<sup>51</sup> This is a quotation from the 'Jabbawocky' poem in Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass* ([1871]/2010). 'M' has wryly consented to allow me to quote this email.

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When Alice is summoned to give evidence at the trial of the Knave of Hearts in the final scene of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, she is growing to her full size again and confidently speaks out in defiance of the vacillating Red King and the vindictive Red Queen.

'Let the jury consider their verdict,' the King said, for about the twentieth time that day.

'No, No!' said the Queen. 'Sentence first, verdict afterwards.'

'Stuff and nonsense!' said Alice loudly. 'The idea of having the sentence first!'

'Hold your tongue!' said the Queen, turning purple.

'I won't!' said Alice.

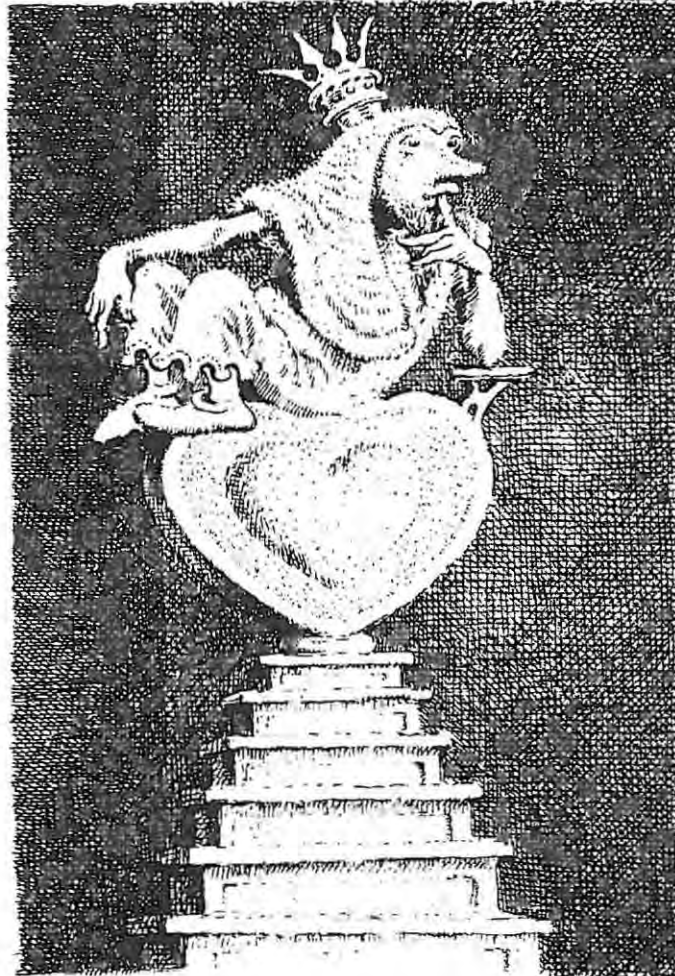
'Off with her head!' the Queen shouted at the top of her voice. Nobody moved.

'Who cares for you?' said Alice, (she had grown to her full size by this time.) 'You're nothing but a pack of cards!' (Carroll, [1868]/2010: 166).

Although the cycle of research papers presented in this chapter are artefacts of a 'historical Me', and Alice finally recognises them as "nothing but a pack of cards" (ibid), the 'present I' can meditate on a systematic account of adventuring in AD research that is now on record. Like Alice's adventures, mine have been presented episodically, one after the other. Though not as bizarre as hers, my own adventures have been "complex and messy" (Shay, in press: 9) although in the process of narration, they have come to seem less so and 'plot' has become much clearer. Like Alice, I have sustained a constant inner conversation in response to intimidating or unaccountable phenomena. Like Alice, I can finally locate an independent researcher-voice: I too can say "Stuff and nonsense!", "Who cares ...?" or "I won't!" if need be, as well as any other more nuanced claims or observations I may wish to make. Chapter 4 has put together a careful memorandum of the Actual and the Empirical in this 'history-within-a-history'. I now, at last, have "somewhere to stand" (Carter and New, 2004: 4). I am finally in a position to infer what must have been the case for this research journey to have unfolded as it did. I hope thereby to make much more important inferences concerning the kinds of material, cultural and agential resources that must be in place for *our* research journeys, as an AD community, to reach significant, emancipatory knowledge in our field. Thereafter a hopefully more rational and humane 'verdict' than the one pronounced by the Red Queen might be advanced.

## Chapter 5

### 'What must be the case': Identifying the transfactual conditions of emergence



"'Let the jury consider their verdict,' the King said, for about the twentieth time that day" (Carroll: [1865] 2010: 166).

"Basically ... autoethnography is only useful as an 'in' to a broader analysis of a cultural situation: when the 'auto' dominates, the 'ethno' goes to hell!" (L. Harrison, Email communication: September, 2011).

"We have a certain phenomenon or a position which someone is holding. Let's see what must be the case for that phenomenon or position to be possible" (Bhaskar, and Callinicos, 2003: 98).

## 5.1 Introduction

The 'phenomenon' of the personal research history that I have described in the previous chapter is, in itself, a marginal one, but it becomes more instructive when linked to narratives in the AD movement in South Africa which was, in its turn, closely linked with the last 30 years of South African history. It is to these much wider narratives that I now turn in order to locate the transfactual mechanisms that must have been in place for the phenomenon to have been possible. Realist explanations of causation rely on the 'DREI' principle: "by *description* of significant features [of the case], *retroduction* to possible causes, *elimination* of alternatives and *identification* of the generative mechanism or causal structure at work" (Bhaskar, 1998: xvii). The previous chapter has described the significant features of the case and this chapter will trace and unpack causation. By eliminating alternative explanations, I hope to reach a decisive 'verdict' in the identification of the generative mechanisms that were at work under the surface of the apparent features of this history, including those that were *not* activated in my case. I have explained in Section 2.3.10 that in Bhaskar's dialectical realism absence or negation are features of reality (whether material or non-material) and they are also causal mechanisms and therefore able to contribute to the occurrences or absences of events.

The mostly practiced-based, student-focussed research that I conducted during the 2000s was preceded and conditioned by a rich vein of research activities amongst a small cadre of AD professionals in universities across the country: some sites were especially innovative and productive at particular stages, as I will show. I have explained that what had started as informal movements associated with SAAAD and SAARDHE during the 1980s, became a diverse, loosely structured 'constellation' of interconnected communities of practice (1998) during the 1990s. The early South African AD community had intersected with issues in national democratic transformation, the broad socio-economic shifts of the 1990s and with national debates about the purposes of a newly-envisioned higher education sector for the post-apartheid state. They had participated in one of the most important social agendas faced by the ANC government as it came to power, that is, the "formidable challenge of pursuing economic development ... social equity and the extension and deepening of democracy *simultaneously*" (Badat, 2007: 7). Because of the uniquely South African

patterning of advantage and disadvantage based on race – systematically and deliberately pursued by the apartheid educational planners for over 50 years – issues of redress and transformation are particularly urgent in the post-apartheid HE context. I would argue that AD's most important role in South African universities has been (and still is) in the theorisation and implementation of the best ways in which this transformatory agenda might be advanced. So AD in South Africa has had an unusually strong *normative* orientation. In Maton's analysis of fields which I introduced in Chapter 1, AD could be characterised as an "axiological cosmology" which involves the moral charging of practices and beliefs in the field (2011: 5). However, I explain in this chapter that certain key actors and agents in the movement drove its epistemological project at different times.

In Chapter 3 I described the ideological and theoretical turns in the AD field in South Africa over 30 years and how these were enacted in three main forms of student and institutional support. But these 'local' turns were responsive to international ones, for example, in the theorising of language and literacy (Gee, 1999), in the place and nature of universities in a globalised society, and in the purposes of academic research in an increasingly competitive 'knowledge economy' (Boud and Lee, 2009). All these issues were arising within universities internationally at the turn of the millennium. AD has emerged in "a time of transformations and ruptures" (Walker, 2002: 3) and has been deeply implicated in and responsive to them. Some AD intellectuals have played a significant role in influencing and addressing these debates and in raising awareness of them in local academic contexts.

AD in South Africa has been a small, fragile and fragmented group, often depleted and discouraged by wider forces and pressures, but despite periods of crisis<sup>52</sup> and stasis, I believe that it has been able to sustain – sometimes tenuously – a critical, intellectual presence in our universities in the longer term. The analysis below I draws attention to the role played by social actors and communities as they responded to new cultural registers and new discourses in the political or economic spheres, thereby activating, advancing or resisting the potentialities for different ways of being and knowing in the South African academy. It is within the broad, historical shifts and turns, (national and

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<sup>52</sup> Perhaps the most traumatic of these crises was the collapse of SAAAD in 1998. But in the same year the UWC ADC unit was finally disbanded and there were extensive job losses in the profession.

international, political and economic, cultural and intellectual), that I will now attempt to find the particular mechanisms that informed and shaped the field to which I am affiliated and in which as a novice researcher 10 years ago I began to read and write.

Using Archer's social ontology, I will abstract the mechanisms I seek from within three strata that I understand as making up the Real domain in this study:

1) the structural or material domain – in which I will locate the emergent properties in the economic and political conditions (including policies) that were most pertinent in shaping AD;

(2) the cultural domain – in which I will consider the emergent properties of various ideologies, theories and discourses that were most influential in AD practice and research in SA;

(3) the agential domain in which I will describe the impact of actors or corporate agents who, though caught up within larger flows of history and ideas, made independent, sometimes oppositional, choices and decisions.

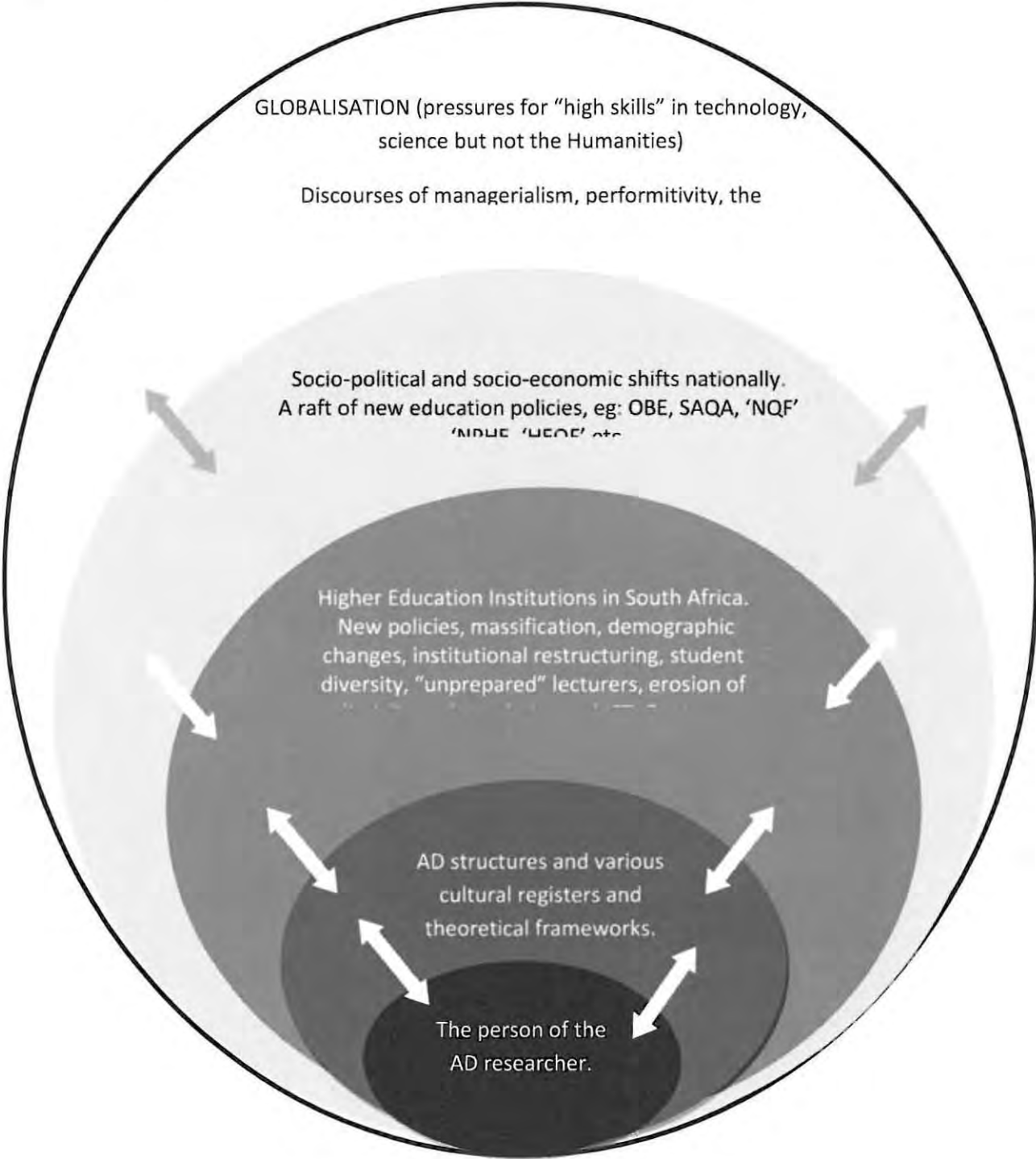
I have explained in Section 3.3.4 that in order to explicate the emergent properties of *people* in their concerns and choices I called on the memories of a number of those whose careers in AD stretch back to the early 1990s – some even before that. The following people were consulted: Brenda Leibowitz, Chrissie Boughey, Lynn Quinn, Kevin Williams, Carol Thomson, Shelley Barnsley, Fiona Jackson, Kathy Luckett and, latterly, Sarah Murray. Bruce Kloot also shared his insights into the profession on the basis of his recently completed doctoral study on the history of AD at two universities – UCT and SU. Several of these colleagues have kindly read this chapter, checked my analysis and suggested some changes. Others in the profession such as Judith Reynolds and Billy Meyer have commented extensively as 'critical friends', adding further detail and, at times, offering alternative readings of the events and experiences that we shared. Liz Harrison also offered constructive advice on the use of autoethnography in doctoral work and I include one of her remarks at the head of this chapter. Although these 'Personal Communications' are not the main data source for this thesis, they have enriched, refined and strengthened the accounts that follow, especially in the final sections of this chapter in which I explore the agential domain.

In Table 3 (on the next page) I posit the range of *potential* mechanisms that I believe to have been formative in the emergence of research in the field although, as I explained in Section 3.4, the range I present is necessarily constrained by the limitations of the research topic: I am not offering a comprehensive history of research in South African AD. Even from within the range I identify, I need to select the mechanisms that were most pertinent to the phenomenon of my own emergence. I have needed to take the case of a teacher of 'academic literacy' in two distinctly different institutions over the period under review, and enquire into the complex interactions amongst sets of material conditions, cultural registers and agential choices that were shaping one particular set of research events.

The strata that I present in Table 3 appear reified for diagrammatic convenience, but the properties within each of them cannot simply be *aggregated* as factors in the case. Their relation of *composition* or *configuration* is the significant issue (Elder-Vass, 2007: 321). Emergence is *relational* (Carter and New, 2004: 14) and *synchronic* (Elder-Vass, 2007: 321). For example, dominant discourses (within the cultural domain) were influential in policy development (in the structural domain); policies (in the structural domain) constrained personal emergent properties (in the agential domain) and so on. All these elements were all "reciprocally interactive" taking the form of "non-linear feedbacks" operating in "staggered rhythms" (Harvey, 2002: 176). However, Table 3 is an attempt to tease out the strata and at least begin a systematic deconstruction of causation. It uses a number of abbreviations so I recommend that readers consult the Abbreviations section starting on page iix.



Another way of graphically conceptualising the ways in which the person of the researcher in AD is impacted by interacting properties and powers in different strata is expressed in Figure 1 below.



**Figure 1: Strata in researcher emergence**

## 5.2 Generative mechanisms in structural/material domain

### 5.2.1 National education policy shifts

Kraak (2001) has traced some of the complex socio-economic and socio-political dynamics that influenced legislation in the South African higher education sector from the early 1990s. I briefly outlined some of these important policy developments in Chapter 3 but I will now explore the deeper mechanisms that drove them, link them to particular effects on AD, and thereafter explain their direct or indirect impact on AD research including my own. Equally interesting are the marked absences of some of these structural mechanisms in my own story. Some were never actualised at all. As Bhaskar has explained: "Tendencies may be possessed unexercised, exercised unrealized, and realized unperceived (or undetected) by men" (1998: 77).

During the early 1990s, during the time of the negotiated political settlement, building consensus was a predominant value, but as the decade wore on, there were significant disagreements amongst those responsible for reconstituting higher education for the post-apartheid state. These conflicts were constituted around issues such as the extent to which globalisation and the forces of economic modernisation should be allowed to predominate, the importance of equity and the ways in which redress might proceed, or whether more or less interventionist or developmental approaches might be adopted in relation to higher education (Kraak, 2001: 85). Kraak identifies several competing discourses that impacted on the nature of the policies that emerged: I will refer to *two* of these as having particular relevance as mechanisms in the shaping of AD. The first is the 'high skills' (or 'economic rationalist') discourse and the second is the 'popular democratic' discourse (ibid: 86). Thus there were tensions between the need for "social equity", on the one hand, and "economic development" on the other (Badat, 2007: 7). But this was probably an untenable ambition because, as Badat and others argued at the time of the democratic transition, international experience had shown that favouring one goal (eg., development) usually jeopardizes the other (eg., equity) (1994, in Kraak, 2001: 95). Badat made a case for a *balanced* approach that accommodates both equity and development, seeing them as "parallel rather than correlative objectives" (ibid).

In 1989, as the Eastern bloc was collapsing, the apartheid regime was also surrendering to the idea of negotiated settlement in the context of civil and economic collapse. In the

national mood of political compromise and reconciliation, Kraak says, the ANC shifted its social and economic policy propositions “from left-socialist formulations to what at best can be described as social democratic and at worst neo-liberal thinking” (ibid: 88). Soon after taking power, there was the release of the conservative, monetarist ‘Growth, Employment and Redistribution’ (GEAR) strategy to replace the former ‘Reconstruction and Development Programme’ (RDP) that had characterised the ANC’s earlier more socialist macro-economic position<sup>53</sup>.

Contingent on this dramatic shift in economic policy was the emergence of the ‘high skills’ thesis which was drawn from international discourses relating to the economic imperatives of globalisation. This thesis is also known (more pejoratively) as ‘economic rationalisation’ and Kraak sets it against the more radical, ‘popular democratic’ values of the anti-apartheid struggle (2001: 88). Globalisation has impacted higher education in South Africa in ways that are far too complex to determine at this stage but Kraak refers to Australian critiques that “dismiss its impact as the new-liberal or neo-right subjugation of the educational process to the dictates of the market and the accentuation of existing social inequalities” (ibid: 90). However, the ANC’s adoption of the ‘high skills’ discourse was a strategic one, based in a desire to find “the most optimal way of taking power and adapting to globalisation on terms beneficial to the working class and the poor” (ibid). Thus the National Education Policy Initiative (NEPI) documents of 1992 and 1993, and the Higher Education and Training White Paper (1997) interlinked educational reform to macro-economic and labour market reforms in pursuit of a competitive, high skills future for South Africa.

The high skills discourse has been associated with a tendency to single, unified and integrated regulatory frameworks for education as opposed to more traditionally elitist, ‘old order’, stratified systems. Thus in South Africa a unified model was proposed and passed in the form of the SAQA Act in 1995 and the NQF was set up at the same time. High skills discourses have also been associated with privileging of the ‘STEM’ (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) disciplines in universities at the expense of the Humanities (Hamilton, 2011: 37). Globalisation has imposed new conditions of competitiveness that demand a highly skilled, technologically sophisticated workforce

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<sup>53</sup> This is perhaps explicable in terms of the enormous debts left by the apartheid government which were expected to reach 7% of GDP by 1992/1993 (Moll, 1993: 245) and in response to pressures from the World Bank (Kraak, 2001: 105).

(Kraak, 2001: 89). The fact that my own research was conducted in a Humanities context may have contributed to my own (and institutional) constructions of it as 'marginal' or 'low-profile' research. Two 2011 reports into the state of the Humanities in South African universities<sup>54</sup> highlight "the reduction of the value of the humanities ... and education ... to a utilitarian and market-driven logic that identifies the value of any educational endeavour solely in terms of its direct, discernable benefits or "impacts" in response to existing market demand" (Hamilton, 2011: 36). To illustrate this, amongst the various Access or Foundation programmes offered at UKZN (for example, in Commerce, Engineering or Education), the Science Foundation Programme was always the most stable and well-funded whereas the Humanities programme, for financial and other reasons, was always the least stable, constantly beset by restructuring, shifts in staffing and in Faculty management<sup>55</sup>.

I have explained in Chapter 3 that there were further policy shifts during the 2000s and two, in particular, were of significance in my own story. The National Plan for Higher Education (NPHE) (South Africa, 2001) set up the major institutional mergers of 2004, including the UKZN merger which was to have direct effects on my own research context. In 2000 the first tranche of DoE redress funding for extended programmes became available. Foundation Programme Grants were dependent on compliance with particular criteria: the foundation phase needed to be infused into mainstream studies. UKZN's Humanities Foundation/Access Programme applied for this grant in time for the third tranche of funding (for the period 2007 to 2010) and this policy development generated morphogenesis on the Pietermaritzburg campus of UKZN in the piloting of an Extended Curriculum for the Humanities on that campus. I have shown in Chapter 4 that this, in turn, had notable effects on my own research, shifting my focus from generic matters in the development of 'academic literacy' onto teaching and learning in the discipline of Politics.

All these momentous policy shifts generated radical and dramatic changes across the whole of the HE sector and had a profound impact on the nature of AD work, as I will

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<sup>54</sup> The first report was published by the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAF) (2011) and the second was commissioned by the Minister for Higher Education and Training named 'Charter for Humanities and Social Sciences' (2011).

<sup>55</sup> This view has been confirmed by Barnsley (S. Barnsley, Personal Communication: October, 2011). She has been involved with running the Science Foundation Programme on the Pietermaritzburg campus of UKZN since 1991.

explain below. But in my own case these broader mechanisms went “unrecognized” and largely “unexercised” (Bhaskar, 1998: 77). These were causal absences: my papers are notable for the fact they show little awareness of the broader socio-economic or socio-political context in which I was investigating student learning.

### **5.2.2 Structural shifts in the nature of Academic Development work**

During the 1990s, universities in South Africa were facing massification, major demographic shifts in the student body, institutional restructuring and mergers, diverse levels and kinds of preparedness in students (including linguistic/literacy diversities), the new policy directives (described above), ‘under-prepared’ lecturers, the emergence of new information technologies and the erosion of long-established disciplinary boundaries<sup>56</sup>. In this context, inevitably, the traditional modes of TLA needed to be overhauled. It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that many former AD practitioners began to be deployed in interpreting and mediating these changes. They had resources (some theoretical), practical expertise in teaching ‘underprepared’ students (who had now become a majority phenomenon), useful cross-disciplinary perspectives which they had been developing on the margins of institutions and faculties, as well as strongly-felt commitments to equity and redress – this was a cultural value in the early AD movement in SA (B. Leibowitz, Personal Communication: October, 2011). These qualities and kinds of “intellectual capital” (Mehl, 2002) became complementary conditions generating substantial changes in the nature of the profession.

One could also argue that the same complementary condition was generating morphogenesis of a different kind. AD now had ‘wares’ that had become more marketable. Mehl (at an AD conference at Rhodes University in 2000<sup>57</sup>) argued that AD practitioners had now become the “undisputed experts [...] in assessment and methodologies of instruction”, amongst other areas of scholastic endeavour, suggesting that “It is time for AD to break out of its ivory tower cocoon and market its wares much

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<sup>56</sup> At this time several universities were forming cross-disciplinary ‘Schools’ or ‘Colleges’. For example at UKZN, at the time of the merger in 2004, all languages (except African languages and English Studies), applied linguistics and ‘academic literacy’ and English second language courses were structurally subsumed within a much larger ‘School of Languages’.

<sup>57</sup> This conference was held at Rhodes University in 2000 in an attempt to rebuild the AD community after the collapse of SAAAD in 1998. Quinn and her colleagues from ADC organized the conference. Melanie Walker and Merlyn Mehl gave keynote addresses.

more broadly", even beyond the academy – in companies for example (2002: 24). But AD's gradual shift into 'corridors of power' probably surprised no one as much as the profession itself. Mehl's somewhat cynical suggestion has indeed been taken up. Boughey says that "many Educational Development practitioners are engaged in lucrative consultancies outside of academic life" (2007: 20). Others have continued to advance a Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) within the wider opportunities for transformation that are now available to them.

But the professional transition I have described was by no means smooth or uniform. Some AD staff enjoyed teaching students and retained their identities as 'language specialists' or 'academic literacy' teachers – like me and some of my colleagues – most of these eventually participating in Extended Studies programmes of various kinds. But others became 'advisors' 'consultants', 'officers' or 'directors', demonstrating their adoption of new managerialist discourses<sup>58</sup>. The new professional focus was on activities such as:

1. [the] provision of staff development activities, notably induction/orientations to teaching courses for new academics and training in use of ICT/e-learning
2. engaging in and promoting research in learning and teaching
3. providing leadership for learning and teaching and implementing strategic direction of their institution
4. assisting in the development of new courses.

(Gosling, 2009: iii)<sup>59</sup>.

The extent to which ADCs, or the like, have become involved in quality assurance, or institutional auditing or planning processes more generally, has varied from institution to institution but this became another important new role in the profession (ibid). Grant suggests, however, that this shift to higher-status functions means that an AD identity might now be perceived by others as "either fraudulently academic, or baselessly know-it-all, or servilely a tool of managerialism" (2007: 37). There are certainly risks involved in the uptake of higher-status positions: some in the AD profession (and others from within Education departments) have become "academic barons" (Archer 1988/1996:

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<sup>58</sup> There was a period in the Rhodes University ADC, from 2000 to 2004 when the staff were called 'Teaching and Learning consultants'. Boughey was the 'Director' of the ADC unit and there was even an education 'officer' in the unit.

<sup>59</sup> The Gosling Report (2009) surveyed 19 directors of AD in SA universities. It was commissioned by the leadership forum of HELTASA (Higher Education Learning and Teaching Association of South Africa).

212) with considerable vested interests in maintaining the status quo and their newly privileged status. So the multiple vulnerabilities imposed by the educational ruptures and crises in our country have served to establish the field and offered powerful opportunities for some.

The shift described above represents Volbrecht and Boughey's 'Higher Education Development' phase (2004) that I have already described in Section 3.3.3. An important effect of this development was that AD's higher-profile functions (relating to staff, curricular and institutional development) meant that the profession needed to avoid the 'fraudulently academic' slur and upgrade its qualifications. Therefore, at Rhodes University, for example, Lynn Quinn and Jo-Anne Vorster gained Masters degrees in 2000 and, later on, PhD qualifications in 2006 and 2010 respectively. Chrissie Boughey supervised 11 PhD studies to completion during the years between 2004 and 2010 and between them the Rhodes ADC/CHERTL staff generated four PhDs during the 2000s. This scenario was paralleled in ADCs in other South African universities – for example, in CHED at UCT (C. Boughey, Personal communication: October, 2011). So a new generation of AD intellectuals was reinvigorating the field.

Rhodes University was something of a hub for intellectual activity in AD from the beginning of the 1990s onwards. Later in the chapter I will discuss, for example, the structural affordance of Sarah Murray's 'Masters in 2<sup>nd</sup> Language Teaching' which started up in the early 1990s. The fact of my location within this institution in the early years of my own career was certainly a complementary condition in terms of my own emergence as a researcher. I had access to the new intellectual capital that was being accrued in the field. In the Linguistics department in which I was then located, as well as in the affiliations I had developed with the ADC, I observed research-intensive communities at work. Research was being modelled and discussed, the conduct of research was a norm, and so I was encouraged, even as a teacher on an EAP programme, to be theorised and scholarly about my practice.

Despite substantial structural shifts in the profession more broadly, some universities continued to support the kind of AD work that I did between 2000 and 2010, albeit by means of 'soft' grants and short term contracts. Gosling (2009) reports that of the 19 ADC units that he surveyed only half understood themselves as having a significant role in

student learning, the other half claiming that student learning support was “not in their remit” (2009: iii). The student learning ‘branch’ of the AD profession continued to be somewhat marginalised, less secure and probably less well-paid<sup>60</sup>. In my own context at UKZN from 2005 onwards, there was no sabbatical time for contracted staff in foundation programmes and no institutional support or funding for formally constituted research activities in this field. For example, when I applied for funding to do a PhD in the institution in 2009, my application was refused on the grounds of my contracted status. So this became another structural emergent property (‘SEP’) in my own story: I determined to seek funding elsewhere and eventually I re-registered my PhD at another institution, RU.

Whilst working under these conditions of temporary employment it is not at all surprising that I undertook informal, *ad hoc* action research. When my research partner Dr Billy Meyer and I discovered that we had theoretical differences (see Section 4.2.3) we were simply able to abandon our shared project without any serious consequences. Yet in this context, it should be noted, the informality and volatility of the structures that were specifically *student-centred* (such as the Humanities programme in which I was employed) needs to be set against a much more formally constituted ‘managerialist’ branch of AD. Since 2008 the UTLO at UKZN has subsumed the management of all the AD functions in that institution and it is currently setting up another round of major structural remodelling which will take effect on 1 January 2012 (UKZN, 2011). Teaching and Learning initiatives in that institution seem now to be characterised by top-down, policy-driven approaches: quality assurance, institutional planning, performance management, auditing and monitoring functions of various kinds, all strongly suggesting an ‘efficiency’ model’ of AD<sup>61</sup>.

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<sup>60</sup> I have little large-scale evidence for this claim. But in my personal experience of Access programme budgets at UKZN, contracted staff were certainly paid less well than their tenured equivalents. However in general terms this remains a speculative proposition.

<sup>61</sup> For example, a newly conceived Academic Monitoring Project has recently been launched at this institution, which, according to one of the colleagues that I consulted, was instituted hurriedly “with inadequate research and design time, careful evaluation of already existing offerings and how the different [AD] options could/should relate to each other” (F. Jackson, Personal Communication, November, 2011). All the Access/Foundation programmes are to be disbanded at the end of 2012 when the DoHET Foundation Grants expire and entirely new models for student learning support are currently being conceived (S. Barnsley, Personal Communication: October, 2011).

But Boughey (2007) has argued that even foundation work has been caught up the incursion of market forces into South African higher education. The revised formulas for the funding of foundational work (which I described in Section 3.3.3) link subsidies to more efficient throughput rates. So the willingness to fund student development in the early phase of tertiary learning is “thus symbolic of economic rather than egalitarian concerns” (ibid: 20). However, I argue in the final chapter that there are inherent dangers in the bifurcation of the ‘equity’ and ‘efficiency’ discourses that now characterise the AD project. The ‘splitting off’ of AD’s more intimate engagements with students and the ways in which they learn severs the profession from its epistemological foundations, the ways of knowing it originally developed in close-up research, often generating the rich (though uncomfortable) insights that are available only to the ‘outsiders’ on the peripheries of disciplines and often invisible to ‘insiders’, as we note, for example, in the work of Cecilia Jacobs (Jacobs, 2005).

The two sections above have explored the emergent powers of the various material structures (mostly national, political and economic) that have been pertinent in the emergence of AD as a profession. These wider structures were formative in shifting the nature of AD research and practice, re-constituting it in the specific, bifurcated ways that I have described and these, in turn, help to account for both the ‘presences’ and ‘absences’ in my own research story. In the following sections I will again apply the same realist approaches in identifying the mechanisms generated from within the ideational domain. I will explore the ways of knowing and being that underlie the various kinds of research which have been conducted in our field. These onto-epistemological values generated diverse theories, discourses and ideologies, some making brief, some more sustained appearances in my own projects.

### **5.3 Generative mechanisms in the cultural domain**

#### **5.3.1 Theoretical resources in early AD research**

Over the years AD researchers have drawn from a range of theoretical resources as they have sought to advance novice students’ epistemological access. In the early 1990s some of the ‘thought leaders’ in AD recognised the largely a-theorised nature of AD practice and, like the politicians and economists of the same period, opened themselves up to global intellectual ‘markets’ in their quest to address both ‘equity’ and ‘efficiency’ in

widening academic access. Inevitably, the newly democratic South Africa, after so many years of intellectual isolation, looked outwards to the (mostly Anglophone) international academy for the ideas or theories that could help it to make sense of the educational imperatives of the new dispensation.

In Sections 3.3.1 to 3.3.3 I have already described the main theoretical ‘conjunctures’ in the South African AD movement and the kinds of student or institutional support structures with which they became associated. To recap, very briefly:

1. The Academic Support discourse drew on popular rather than academic writers, (such as Buzan or de Bono) and on ideas based in the ‘ELT industry’ with its burgeoning market of textbooks and learning materials. Other ideas that informed this phase focused on the resources of *individual* learners, in their intrinsic intelligence or motivation. Language was understood as a neutral “instrument of communication” – an *autonomous* model of literacy. It was driven by the ‘common sense’ idea that all that those termed ‘2<sup>nd</sup> language’ students needed for academic success was ‘to get more English’ and this could be provided in adjunct language classes. Those who began to theorise the field were often Applied Linguists. AD practitioners were understood as essentially ‘language specialists’ or, later on, teachers of a unitary kind of ‘academic literacy’.
2. In the Academic Development phase, there were attempts to ground AS initiatives in stronger epistemological foundations. Some early efforts were based in cognitive psychology. The ‘language deficit’ discourse was challenged by work in the New Literacy Studies which was, in itself, part of a much wider ‘social turn’ away from the focus on individuals and their “private minds” into understandings of language and literacy as socio-cultural practices (Gee, 1999). Thus there were moves to an *ideological* conception of literacy. During the 1990s and early 2000s the NLS, as well as other ‘social’ understandings of language and learning, underpinned the more substantial AD research during that time. However AD often retained its ‘common sense’ origins and liberal or individualistic ideologies.
3. Other theorists who were influential in AD were: Bourdieu and the concept of ‘cultural capital’; Vygotsky and the ‘Zone of Proximal Development’; Geisler’s work in rhetorical studies; Halliday and Systemic Functional Linguistics: Genre Theory in the work of Martin, Rothery and Stephenson, Macken and Slade and others; Cummins and Swain’s distinction between ‘BICS’ (Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills) and ‘CALP’ (Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency); Fairclough and CDA; North American approaches to the teaching of writing and composition, such as in Faigley, Johns, and Elbow including conceptions of process writing and free writing some of which became orthodoxies of AD’s pedagogical practice.

Traces of all these theorists and theories can be discerned throughout the mostly informal, largely unpublished (or locally published) ‘oeuvre’ that represents the body of

AD research work conducted during the 1990s and into the early 2000s. This early AD research was often published in SAAAD's Conference Proceedings or in local journals or publications such as 'ASPECTS', 'AD Dialogues', 'AD Issues' and 'Discourse' all of which had a relatively short lifespan during the 1990s. Fortunately for this study, Boughey recorded much of the history of this research work in her Human Sciences Research Council report, *Lessons learned from Academic Development movement in South African higher education and their relevance for student support initiatives in the FET college sector* (2005). Henceforth, I will refer to this very substantial and detailed body of work as 'Lessons Learned'. During 2004 she was putting on record many of the brave and innovative early AD projects and 'voices', most of which would now be lost or forgotten either because the fragility of the forms in which they tended to appear or because of the inherent structural instability of professional positions in AD. Quoting almost randomly from the Reference List from the first half of Boughey's *Lessons Learned* report, I can demonstrate the range, richness, yet informality of much of this early AD research. I have selected only a small section (from the 'L's' and 'M's') to demonstrate this point.

- Liebowitz, B. 1994. 'A revealing correspondence: research and students' learning and writing in the first year History course.' In M. Walker (ed.) *Curriculum Development: Issues and Cases. AD Dialogues Vol 2*. University of the Western Cape: Bellville.
- Leibowitz, B. & Parkerson, A. 1994. 'The role of the writing centre in challenging practice and policy on writing at the University of the Western Cape.' *Proceedings of the 1994 Conference of the South African Association for Academic Development*. University of Natal 30<sup>th</sup> November – 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1994.
- Macdonald, C. 1990a. *Swimming up the Waterfall: A Study of School-based Learning Experiences*. Final Report of the 'Threshold Project'. HSRC: Pretoria.
- Macdonald, C. 1990b. "How many years do you have?" *English Language Skills Evaluation*. Final report of the 'Threshold Project'. HSRC: Pretoria.
- Mahatey, N. & Kwenaitse, N. 1992. 'The Residence Assistantship Programme: towards a holistic approach to student development.' *Proceedings of the 7<sup>th</sup> Conference of the South African Association for Academic Development*. Port Elizabeth Technikon 3<sup>rd</sup> – 5<sup>th</sup> December 1992.
- Mammen, K.J. 1996. 'Chemistry students' erroneous conceptions of limiting reagent.' *South African Journal of Higher Education* 10(1):188-195.
- Mandew, M. 1993. 'Exploring the notion of 'cultural capital' and its implications for educational development.' *Proceedings of the 1993 Conference of the South African Association for Academic Development*. University of the Western Cape 1<sup>st</sup> – 3<sup>rd</sup> December 1993.
- Manie, A. & Bijker, T. 1994. 'Evaluating the use of information technology (IT) in the Academic Development Programme at UWC. In B. Leibowitz & M.Walker (eds.) *Voices Development and Learning. AD Dialogues Vol. 3*. University of the Western Cape: Bellville.
- Marton, F. & Säljö, R. 1976. 'On qualitative differences in Learning-I: outcome and process.' *British Journal of Educational Psychology* 46(1):4-11.
- Mehl, M. 1988. 'Academic support: developmental giant or academic pauper?' *South African Journal of Higher Education* 2(1): 17-20.
- Mentis, M. & Frelick, S. 1993. 'Teaching thinking and thinking teaching: adaptations of Feuerstein's cognitive theories in a university setting.' *South African Journal of Higher Education* 7(1):101-109.
- Mitchell, L. 1997. *Working with Arguments*. Durban: University of Durban-Westville Press.

- Motha, C. & May, M. 1996. 'Towards improving students' academic writing: a joint venture with academic mainstream.' *Proceedings of the 11<sup>th</sup> National Conference of the South African Association for Academic Development*. University of Fort Hare 27<sup>th</sup> – 29<sup>th</sup> November 1996.
- Moulder, J. 1991. 'Remedial education programmes: miracle of failure?' *South African Journal of Higher Education* 5(1):5-10.
- Moyo, C., Donn, G. & Hounsell, D. 1997. *Academic Development and Strategic Change in South Africa: The SAAAD Needs Assessment and Audit of Academic Development*. South African Association for Academic Development: Braamfontein.
- Mphahlele, M.K., Green, G., Huddle, P., Mahoana, P., Ncube, C., Ogude, A., Pinto, D., Ramsden, J., Rollnick, M. & White, M. 1994. 'Tutor development through workshop delivery.' *Proceedings of the 1994 Conference of the South African Association for Academic Development*. University of Natal 30<sup>th</sup> November – 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1994.

(Boughey, 2005: 48–50).

Some of this work has been influential and enduring, such as McDonald's Threshold Project (1990a and 1990b) which used Cummins and Swain in a study of the effects of the use of English as an additional language in developing school literacies in Botswana. In the quotation above Marton and Säljö (1976) represent the international perspectives and theories that AD was drawing on, but other international researchers are referenced elsewhere on the *Lessons Learned* lists – names such as Halliday, Bourdieu, Geisler, Heath, Phillipson and Biggs appear. But my impression of the AD research community in the 1990s was that it was self-referential, ebullient, optimistic, reflexive, exploratory, inclusive, collaborative and mostly – but not entirely – practice-based. There is the sense of a vibrant (though unsophisticated and uneven) indigenous academic community. Amongst those in the list above there were more sophisticated local voices such as those of Mehl and Moulder who were obviously adopting a meta-perspective on the AS paradigm and critically interrogating it. The final reference suggests that new emergent researchers were working with more experienced ones (Rollnick in this case) and were being actively mentored.

Leibowitz describes the early SAAAD conferences as "*full of missionary zeal*"; "*there were no key note addresses – no 'wows' from overseas*" (B. Leibowitz, Personal communication: October, 2011). Jackson describes them as "*a very constructive space ... a forum where many contributors worked hard to develop self-reflexive and institutional understandings, [shifting] away from deficit constructions of students, to analyses of institutional deficits*" (F. Jackson, Personal communication: November, 2011). Almost all the AD professionals I consulted recalled the excitement and fervour of these early conferences. SAAAD, before its demise in 1998, seems to have been a developmental space for the new and relatively under-qualified AD profession.

Boughey, however, does mention one “*wow*’ *from overseas*” from this period. Peggy Nightingale, who wrote a chapter for *Literacy by Degrees*, visited the community and gave workshops in the mid-1990s (C. Boughey, Personal communication: October, 2011). At one SAALA<sup>62</sup> conference at the University of Zululand in 1996 Fox, Baker and Clay were key note speakers. As members of the ‘New London Group’ they would also probably qualify as “*wows*’ *from overseas*”. Their work was affiliated to the New Literacies movement and their presentation at this conference was entitled *Literacies for the Future* (Fox, Baker and Clay, 1996: 70–81).

It is little wonder, perhaps, that as I entered the ‘rank and file’ of the AD community in 2000, I adopted something of the spirit of this lively and relatively informal research culture. It seems research into one’s own practice was common and this was not necessarily a ‘high stakes’ commitment. Grassroots action research in which one might evaluate a classroom initiative with a colleague was a norm. For me, at least initially, this was a complementary condition, a generative mechanism underlying the design of Events 2, 3 and 4 (see Appendices B, C and D). If my earlier research papers had been written ten years earlier I have no doubt that they would have been published, like many of those in the list above, in Conference Proceedings.

There is a noteworthy absence of ‘hard theory’ in the full reference list of Boughey’s *Lessons Learned* report. Boughey agrees that: “*soft theory was there but not hard theory*” (C. Boughey, Personal communication: October, 2011). The post-structuralists, such as Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard or Barthes, and the Critical or Social Theorists, such as Habermas or Giddens, are nowhere to be seen on Boughey’s *Lessons Learned* lists although these were powerful figures in the international academy during the 1980s and ‘90s as I have explained in Chapter 2. Bernstein also seems to be absent<sup>63</sup>. Bourdieu is an exception and his theories of habitus, class and capital are often quoted in the AD research community in South Africa, although Kloot, quoting Reay (2004), points out that these references may often have been “*Bourdieu as hairspray*” (B. Kloot, Personal communication: November, 2011). The generative mechanism underlying this absence could reside in the fact that the AD community did not identify itself as a fully *academic*

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<sup>62</sup> SAALA and SAAAD were closely linked professional bodies at this time demonstrating AD’s very close early affiliations with Applied Linguistics in this country.

<sup>63</sup> However, Murray says that the Masters in Second Language Teaching program that she ran in the Education Department at RU during the 1990s *did* use Bernstein’s theories (S. Murray, Personal communication: April, 2012).

profession in its early days, nor was it constructed as such in its institutions. More commonly it characterised itself as a community of education activists within a broadly normative, equity-driven project on the fringes of the academy – a field with an “axiological cosmology” (Maton, 2011: 7). AD’s ‘thought leaders’ were often attempting to drive the field towards an “epistemological cosmology” (ibid) – but not always successfully.

Only very recently has AD come to be understood as a fully academic profession. A few have been granted identities as full ‘professors’<sup>64</sup> – those who profess a particular body of knowledge, that is, scholarship within the field of ‘Higher Education Studies’ or SoTL. However, this has not been the case across all universities: many AD communities are retaining their ‘consultancy’ or ‘managerial’ identities. Yet others in the field cling to their identities as *teachers* rather than lecturers or intellectuals<sup>65</sup>. It is still to be ascertained whether there will be a broader, national shift in this regard. Many in the profession may not wish for such a shift – their vested interests are better served in their roles as ‘TLA bureaucrats’ where they may have considerable agency. Others have little agency to change their lot: they are ‘just teachers’, simply hoping that their contracts will be renewed. This latter group would represent the “masses” in a Social Realist analysis (Archer, 1988/1996: 215).

Another generative mechanism underlying the general absence of *formal* Critical or Social Theory could be located in AD’s theoretical roots in language and literacy development. So the earlier, better-theorised AD researchers drew heavily on work related to linguistics, applied linguistics, or rhetorical studies. The first phases of AD in South Africa only a few in the profession understood themselves as needing to engage with the sociologists or philosophers of education and they might have turned, for example, to Bourdieu – as ‘*hairspray*’ or not. Wally Morrow was one of the few local, trained philosophers who addressed the AD field in this country. He was an educational philosopher first at UWC (where he was Dean of Education) then at UPE (now NMMU) during the 1990s and 2000s and his notion of ‘epistemological access’, which appeared

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<sup>64</sup> Boughey became a full ‘professor’ in 2006 but was initially not allowed to use the title on the grounds that she was not ‘professing’ a discipline as such (C. Boughey, Personal communication: October, 2011).

<sup>65</sup> Reynolds, who works in the Extended Studies programme at RU has endorsed this claim, recalling a submission for a recent Extended Studies conference held at RU which explicitly claimed that “people working in Extended Programmes should be committed teachers and not research professors” (J. Reynolds, Personal communication: November, 2011).

in a short 3-page article in 'AD Issues' at a critical moment of national change in 1993, became a reverberating, generative idea in the AD community for almost 20 years.

Although Critical and Social Theory, as such, are not directly observable in the broader research history, there are nevertheless many strongly (lower-case) 'critical' features in the body of AD work. After all, the New Literacies is a broadly critical tradition, drawing in part on the work of Foucault and on the 'linguistic turn' generated by post-structuralist thought; Fairclough and CDA were used, for example, in some of the AD research done at UCT in the 1990s, as I will explain below, and Quinn and McKenna's PhD studies used CDA (2006 and 2004a); Walker was an advocate of critical action research based in the work of Carr and Kemmis (see Walker, 2002); Janks did extensive and original work in critical pedagogies (see Janks, 2000). Critical ethnographers, like Carspecken, made appearances (even in my own Masters thesis). Besides, AD's early structural positioning on the margins of powerful academic institutions offered unique insights into its hegemonic practices and constructions, as McKenna's PhD thesis (2004a), for example, has so clearly demonstrated. Thus I, and many others in the community, were inclined to construct ourselves as 'critical' or 'emancipatory' researchers, however naïve some of these claims might have been.

### **5.3.2 Theoretical resources for the Higher Education Development phase of AD research**

Higher Education Studies, as an emergent discipline, is now turning to different kinds of theoretical resources and new ways of knowing and being. It is no longer a predominantly language-focused field although, given the inherent diversity in literacies and inequities in the kinds of education provision in the secondary school sector in South Africa, AD will surely need to continue to draw on literacy and language theories, especially for its staff development programmes (L. Quinn, Personal communication: October, 2011). But in its new roles AD has needed to understand disciplinarity, social change, policy formation, curriculum theory and institutional structuring or planning. It has needed substantive theoretical resources for the task of working alongside peers in the scholarship of teaching and learning. So it has needed to take an onto-epistemological turn, and in some communities it is doing so. Quinn describes just such a turn during a period from her own PhD journey when she was in search of meta-theoretical foundations on which to build

her thesis. Her phenomenon was the emergence of a staff development programme at RU. She had explored Activity theory for some months, *"but then Kevin<sup>66</sup> starts with all the bloody CR stuff"* and *"I get hooked"* (L. Quinn, Personal communication: October, 2011). This was, I believe, a key moment of morphogenesis in the cultural domain of AD: Williams writes: *"I think it was Lynn's leap of faith into Archer that provided the final stretch across the theoretical chasm, or lacuna, at the time"* (K. Williams, Personal communication: October 2011). Jo-Anne Vorster, in the same community of practice, was studying the phenomenon of the curriculum of a Journalism department in her PhD thesis and she began to draw on Bernstein and Maton – a pioneering turn<sup>67</sup> within the AD system. UCT was taking a 'Bernsteinian' turn at the same time (K. Williams, Personal communication, October 2011). All these theorists – and others such as Martha Nussbaum – are now being used in various PhD studies that are part of the 2-year-old PhD in HE Studies group which is based in CHERTL at RU. However, it is important to point out that the turn to realist philosophy or to realist social theories may never become a general theoretical trend in the constellation of AD communities. These may be reifications that come to characterise only a few interconnected communities of practice.

## **5.4 Generative mechanisms in the agential domain**

### **5.4.1 Some caveats**

The part played by reflexive social actors in the theoretical history of AD has already been noted in several instances in the section above. I have explained earlier in this chapter that the domains of structure, culture and agency are highly relational and interactive and it often seems impossible to discuss them separately. Nonetheless, to avoid the "fallacy of conflation" (Archer, 2000: 5–6) this final section of the chapter will attempt a particular focus on *agency* in the unfolding narratives of AD in this country. I have explained that I cannot explore the socio-cultural interactions of *all* the key social actors and corporate agents in almost 20 universities over the past 30 years can only record some of the influential people and communities, mostly those who impacted my own thinking and practice. I am well aware of the personal bias in what follows and

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<sup>66</sup> 'Kevin' is Dr Kevin Williams who did indeed introduce Critical Realism to the AD community of practice at RU. I will describe his agency in the next section.

<sup>67</sup> Although Bernstein was not 'new' in Departments of Education, he does not appear to have been much used in AD until this point.

others in the 'constellation' of AD in South African universities will remember different people and communities as significant. This section is, then, is a *proposal*, a tentative mapping out of roles played by some of the salient actors and agencies in AD and a more comprehensive and objective investigation awaits a post-doctoral time, the period which Grant describes as "The mourning after ... the strange 'time of thesis'" (2007: 35).

As I have been reading and writing about the structural and ideological shifts in AD in South Africa, I have pondered the names I have encountered, asking myself such questions as: 'Who were Badsha, N and Walker, M?'; 'Who were Vilakazi and Tema, (1985)?'; 'Why did Starfield stop publishing?'; 'What happened to Wally Morrow?'; 'Where did they come from, and where did they go?' Many of these researchers were 'thought leaders' in the field of AD and, very often, I had stored photocopied readings of their articles in dusty boxes for many years. At times, during the writing of this dissertation, I shuffled through the piles, seeking out memory traces, conducting internal conversations: 'Who gave me this reading? When was it? Shall I throw it out now? I wonder...' After the manner of that arch meta-reflexive, Alice, I have often thought "CURIOUSER AND CURIOUSER" (Carroll, [1865]/2010: 15). One of the curiosities of AD is that it has been a highly mobile and fragmented profession, and there have been many who, under frustrating and disheartening conditions, have become "migrants" in Archer's terms (1988/1996): they have moved to other countries, to jobs in government, to NGOs, to more secure disciplinary or administrative environments in academia – or, quite simply, funding for their contracted posts has run out, as in my own case. So much of this history is untraceable and often some quite prominent 'voices' in the profession seem to fall suddenly, unaccountably silent.

#### **5.4.2 Agency in the early AD movement: UWC, UND and RU**

It is important to highlight that AD as *an agent of systemic change* in South African HE started in the HBIs (such as UWC and UNIBO) and the agents who first voiced the idea of radical change (rather than the 'band aid', bridging initiatives that were starting up in the liberal HWI universities at the time) were also black. For example, Vilakazi and Tema, Mehl and Ndebele (who was later VC at UCT) laid down this 'conceptual gauntlet' from the mid to late 1980s, challenging the notion that the problem was with individual students or '2<sup>nd</sup> language' students who didn't have quite enough English or 'academic literacy' to

cope in academia: the problem was rather structural and systemic. The HBIs also started SAAAD and only later were they joined by others in AD from the HWIs. Mehl and Ndebele were both at UWC during the late 1980s and 1990s. Boughey says that when she arrived at UWC in 1988 *“The ADC was just starting up and was staffed with radical, left-wing intellectuals who had been involved in the struggle<sup>68</sup> and who were working with the idea of transformation”* (C. Boughey, Personal communication: October, 2011).

The ADC at UWC during what Kraak has called the “pre-‘taking of power’ era” (1988–1994) era was clearly an important, generative community of practice which developed a high level of corporate agency. Leibowitz and Boughey who were both employed at this institution from the late 1980s, remember *“the comrades”* – Narend Bajnath, Nasima Badsha, Uta Lehmann, Marcella Naidoo and others. Saleem Badat (now VC at RU) was in the policy unit at UWC at that time and would later become an important figure in HE policy development during the 1990s. Melanie Walker, Paula Ensor, Uta Lehmann and Terry Volbrecht were passionately advancing the epistemological project of AD (C. Boughey, Personal communication: October, 2011). Boughey recalls that Walker was adamant that the small new ADC community should conduct original research and ‘get theorised’.

*We had weekly research development sessions where we worked with an article on, say, interviewing or hermeneutics or something like that. Paula Ensor was a notable voice in these research development sessions. Strangely, I had a Master’s at that stage but was still required to attend those sessions as a ‘novice’ in the field* (Boughey, *ibid*).

Boughey has shown me a collection of the papers emanating from those Monday afternoon research seminars: a large cardboard box of artefacts of an earlier time: typewritten, cyclostyled paper presentations from between 1991 and 1993 (some with coffee mug stains) on topics as varied as ‘Maintaining domination through language’ (Ndebele, 1993), ‘Large group teaching’ (Morrow, 1993), ‘Transformative possibilities in using computers in education’ (Manie, 1992) or ‘Research-based development: A case study in educational change in a university setting’ (Walker, 1992) – the latter, interestingly, references Archer’s early work on national change in education systems (1979). However, Walker was more commonly an advocate of critical action research, using Carr and Kemmis – a cultural register that probably affected my own research decisions 15 years later, albeit indirectly and unconsciously. Boughey began to use Cummins and Swain in

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<sup>68</sup> The ‘struggle’ here refers to the liberation struggle for the defeat of apartheid.

search of a theory that could challenge the dominant, naturalised notion of students' problems as simply to do with their status as 2<sup>nd</sup> language speakers. Susan Starfield (who was from WITS) was also using Cummins and Swain at this time<sup>69</sup>. Yet others in the UWC community of practice dismissed these theorists as "*a-political*" (B. Leibowitz, Personal communication: October, 2011) illustrating how strong the early AD movement's political agenda was – sometimes at the expense of the epistemological project that Walker, Badsha and others were so deliberately inculcating.

In the early 1990s Volbrecht 'discovered' the New Literacies and Street's conceptions of autonomous/ideological models of literacy. Considering that Gee's *Sociolinguistics and Literacies: Ideology in Discourses* was only published in 1990 and much of the key work in the NLS was yet to come, this was remarkably prescient of Volbrecht<sup>70</sup>. Many, including Boughey, responded enthusiastically to the new register. The NLS was a "politically progressive" turn in which the focus on the social could "unmask the workings of hierarchy, power and social injustice, as well as create more humane ... institutions and communities" (Gee, 1999: 1). It was a reaction against the "cognitive revolution of the 60s and 70s ... in which fact and logic, not affect, society or culture were emphasized" (ibid). So it is not difficult to see how the literacies movement represented a complementary cultural condition in the UWC community. Another innovative idea mooted at UWC in 1992 was that of a course work Academic Development Masters degree<sup>71</sup>. Walker had started to research the idea of such a qualification and was making plans to start a programme in 1994. But at this point, it is sad to note, another kind of agency intervened. The VC of UWC at the time was unsympathetic to the ADC unit and this lively community was gradually disbanded over the 1990s. Walker emigrated to the United Kingdom in 1995. Brenda Leibowitz left UWC in 1998, describing herself as professionally "*depressed and sad ... disenchanting*" (Personal communication, October 2011). She worked at the Department of Education for six years but in 2004 she was called on to help re-constitute a professional body for the AD profession – HELTASA. So fortunately she returned to the field. Boughey moved to the University of Zululand in 1993 where she became something

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<sup>69</sup> I have since discovered what happened to this important early voice in AD: Starfield emigrated to Australia during the 1990s (L. Quinn, Personal communication: October, 2011).

<sup>70</sup> Murray says that the Masters programme she was running at RU during the 1990s also referred to theorists in the NLS.

<sup>71</sup> I have gleaned this information from shifting through Boughey's dusty box entitled 'ADC Seminar Papers'.

of a 'thought leader' herself, taking many of the knowledge and idea she had developed at UWC to the KwaZulu-Natal community and writing her PhD during the mid-1990s.

I have explained that at UND in KwaZulu-Natal during the same period there was a community of educational psychologists who bravely took up the cause of 'theorising AD' – or AS as it was referred to at that time. Dr Anita Craig was an important social actor in this endeavour. The 'Teach-Test-Teach' initiative which this community designed and implemented in KZN in the early 1990s was an attempt to identify the cognitive potential of students who might be able to 'make it' at university despite the fact that their poor schooling had left them with cognitive deficits. Thus the emphasis was on *cognition* rather than *language* in this community of researchers. Although the 'Teach-Test-Teach' initiative "*fizzled out*" later in the 1990s (C. Boughey, Personal communication: October, 2011) the UND community of practice produced a substantial body of research into the conceptualisation of 'under-preparedness' in 'new' students entering 'old' universities. They based their work in Piaget, Bruner, Luria, Feuerstein and Vygotsky, and applied these theorists to the enormous changes occurring in South African HE. Their papers were mostly published in *The South African Journal of Higher Education* in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Boughey, who was a marker for the 'Teach-Text-Teach' tests while she was employed at the University of Zululand, believes that the testing system was an attempt to identify the students' "*thinking patterns*", or their potential for thinking abstractly (*ibid*). However, this programme failed to get established as means of assessing aspiring students' cognitive potential and theories based in education psychology did not become the theoretical foundations for AD more generally – not in South Africa anyway. Apart from the international shifts to more socio-cultural understandings of learning that I have already described, the national, political context of South Africa at the time meant that academics were seeking out theories that could foster the democratic project: it seemed more expedient to conceptualise epistemological access in terms of 'a language problem' rather than 'a cognitive problem', the latter appearing to be uncomfortably reminiscent of apartheid thinking, however unfair this construction of theories based in cognitive psychology might be. My own very brief and superficial turn to cognitivism (see Event 4: Appendix D) – my own Wertsch/Vygotsky as '*hairspray*' project – was curtailed by a sense of insecurity in new epistemological territory and by the fact that I had been schooled in the literacies approach by a prior community of practice. However, it was

fascinating for me to see a mention of Bhaskar amongst the body of 1989 research papers generated by the UND community. Professor Ronnie Miller refers to *The Possibility of Naturalism* (1979) and *Scientific Realism and Human Emancipation* (1986) in his paper *Conceptual issues in theorizing cognition* (1989). These references are merely brief footnotes<sup>72</sup> but Miller, in attempting to understand the interplay of structure and agency and its implications for epistemological access, was clearly exploring theorists beyond the limits of his own discipline of Psychology.

During the period of the early 1990s, there was another important initiative developing at RU under the guidance of Sarah Murray<sup>73</sup>, a Masters programme that was a collaboration between the Education and Linguistics departments. Murray says that she did not herself start up the coursework-based 'Masters in Second Language Teaching' that I refer to, but that it was originally conceived and set up by Applied Linguist Professor Len Lanham as well as by Bill Blunt and Charles Nuttal (S. Murray, Personal communication: April, 2012). Nevertheless, it became a very influential community of practice under Murray's direction and it has had a far-reaching impact, especially on the Cape Town-based AD group, training people like Shelley Angelil-Carter, Moragh Paxton, James Garraway, Rob Moore (who has moved to WITS), and others from RU, such as Lynn Quinn, Helen Alferts (my mentors) and Monica Hendriks. I select here the names of those who worked in HE language-related programmes or initiatives or who later on became foundational in AD's intellectual project in particular contexts.

### 5.4.3 Agency in AD at UCT and CPUT

As UWC's ADC was collapsing during the 1990s the focus shifts, I believe, to corporate agency associated with UCT and CPUT. At UCT, CHED is an 'umbrella' organisation subsuming a variety of different AD projects. Its research and practice have undergone many of the same structural and theoretical shifts that I described in the first sections of this chapter but CHED has been a remarkably stable community from the agential

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<sup>72</sup> Miller's footnote reads: "The relationship between the individual and society is one of the major theoretical preoccupations of social science. A fairly recent account, and attempt to resolve the problem is provided by Bhaskar (1979; 1987) in terms of a transcendental realist approach" (1989: 159).

<sup>73</sup> Murray had been at UNIBO from the mid-1980s. She was part of the early SAAAD movement and remembers the first two SAAAD conferences which were held on campuses in Qwa-Qwa (1985) and Mbabatha (1986) – both venues in ex-'Bantu homelands'. Murray was the only person I consulted who could answer the question: '*Who were Vilakazi and Tema?*' although the paper these sociologists presented at SAAAD in 1985 was ground-breaking at the time and subsequently very often quoted in AD literature in this country.

perspective. Professors Ian Scott and Nan Yeld, Lucia Thesen, Moragh Paxton, Rochelle Kapp, Jeff Jawitz, Rob Moore, Shelley Angelil-Carter, Suellen Shay, Kathy Lockett<sup>74</sup> and David Bond, for example, are all either still at UCT or else have had long careers in that institution. This community published three collections of articles as books during the 1990s. *Access to Success* (1998), edited by Angelil-Carter, features many of the names above and it either uses 'literacies' or CDA frameworks<sup>75</sup>. This UCT book contains some chapters based on Masters research which had been carried out on the RU Masters programme mentioned in the previous section. This book impressed me when I was a novice in AD in 2000 and I remember consulting it often as I made my way in the new profession.

Lockett's 2007 paper introduced me to Social Realism: *The development of agency in first generation learners in higher education: A social realist analysis* prompted me to review my ideas about student learning and generated my first ideas for a doctoral study, as I have explained in Chapter 1<sup>76</sup>.

More recently CHED has conducted large-scale, high-impact research. Scott, Yeld and Hendry's *A Case for Improving Teaching and Learning in South African Higher Education* (2007) is an analysis of the graduation rates of a national cohort of students, all those who registered in tertiary institutions in 2000. This research has powerful effects on HE and in the country generally. It represents the kind of 'bigger picture', quantitative research that AD researchers in this country have generally avoided. Suellen Shay has also led a 'bigger picture' research project into the curriculum of comprehensive universities, using a Bernsteinian framework (in press). This research also has the potential to influence policy and planning in HE. Yeld has been instrumental in setting up the National Benchmark Tests which are helping to standardise and refine admissions policies to tertiary institutions across the country.

The fact that CHED at UCT has been able to sustain capacity, steadily building on maturing intellectual capital in the field, offers us one answer, at least, to Maton's question: "How can we create not only powerful but also influential ideas?" (2011: 1). Another major

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<sup>74</sup> Kathy Lockett moved from UKZN to UCT in early 2005.

<sup>75</sup> All but three of the articles in the 1997 book reference Gee's *Sociolinguistics and Literacies* (1990) and those that don't use Fairclough.

<sup>76</sup> Lockett says she developed an interest in Archer's social theory partly through the agency of Kevin Williams who had moved to UCT in 2005 (K. Lockett: Personal communication: November, 2011).

tertiary institution in Cape Town – CPUT – has also generated a rich vein of AD research, particularly in the work of Christine Winberg (originally at UWC), James Garraway (who has been a strong presence in HELTASA) and Cecilia Jacobs. The latter’s expertise in the NLS and her framing of the relationship between AD practitioners and the mainstream lecturers was very useful to me as I shifted my own researcher’s gaze to the study of teaching and learning in the discipline of Politics (See Events 5 and 6: Appendices E and F).

#### **5.4.4 Agency in Academic Development at RU and UKZN**

I turn now to narratives of agency in the two institutions in which I practiced and conducted research. Apart from Murray’s agency in the Masters programme I have already described, CHERTL at RU (like CHED at UCT) is also a relatively stable, mature community of intellectuals though it is much smaller. Boughey is a key agent in this context and now the ‘Dean of Teaching and Learning’ at RU. AD at RU has developed around more or less coherent sets of concepts and theories in the cultural domain whilst avoiding “cultural embroidery” or “enruttedness” which, as Archer has argued, can promote stasis (1988/1996: 153). During the early 2000s Dr Kevin Williams also became an important ‘thought leader’ in this community. He was employed by CHERTL in 2001 and introduced Bhaskar and Archer’s realist theories to his new colleagues – often over extended coffee breaks in the departmental tearoom where, it seems, he met with some initial resistance (L. Quinn, Personal communication: October, 2011). Williams was a theologian by training (the Theology department at RU had been closed down in 2000) and he was redeployed by CHERTL as a part-time academic development ‘consultant’. His philosophical background, I believe, enabled him to engage with Bhaskar (and later Archer and Sayer) and to promote them in the community. Quinn, Boughey, Vorster and McKenna all started to read in the realist philosophers and this, I believe, has led to something of an ‘ontological turn’ in this community.

The institutional leadership at RU has extended and challenged the AD project and encouraged innovation at different stages – but it has never fundamentally ruptured it. Quinn’s doctoral study – a Social Realist analysis of the genesis of the staff development programme at RU – clearly demonstrates the role of social actors in the process in mediating and activating institutional change. For example, Quinn describes the agency of

the DVC when Boughey became Director of the ADC in 1998 and explains the role that both these social actors played in dramatically refocussing AD practice in the institution (Quinn, 2006). Quinn and Vorster went on to set up a successful staff development programme which has subsequently become a model for other institutions. Since 2005 the Extended Studies Unit has supported student learning within faculty and disciplinary environments but its staff now have permanent positions and full academic status with sabbatical time for research (J. Reynolds, Personal communication: October, 2011). The Dean of Teaching and Learning has oversight of this more student-focused branch of the community which means that AD now has both 'staff-facing' and 'student-facing' aspects and the interlinkages between the two are structurally sustained and mutually enriching.

So after a fairly difficult period of morphogenesis over the early years of the 2000s there is now a fairly stable, theoretically sound and sustainable AD model in the institution. Dr Saleem Badat, the current Vice Chancellor at RU, has strongly promoted the work of CHERTL, especially its research agenda<sup>77</sup>, taking some budgetary risks in the process. Hence the appointment of Sioux McKenna to establish the PhD in HE programme, undoubtedly a generative mechanism in my own emergence as a scholar and hopefully for many others in future years.

In terms of my own personal agency, the opportunity to live, work and participate within a reflexive community of AD practitioners over the year in which I have been writing this dissertation has had an immeasurable impact on the direction that it has taken as well as on any claims to 'truth' or 'validity' that it can ultimately make. The community has been involved with this study: they have read sections, commented, regulated, challenged, listened, engaged, suggested readings or 'leads' to follow up, shared memories, stories, coffee, dug up AD 'artefacts' and have even praised and warmly encouraged me at times. This is, I recognise, something of an ideal context for researcher emergence – complementary conditions that Archer would describe as “a treasure trove of reinforcement, clarification, confirmation and vindication – because of the logical consistency of the items involved” (Archer, 1988/1996: 153). Many others are not so fortunate. Nevertheless, on the basis of this experience, I will argue (in the

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<sup>77</sup> Dr Badat is responsible for the (rather awkward) nomenclature 'CHERTL' in which the 'R' (research) agenda is made particularly salient (L. Quinn, Personal communication: October, 2011).

final chapter) that a stable, well-theorised community of practice, rich in ideas in the cultural domain, is a necessary complementary condition for researcher emergence.

But at UKZN the merger, with all the ambitious and complex re-structuring that this has inevitably entailed, seems to have radically disrupted an earlier, older community of AD researchers in the three former institutions that it incorporated. In some of these there had been a strong culture of research into AD – quite apart from the research based in cognitive psychology on the UND campus that I have already described. For example, in Boughey's *Lessons Learned* report, many of the names mentioned in her reference lists were originally based at UNP or UND. She references, for example: Bulman, Torr, Barnsley, Jackson, Inglis, Searle and Naidoo amongst others. In my conversation with Barnsley, she recalled others: Grayson, Akhurst, Downs, Houston, Kioko and Singh<sup>78</sup> (S. Barnsley, Personal communication: October, 2011). In the 2000s there were other AD researchers in the KwaZulu-Natal AD community: De Kadt, Mathonsi, Lockett, Sutherland, Makoni, Bertram and Parkinson. Yet, strangely, my account of conducting AD research at UKZN between 2005 and 2010 (in Chapter 4) suggests that I felt theoretically and even physically isolated from a community of researchers in AD over this period. I believe this was, in part, a 'merger-effect' as well as an effect of sheer institutional size. There are logistical difficulties, of course, in building collegiality in a multi-campus environment, especially when the arterial link between them is the N3, the busiest highway in the country – an ecological constraint, in a sense. But I never once met Parkinson in all the time I worked at UKZN: she and Barnsley were involved in the Science Foundation Programme when I arrived in the institution – a long-established, well-funded, independent community of practice in a separate buildings at UKZN. Bulman worked at UKZN until 2010 and wrote her MEd thesis on the topic of the history of AD in KwaZulu-Natal. Thomson described her strong personal leadership in the SAAAD movement during the 1990s (C. Thomson, Personal communication: October, 2011). Jackson has pointed out that Fiona Bulman had conducted extensive research into integrated academic support within mainstream curricula at the former UNP, and had much practical experience to offer, but when the Extended Curriculum in the Humanities was being mooted at UKZN during 2007, I have no recollection that this

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<sup>78</sup> This latter group had either a particular focus on foundational work in Science or Mathematics or on more generic aspects of student support and my own research was always strongly focused on epistemological access in the Humanities so it is probably not surprising that I did not encounter these researchers' names.

intellectual capital in the institution was recalled or deployed although Bulman was still working at UKZN at that time (F. Jackson: Personal communication, December 2011). Searle still works at CHES on the Durban campus at UKZN. Luckett moved to UCT in early 2005 before I arrived (K. Luckett, Personal communication, November 2011). Until 2008 de Kadt had a higher-level executive directorship (which was flagged as 'Temporary' in her title<sup>79</sup>) and I met with her in an administrative capacity. Others were Education department-based (such as Bertram and Thomson) and we very seldom met.

Based on these personal experiences, and in the absence of any more substantial accounts of this community to date, I would propose that the complexities of the merger process dispersed an existing AD community and constrained the opportunities it might have had for responding to the demands of the new teaching/learning environment. What had been a lively community of practice had become incoherent and fragmented. It seems that at UKZN the political sensitivities of the merger context were simply too complex for the agency of a small, physically scattered community to manage. Like the illustration of the little White King at the beginning of Chapter 3, they were simply 'written over' by larger forces beyond their control. Thus Jackson confirms that *"While there was innovation in the 90s in terms of discipline based curriculum transformation that has left lasting traces, much institutional memory has been lost"* (F. Jackson, Personal communication: November, 2011). Whilst individuals undoubtedly had *personal agency* in their particular roles in the institution there was a breakdown in *corporate agency* in the AD community in response to profound institutional changes from early on in the 2000s and as the merger was being established. I would suggest, therefore, that much of the capacity that had been built up in the field 'went underground', moved on or was otherwise lost or even ignored: some became "migrants" others "masses" in Archer's terms (1988/1996).

However, the new UTLO at UKZN has powerful corporate agency and is largely responsible for the yet more radical, institution-wide restructuring that is afoot and which takes effect in January 2012. The restructuring of AD initiatives is necessary and will require courageous agential commitments. But I venture to hope that the reconstruction of AD as an 'efficiency' project does mean that it loses touch with its

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<sup>79</sup> Her official title was 'Director of Access (Temporary)'.

heritage, the substantial knowledge base built up in its own communities of practice as well as and in others across the country. If it did so it would become 'a-historicised', stripped away from the cultural ways of knowing and being that have long been accrued in the profession, though not always recognised or sustained.

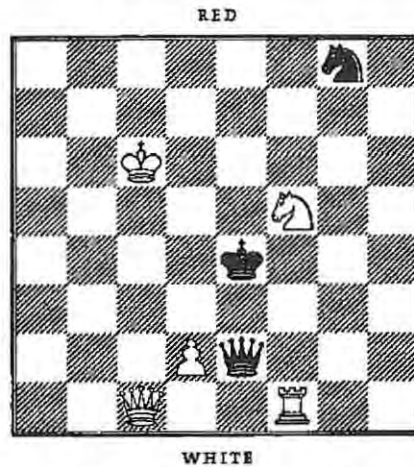
In retrospect, therefore, what I appear to have missed at UKZN was a research culture founded specifically in AD. It *seemed* to be absent. When Sioux McKenna was employed at CHED at UKZN (in mid-2008), I felt I had encountered a 'comrade' in a theoretical sense and immediately identified her as someone to whom I could appeal to help me to read and write in the field. Yet the ULTO at UKZN runs an annual Teaching and Learning Conference – I presented research work at this conference on two occasions. I attended a Research Proposal Writing weekend held at Edgewood College during 2009. There were also strong financial incentives for productive researchers at UKZN – unlike at RU where there are significantly fewer personal research benefits of this kind. There was a PhD cohort in the Education Department that I could easily have joined (despite the ecological constraint of the N3). So, undoubtedly, the institution was indeed offering powerful structural supports for research into teaching and learning and this was potentially enabling. Yet I missed apprenticeship *in the emergent field of Higher Education Studies* which diverges, in important ways I believe, from Education research. As I attempted to understand this sense of absence, Wenger was useful: I missed the ways of knowing, being and becoming that are shared and modelled within a purposive community of practice and their reifications. Although there were structural supports for those who wanted to do research into teaching and learning I can now speculate that, much more than structural support, researchers need the ideas, theories, values, concerns, interests, discourses, partnerships and the specific kinds of expertise that relate to a particular knowledge field. So while the structural systems were well in place, the cultural system of AD had become dissipated.

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This chapter has been excavating the generative mechanisms underlying a body of AD research. It has explored the ways in which various kinds of agency, structures and cultural ideas have inter-related and played off each other at different times and in different locations to produce particular kinds of knowledge and ways of knowing and being in a field. Alice has been moving steadily across the chess board with the help of the White Queen. She began at the second square where she was the White Queen's pawn and – over many interesting encounters and deep, internal conversations – she has journeyed from square to square. Finally she has reached the Eighth Square where she can finally become a Queen. The White Knight has accompanied her to the place where she can cross the last brook. “‘The Eighth Square at last!’ she cried as she bounded across, [...] and threw herself down to rest on a lawn as soft as moss ... ‘How glad I am to get here!’” (Carroll (1871)/2010: 350). In the final chapter, I will review Alice's journey across the chessboard and describe her ‘final examination’.

## Chapter 6

### The future 'You': Charting a way forward (and backwards) in Academic Development research



White Pawn (Alice) to play, and win in eleven moves

	<i>page</i>		<i>page</i>
1 Alice meets R.Q.	37	1 R.Q. to K.R.'s 4th	41
2 Alice through Q's 3d (by railway) to Q's 4th (Tweedledum and Tweedledee)	48 63	2 W.Q. to Q.B.'s 4th (after shawl)	85
3 Alice meets W.Q. (with shawl)	85	3 W.Q. to Q.B.'s 5th (becomes sheep)	94
4 Alice to Q's 5th (shop, river, shop)	94	4 W.Q. to K.B.'s 8th (leaves egg on shelf)	102
5 Alice to Q's 6th (Humpty Dumpty)	104	5 W.Q. to Q.B.'s 8th (flying from R.Kt.)	134
6 Alice to Q's 7th (forest)	124	6 R.Kt. to K.'s 2nd (ch.)	142
7 W.Kt. takes R.Kt.	143	7 W.Kt. to K.B.'s 5th	166
8 Alice to Q's 8th (coronation)	167	8 R.Q. to K.'s sq. (examination)	170
9 Alice becomes Queen	168	9 Queens castle	181
10 Alice castles (feast)	185	10 W.Q. to Q.R.'s 6th (soup)	185
11 Alice takes R.Q. & wins	195		

"What are the possibilities for a restless and critical academic 'developer' who fancies herself as sometime teacher, sometime activist, comforter, advocate, devil's advocate, intellectual?" (Grant, 2007: 41).

Of all the philosophies of social science, social realism is probably the most optimistic about the possibility – and the necessity – of reaching significant knowledge of the social world as a result of systematic, principled investigation (Carter and New, 2004: 1).

"You can't be a queen, you know, till you have passed the proper examination. And the sooner we begin it the better' [...] 'Can you do Addition?' the White Queen asked. 'What's one and one and one and one and one and one and one and one and one and one and one and one and one?' 'I don't know,' said Alice. 'I lost count'" (Carroll, 1871/[2010]: 356).

## 6.1 Alice's 'Addition'

On the basis of this realist examination of my own research events and of the cultural and material domains within which they emerged, I believe I am now in a position to claim "significant knowledge" of a kind (Carter and New, 2004: 1). The aim is *not*, of course, to discover universal, invariant laws on the basis of one case. Yet the project of empirical research is to offer "good explanations ... as a result of systematic, principled investigation" (ibid). So a 'verdict' *can* be pronounced – though it will, of course, be a fallible one. The knowledge accrued in this study can claim some scope and validity beyond the limits of the original research environment, becoming, perhaps, the stuff of *ceteris paribus* clauses or a point of reference for future, related cases. The past two chapters have presented careful evidence in the case under investigation and the vacillating Red King cannot forever delay the decisive moment of judgment. The evidence must be added up and Alice must undergo a final examination. So this chapter will reach some conclusions about 'what must be the case' for researchers to emerge in AD and about 'what must be the case' for substantial, emancipatory knowledge to accumulate and flourish in this field. I will also identify absences, describing conditions of constraint for researchers and the kinds of knowledge they can generate leading to an often-observed phenomenon in AD research in SA: "The re-invention of the wonky wheel"<sup>80</sup> (cited in Boughey, 2005: 41).

My study has been proceeding in steady stages in the manner of Alice making her way across the chessboard in Carroll's illustration above. Alice climbs through the looking-glass and then starts out as the White Queen's pawn, winning her game in eleven moves, finally taking the Red Queen when she reaches the Eighth Square. I believe this thesis has also made eleven clear moves, as follows:

1. Move 1: I assemble my six original research articles and see them as a 'phenomenon' for further study. Amongst their various other qualities and characteristics, I note their theoretical confusion, their failure as critical projects, narrow focus and other limitations.
2. Therefore Move 2 adopts a broad, historical meta-perspective on theories in general and on the beliefs about being and knowing which they embody.

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<sup>80</sup> Boughey quotes this comment made by experienced AD practitioners at the 2004 annual AD conference held at NMMU.

3. Move 3 locates principles in realist philosophy in relation to this historical meta-perspective. I begin to grasp the realist position and this in turn enables me to develop a coherent ontological frame for the current study as well as the means by which I can make sense of the theoretical confusion of earlier ones. Realism also allows me to see the research articles as 'events' in the domain of the Actual and the work of the doctoral study as the quest for underlying mechanisms in the domain of the Real.
4. Move 4 identifies a series of explanatory programmes that will grant access to the domain of the Real: Archer's morphogenetic approach (1998), Volbrecht and Boughey's theorising of the historical shifts in AD practice in South Africa (2004) and, briefly but usefully, Wenger's community of practice theory (1998).
5. Move 5 is an autoethnographic move: it recounts the morphogenetic cycles (from T<sup>1</sup> to T<sup>4</sup>) of six research events, each cycle setting up conditions for the next ones. As I narrate these cycles I clearly recognise the implications of shifting material and cultural conditions for the ways in which knowledge was being generated in each case. Yet I begin to ponder issues of agency: my own agency, the role of corporate agency in the emergence of research events, the importance of social actors in mediating new ideas in the cultural domain of AD.
6. Move 6 is a slow and arduous one. I consider the "structured mess" (Carter and New, 2004: 31) laid out before me on the chessboard and so I prepare a Generative Model (see Section 5.1: Table 3) in order to begin to tease out the plurality of co-acting mechanisms on many levels, all looping back and around each other (ibid: 16). I revisit realist theories and call for aid: I hold extended conversations, both formal and informal, with knowledgeable peers and colleagues (Pawns, Knights, Castles and Queens). Finally I lay my plans and ready myself for the next three moves.
7. Move 7 begins the process of retroduction by exploring the socio-political and socio-economic contexts which were impacting education policy formation and the emergence of AD in South African universities from the mid-1980's onwards.
8. Move 8 argues that, although it was initially an 'axiological project', AD progressively theorises itself and builds up a knowledge base. It continues to develop and seek theories as it takes on new roles and responsibilities in the academy. I describe these.

9. Move 9 searches for the generative mechanisms of people in the choices they make and the capacities they derive from group membership in various communities of practice. I look at the role of agents in advancing or obstructing the AD project. (This is the point I have now reached. I can review the fierce challenges I have faced and guardedly congratulate myself on having made some progress across the board: I have made some headway in 'structuring' the 'mess'. But now, before the coronation feast and the taking of the Red Queen, I need to make two final moves.)
10. Move 10 is the move to the Eighth Square. I add up the evidence (Alice's numerous 'one and one and one and one's') and come to some conclusions about the nature of the mechanisms that were strongly generative in my own case. I eliminate some as *absent* from my research case, as well as some that are absent from AD research more generally, and so I do some "Subtraction" as well (Carroll, [1871]/2010).
11. Move 11 argues "from an 'is' to an 'ought', or from ... fact to value, or from an indicative to an imperative" (Bhaskar and Collier, 1998: 385). The evidence I have presented allows for some value judgments. I remind myself that this realist study is an 'explanatory critique' in a broad sense (as I claim in Chapters 1 and 2). I therefore identify some of the false beliefs and hegemonic practices that have constrained AD researchers and limited the emancipatory impact of whatever knowledge has been built up in this community. I consider the implications of the study in terms of my own ontological values and the possibilities for more fruitful ways of knowing or being in AD in future years.

These, then, are the moves this thesis has already made and I will now turn to the final two.

## **6.2 An evaluative overview of the generative mechanisms identified by this study**

Adding up the evidence, I believe I can now claim that rich resources in the *cultural domain* are more generative for the emergence of academic researchers in this field than similarly rich resources in the *structural domain*. Of course it is best for both to be in place, but the former is a more significant complementary condition than the latter. I

draw this inference not only from the analysis of my own research history but also from the analytical history of AD itself. Thus it was much more difficult for me to conduct research when I occupied positions in which a meaningful intellectual culture relating to my field was dissipated and it was significantly easier when there were rich resources to draw on in the cultural domain. In a similar vein, I have shown that certain communities of practice in AD became more research productive than others at particular times. I would argue that the mechanisms underlying this research productivity related more strongly to the epistemological resources available to the members of these academic communities than to whatever material conditions may or may not have pertained in each case. Thus, for example, UWC, UND, UCT and RU have all been research-rich communities in AD at different times over the years but I have shown that these communities were more research-productive when there was a very pronounced awareness of the intellectual project of AD. Each of these communities was drawing on bodies of substantive theory, often quite innovatively or experimentally.

I would also argue on the basis of this study that the very particular need for AD research to draw deeply on theory relates to the fact that it is an emergent, contested and relatively unstable profession. It has drawn on a range of different disciplines over the years – Applied Linguistics, Psychology, Sociology and Education – which means that it does not have clear epistemological foundations and boundaries<sup>81</sup>. So it is inherently generalist. Boughey's historical analysis of AD practice (which I have referred to extensively in this dissertation) shows its roles and functions shifting dramatically over the years – it is a field that is prone to change. It is also been inclined to understand itself as an axiological project. Together, all these inherent characteristics of the field mean that its researchers are more at risk of poor, inadequate or incoherent theorisation than those from older, more well-established fields. This is well illustrated in the case of my own research papers. I have been able to show that the absence of strong theorisation was at times a causal mechanism which reduced their potential to be read or taken seriously in the academy, even amongst peers.

Although the argument above seems to privilege the cultural domain in researcher

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<sup>81</sup> Murray, however, has suggested that this multi-disciplinary, cross-disciplinary characteristic of AD is a source of strength rather than weakness: "I ... think this linking of linguistics, sociology and psychology provides powerful tools for investigating and understanding the problems students encounter" (S. Murray, Personal communication: April, 2012).

emergence, the structural positioning of AD in academic institutions is, of course, highly significant. As I occupied different structural positions in AD, the nature of the research I conducted mimicked earlier structures that had been set up. Thus, for example, when I worked in Academic Support programmes or curricula, such as ELAP (at RU) or Academic Literacy (at UKZN), I produced research that sought to advance the effectiveness of teaching and learning *within those structural contexts* (see Events 2, 3 and 4 in Appendices B, C and D). Yet when the structures shifted with the piloting of an Extended Curriculum, my research focus followed (see Events 5 and 6 in Appendices E and F). I then became interested in how students could engage with the discourses of Political Science. Apart from the fact that this illustrates a singular lack of critical awareness of the broader contexts in which these AD projects were being constituted – a clear causal absence – it also shows how salient institutional or curricular structure is to the forms of knowing and kinds of knowledge AD researchers are able to generate.

I have also shown that the various ways in which AD initiatives have been constituted in HE have either advanced the profession's potential to impact TLA in HE or have undermined it. For example, the re-structuring of AD at RU from the beginning of 2000s onwards eventually resulted in a stable, secure, well-theorised model and these structures became the platform on which a strong research culture could be established. But the UWC community was structurally undermined during the 1990s. At UKZN the ongoing, institution-wide cycles of structural change disrupted earlier informal research networks in AD. Despite many structural inducements<sup>82</sup> to re-establish a research culture in teaching and learning, the absence of *productive debate* and of *theory* seem to have been causative mechanisms in my case, negatively shaping the research I produced at that time. I have explained that I missed the dimension of social learning, access to the *cultural ways of knowing* and *mentorship* that characterise communities of practice which share a research focus.

Interestingly, Mahmood Mamdani, who has recently started a post-graduate research programme at the Makerere Institute of Social Research in Uganda, seems to endorse this conclusion, describing his approach to the development of researcher emergence thus:

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<sup>82</sup> Examples of these 'inducements' were the annual Teaching and Learning Conference which offered prizes for winning posters or papers; other financial benefits for publishing papers; generous research grants for tenured staff; research proposal writing workshops; a post-graduate cohort system and writing weekend 'getaways'. I once won second prize (R5000) for a poster I submitted to the T & L conference.

We began a program of seminars, two a month, requiring that every person begin with a research proposal, one that surveys the literature in their field, identifying key debates and locating the query within those debates: second, also twice a month, we agreed to meet as a study group, prepare list of key texts in the social sciences and humanities over the past 40 years, and read and discuss them (Mamdani, 2011: 4).

Mamdani argues that African postgraduate education is being suffocated by “market-driven models” and “a pervasive consultancy culture” (2011: 1) and the approach he has adopted with research students gives primacy to the reading of ‘key texts’. The students are spending the first two years of their programme “building a bibliography and coming to grips with the literature that constituted it” (ibid: 7). Thus his approach to the challenge of knowledge production in a contemporary African university is to build up a culture of reading and debate. This affirms my claim that substantial knowledge-building relies crucially on the resources of a strong intellectual culture.

But whatever the complementary or contradictory material conditions or cultural resources that might have pertained in the emergence of AD research in South Africa, they required activation or mediation by reflexive agents. The previous chapter drew attention to the (courageous and innovative, sometimes unrecognised and unsung) roles played by key agents and corporate agencies in advancing AD’s epistemological project. My own active, reflexive agency in generating the cycle of research events presented in the Appendices also needs some evaluation. Following Archer, I have made sense of my own research journey in the following way: the ‘historical Me’ was an intentional subject who made a series of constrained choices within the range of resources and opportunities that were available at different times and in different contexts (Carter and New, 2004: 35). At its homeliest, I would put it thus: I did the best I could with what I had when I had it. Archer, who is herself not adverse to the occasional homely metaphor, describes the internal conversation by means of the “quaint ... folkloric expression, ‘I says to myself says I’” (2007: 1). Chapter 4 tracks the shifting contexts in which the papers were being written but it also tracks my own determinations and deliberations in the form of ‘internal conversations’ – what I was saying to myself at different stages in the journey, how I was formulating and defining my “ultimate concerns: those internal goods that [we] care about most, the precise constellation of which makes for [our] concrete singularity as persons” (2007: 7).

So what was the nature of those 'ultimate concerns' – those 'internal goods that I cared most about' to the point where I elaborated them into fairly sustained projects, one after the other, overcoming setbacks, constraints, even some humiliations, along the way? Carter and New argue that "in practice it will never be possible to identify all the co-acting mechanisms" (2004: 22) underlying a phenomenon and I will, of course, never account for the "precise constellation" of mechanisms that drove these projects. These may have had as much to do with psychological or affective factors as with sociological ones. Certainly I was attempting to 'find a voice' of a kind. Alice's defiance of the vindictive Red Queen when she finally stood her ground and shouted "I won't!" and "Who cares for you?" may well carry psychic resonances in my own case. Archer explains that "The deliberative process has nothing in common with cost-benefit analysis. It is emotionally charged, rather than being a simple exercise in instrumental rationality, because ... our emotions (as distinct from our moods) are commentaries on our concerns, which supply the 'shoving power' leading to action" (2007: 13).

So the "continuous ... self" with a "concrete singularity" and a "precise constellation of concerns" (ibid: 12) was responsive to *some* of the identities and registers that were available in AD, though not to others. For example, I was never responsive to AD as an efficiency project: cost-benefit analyses, throughput and retention statistics, auditing, monitoring, tracking or surveying roles of any kind. My research shows some awareness, but little engagement, with these wider aspects of HE and my research focus was narrowly concerned with the teaching/learning nexus in immediate, 'grassroots', practice-based contexts. Thus the research events that emerged tended to be 'epiphenomenal', ignoring the 'macro' structures that were positioning the 'micro' contexts which were occupying my attention. So they were a-political or, at least, politically naive, and it is now much clearer why they could have so few critical effects.

Yet there were other identities with "shoving power" (ibid: 13) that were available to me and to which I responded enthusiastically. Grant's quotation at the beginning of this chapter suggests a variety of 'names' for the "restless and critical" Academic Developer: "sometime teacher, sometime activist, comforter, advocate, devil's advocate, intellectual?" (2007:41). The historical 'Me' saw herself as an *activist* or *advocate* on behalf of vulnerable students – I believe this is clear in all my papers. I had a very strong

identity as *teacher* and, sometimes even as *comforter* observable in the paper concerning the way I offered formative feedback to students (Event 2: Appendix B). I aspired to the *intellectual* identity as well, though not always successfully (eg., in Event 3: Appendix C). All these were 'names' that I adopted at different times, each more or less coherent with the 'concrete singularity' of the 'continuous self' that I brought to my research practice.

Another AD 'name' which was strongly felt in my own case was that of *self-reflexive practitioner*, so frequently observed in the earlier days of AD research, and a distinct, recurrent presence in my own research story, (eg., Events 2 and 4: Appendices B and D). This strong personal identity is sustained in this doctoral study: I am still reflexively exploring my own praxis, but this time with more secure and sophisticated theoretical foundations. Through Archer's theorising of agency I have learnt better how to use the 'self' in my intellectual work. So there are still potential strengths in praxis-based, evaluative research which I have continued to draw on.

Referring to the profession in general, the *devil's advocate* name could be adopted more readily. There is an important public adversarial or critical role that the now better-established profession might take up, for example, for responding to the 'marketisation' or the 'economising' of HE, which, according to Walker, is divesting universities of their public good functions (2002: 4). Some now have the authoritative positions and strong theorisation to exercise a kind of "reflexive vigilance" (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, in Walker, 2002: 7) in HE, analysing the power relations that continue to marginalise, exclude and ignore certain voices and communities. They could respond to the erosion of academic freedoms in what Parker and Jary describe as the "McUniversity" where knowledge is standardised, packaged and served up to increasingly instrumental customers (1998, in Walker, 2002: 4). Although some in the profession have adopted this kind of identity, it is not strongly developed – another absence that needs absencing, perhaps. As the Higher Education Studies field matures, the role of what Sacks (2000, in Walker, 2002: 7) calls the "*activist professional*" could become another of AD's range of 'names'.

### 6.3 Moves from fact to value

One 'value' drawn from this study, therefore, is the immense importance of communities of practice in generating researchers and bodies of knowledge in a field that I have described as inherently contested, variable, broad and unstable. Critics of Archer's conceptualising of the internal conversation refer to the way in which her theory foregrounds individual agency as a causal power and ignores the ways in which morphogenesis often occurs through collective action and I believe my study illustrates the accuracy of this critique. Researchers who want to generate axiological knowledge need to become corporate agents – the 'Me' with a personal identity will need to become a 'We' with a social identity, and an elaborated 'You'. Researchers can be trapped and isolated in their own inner dialogues and private projects. Alternatively, they can become isolated and lonely in institutions which marginalise or ignore their work. Both kinds of isolation are dangerous for emergent researchers in AD. Without an intellectual community in which ideas, beliefs and theories are being shared, explained, modelled, enjoyed, interrogated or contested, the research journey is longer and harder and the value of the kinds of knowledge that can be built up is compromised. Generative research communities are not simply sites for sharing methods, techniques or material rewards but are places that "raise questions about what counts as knowledge ... about how we come to know, about who counts as knowers, and about how we write about higher education and our lives in it" (Walker, 2002: 11). So critical action research communities *do* need grow and flourish. My sense of the importance of this approach when I first moved to UKZN was not at all misguided although I failed to grasp the high complexity of the socio-political world in which I had taken up the cause of AD research and I failed to embrace the rich, generative potential that is inherent in critical action research.

In Chapters 1 and 2, I quoted Kincheloe and McLaren who argue that authentically critical research can produce "dangerous knowledge, the kind of information and insight that upsets institutions and threatens to overturn sovereign regimes of truth" (1994: 138). But a few isolated research events, on their own, will seldom generate 'dangerous knowledge' except, perhaps, in a local sense. Yet when the 'I' becomes a 'We' the future, elaborated 'You' becomes possible. I was always part of a professional community that was generating 'dangerous knowledge' even from its earliest days. It

offered kinds of information, for example, that upset hegemonic constructions of students and their 'problems'. More recently, it has addressed the unquestioning adoption of efficiency discourses in higher education at the expense of those that relate to equity or redress and it is currently driving research into many aspects of HE, for example, in the PhD programme from which this dissertation emerges. It is all but impossible to generate substantial emancipatory knowledge as an individual. Oppressive 'truth regimes', both new and old, are challenged in communities with agency. Communities of AD intellectuals have always and will always need to aspire to the *change agent* name, an important heritage based in the fervent idealism of the early movement.

Yet another insight that I draw from this study is that authentically critical research that is capable of generating 'dangerous knowledge' has little to do with cost-benefit analyses or deliberations based in instrumental rationality. Though Alice did indeed want to be a 'queen', this is not what drove her head-long dash underground or her longing to enter the Looking-Glass room. It was her curiosity – a need to make sense of 'what must be the case' – that inspired Alice's adventuring. This has implications for how we conceptualise researcher emergence in AD. The researcher's personal identity, her interests, emotionality and ultimate concerns all need engagement or research projects undertaken cannot be sustained. The complex subjectivities and meta-reflexive capacities of the person of the researcher must not be ignored: we cannot do research without calling on what we most deeply care about. So researchers need the 'I' as well as the 'We' to develop distinctive voices.

Yet, as Walker (2002: 10) says, "there is a sense in which we are always strangers to ourselves, struggling to see what lies beyond the periphery of our vision, in contexts which can never be fully known to us". As we strive to make sense of our cultures and settings, how we relate to them or try to transform them, theory is crucially important:

Theory is not just back-up that can be turned to when all else fails, rather it is what makes it possible to see the world differently and so be able to act in different ways ... its concern is not simply to say why the world is as it is but to provide us with the space to think how it could be different (Schratz and Walker, 1995: 125, in Walker, 2002: 12).

Thus a final way in which I can draw 'value' from some of the 'facts' claimed by this study is that AD researchers are extremely vulnerable without strong theoretical

foundations. They are vulnerable both to themselves and their subjectivities and become easy prey to the ways in which institutions might marginalise or exclude their work as 'just practice-based teacher's stuff'. Without theory our stories about practice are undoubtedly partial and situated and carry as much potential for repression as for empowerment. Theory is our defence against ourselves and our potential to do harm, however unwittingly. It is also our defence against the ways in which our work is constructed or overlooked. We cannot afford to be ignorant the grounds on which we make our claims for knowledge, otherwise we do indeed deserve the *fraudulent academic* name that Grant (2007: 37) also evokes.

In the same way, those that now run teaching and learning 'bureaucracies' of various kinds in universities, assuming many of former functions of AD, cannot afford to be poorly theorised either. If they do not draw on the now substantial 30-year old body of research (past and current, national and international) in the HE field, they also carry their own potential for repression and harm.

But not just any theory will do. AD researchers need to do *holistic* studies that are founded in an ontology that can offer systematic accounts of agency, culture and structure and the complex causation in configurations of these elements. We need to understand the affordances and constraints of particular theories – what they can offer us and how they can limit us. Although I reject none of the theories that I used in my earlier papers, I now have a better sense of what they can do for us, where, how and what kinds of questions they might answer or fail to answer, what kinds of knowledge they might generate. I believe this discrimination is the outcome of a much more pronounced awareness of ontology, especially of an ontology that accommodates accounts of a world of multiple causation, an open, contingent yet sometimes explicable world. We need this kind of *depth* ontology to guide us as we assemble our theoretical resources.

When I started out on this doctoral journey I imagined it would be a study of ontological shifts and turns. Now, as I reach my destination, I find that my ontology hasn't changed after all. I have simply discovered what it is. Like Alice, I am a Critical Realist.

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When Alice started in the Second Square as the White Queen's Pawn, they began to run, hand in hand: "The Queen kept crying 'Faster! Faster!' but Alice felt she *could not* go faster" (1871/2010: 225). Alice noticed that, however fast they went "the most curious thing was the trees and the other things around them never changed their places at all ... They skimmed though the air, hardly touching the ground with their feet, till suddenly, quite exhausted, they stopped ... The Queen propped her up against a tree, and said kindly, 'You may rest a little now'. Alice looked round her in great surprise: 'Why I do believe we've been under this tree the whole time! Everything is just as it was!' 'Of course it is', said the Queen.

Thus our deepest journeys lead us back to where we began and, however far or fast we think we have travelled, the final destination is under the same tree. Here we discover who we are, who we have always been, and who we might be. Under the same tree, after much exploring, we find the words and images for what we most essentially believe about reality.

T. S. Eliot (1944: 54) in the Four Quartets makes a similar point:

*We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.*

Ad majorem Dei gloriam

10<sup>th</sup> December, 2011

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# Appendices

## APPENDIX A

Niven, P. (2005). Exploring first year students' and their lecturers' constructions of what it means to read in a humanities discipline: A conflict of frames? *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 19(4): 777–789.

## APPENDIX B

Meyer, W. and Niven, P. (2007). Critical Reflections on the role of identity in two respondents' formative assessment practices. *English Academy Review*, 24(2): 121–133.

## APPENDIX C

Niven, P., and Meyer, W. (2007). Understanding the impact that principled formative feedback has on first year students' writing: Is it useable or not? An action research project. *The International Journal of Learning*, 14(8): 13–22.

## APPENDIX D

Niven, P. 2009. 'Quit school and become a taxi driver': Reframing first-year students' expectations of assessment in a university environment. *Perspectives in Education*, 27(3): 278–288.

## APPENDIX E

Niven, P. 2011. Intersecting epistemologies: First-year students in a Political Science module. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 16(6): 641–653.

## APPENDIX F

Niven, P. Teaching Political Science to first-year students in a South African University: challenging 'taxi-rank' analysis? In press.

## APPENDIX G

Niven, P. and Grant, C. 2012. PhDs by publication: 'An easy way out'? *Teaching in Higher Education* 17 (1): 105–111.

## APPENDIX H

Schedule of interview questions for Academic Development professionals (1990 – 2010). October, 2011.

# Appendix A

## Exploring first year students' and their lecturers' constructions of what it means to read in a humanities discipline: A conflict of frames?

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### Abstract

This article reports on a critical, ethnographic investigation into the reading practices of a group of 14 foundation year students at Rhodes University in 2002. The university had identified all the students as 'underprepared' for university learning. They were from poor, socio-economic backgrounds, used English as an additional language, and had been educated in township or rural schools. Using the Socio-cultural model of literacy (Gee 1990; Street 1993), the study explored the culturally-shaped attitudes and assumptions about reading that the students brought with them into a tertiary learning context from their homes and schools. It reported on their subsequent efforts to become academic readers in a Humanities discipline. Framing Theory (Reid and MacLachlan 1994) was employed to analyse the kinds of mismatches that arose between the students' frames about the nature and purpose of reading, and those implicitly accepted as normative by their lecturers. It accounted for the students' difficulties in achieving epistemological access in terms of a conflict of frames: both the students and their teachers failed to recognise each others' constructions about the nature and purpose of 'reading for a degree'. Whilst the lecturers had 'Expressive' frames for reading, the students' reading frames were primarily 'Cognitivist'. The paper concludes that both the students and the lecturers were 'underprepared' for the learning and teaching tasks they undertook and recommends that a more 'Socio-cultural' understanding of literacy would facilitate a rapprochement of frames.

### INTRODUCTION

The motivation for this study arose out of my experience of tutoring students on an academic development programme at Rhodes University which is designed to meet the specific linguistic and cultural needs of students at foundation year level.<sup>1</sup> Despite the fact that most of these students were taking four or even five years attempting to complete their degrees, their chances of throughput to degree level appeared to be significantly lower than those of students in the mainstream.<sup>2</sup> This was in spite of the fact that their academic results at school indicated that they were clearly capable, hard-working students. In South Africa only four out of ten school-goers ever reach their final year of schooling (Monare, 2003) and in 2001, the year that most of the participants in this study matriculated, only 15 per cent

achieved a university endorsement nationally (Statistics South Africa, 2002). This percentage was 6.5 per cent in the Eastern Cape (*ibid.*), the home province of most of the students in this study. Seen from the national perspective the students who were accepted into Rhodes University in 2002 are a part of an 'elite' body because they represent less than 2 per cent of their original school year group. The fact that only between a third and a half of these high-achievers go on to graduate provided the stimulus for this study. It was clear that the quality of these students' experiences of teaching and learning during their first year in a tertiary context needed to be explored.

Common sense suggests that the under-performance of foundation-year students could be explained by the fact that they all use English as an additional language. This has implications for their ability to cope academically at tertiary levels where success is dependent on the reading and writing of academic texts in English. Other reasons why students fail may be because they are lazy, not intelligent enough, or that their 'literacy levels' are low – lecturers often explain student failure in these terms (Ballard and Clanchy 1988; Johns 1997; Boughey 2000). However, I explored the issue of students' epistemological access from a different perspective. I looked at the ways in which the literacy practices that the students brought with them from their homes and schools intersected with the literacy practices of a representative Humanities discipline. I postulated that neither lecturers nor students could make any sense of each other's literacy practices and that this meant that satisfactory teaching and learning could not proceed.

This study rested on the assumption that reading is at the heart of academic success (Pretorius 2002a). However, in South Africa, whilst a considerable amount of research has been done into the difficulties that novice academics experience as they come to *write* in new knowledge communities (Paxton 1993; Moyo 1995; Orr 1995; Boughey 2000), similar research into *reading* has been markedly absent. Given the centrality of reading at university, particularly in the humanities, (students are traditionally understood to 'read for a degree'), one might expect research into reading to be much more common. Yet when Pretorius (2002b) conducted a small literature survey of four South African Applied Linguistics journals between 1990 and 2002, she discovered that only 17 of the 1 202 articles in the journals dealt with reading – 1.4 per cent of the total research output.

Yet good academic writing relies on wide reading. Bajnath suggests that: 'with unsuccessful writers there is a poverty of input at the reading stage . . . This results in the development of inadequate text worlds, lacking the richness of understanding and insight that is necessary to deliver a competent piece of writing . . . Consequently, the [poor] quality of the product is determined at this stage' (1992, 75, 76). It would seem that academic reading is pre-eminent: it precedes academic writing and determines its depth and quality. The fact that it is so important to successful studenthood suggests that lecturers should devote more time to the

teaching of academic reading skills, strategies, values and expectations. Yet McCormick (1994, 5) says that 'teachers [at universities] do not regard themselves as involved with teaching reading'.

## THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study adopted a Socio-cultural framework for understanding and exploring students' reading. McCormick (1997), Johns (1997), Cope and Kalantzis (1993) and others have identified the three fundamental paradigms in which the nature of learning and literacy are understood. These paradigms are variously named but they describe similar ideas. Because McCormick focuses particularly on reading, I employed her terms: she discusses reading within 'Cognitivist', 'Expressive' and 'Socio-cultural' models. Briefly, the Cognitive model is rooted in the objectivist tradition and sees reading as a neurological skill. Learning to read is seen as mastering a hierarchy of skills, from micro-level skills such as letter or word recognition, to learning to read larger and larger units such as sentences and paragraphs. The child learns phonics first, before reading for meaning, and comprehension will consist of 'simply adding up the meaning of words to create the meaning of the whole' (McCormick 1994, 17). The Expressive model challenges this 'bottom-up'<sup>3</sup> approach seeing reading as essentially a 'top-down'<sup>4</sup> process, whereby meaning is accessed by means of what is 'behind' rather than 'before' the eyes. Reading is meaning-driven and it is taught by means of *exposure* to a variety of whole texts in a 'print-rich' environment rather than by means of practising from 'textoids', like graded basal readers. According to the Expressivists, learning to read does not need to be deliberately structured or graded. It occurs naturally given supportive mentors and a plentiful supply of reading materials to engage the interests of individual readers.

But 'natural' literacy development has been contested by the Socio-culturalists who claim that what is 'natural' turns out to be highly constructed within particular cultural formations (Baynham 1995). Non-mainstream learners have not been exposed to the implicit rules of mainstream, powerful cultures and have not acquired them 'naturally' in their own interactions at home, nor, in many South African schools, have they acquired them at school either. So what is implicitly acquired and understood by learners from mainstream cultures needs to be deliberately and explicitly taught to learners from non-mainstream cultures.

The basic assumption of the Socio-cultural approach is that literate behaviours of any kind are cultural phenomena, and that people are socialised into particular ways of using reading and writing in the experiences of their homes, communities and schools. Literacy is understood in terms of 'practices' rather than 'skills'. Literacy is not a single, neutral phenomenon, but rather there are varieties of socio-cultural 'literacies', each operating within complex webs of social relationships and assumptions. Unequal student access to the academy is therefore not as much a 'language' or 'skills' problem as an issue of cultural adjustment to the discourses

of 'unfamiliar knowledge communities' (Northedge 2003, 17). The particular cultural literacies students bring into the academy may conflict with the literacies that are already powerfully established within universities.

Seeing reading as a form of cultural socialisation had important implications for how the research was conducted. It employed ethnographic approaches and methods because it was interested in building up a rich, detailed picture of the cultural meanings and uses of literacy in two main sites: firstly, in the homes and schools of the student-participants and, secondly, in a university department. I interviewed the 14 students, three lecturers and three tutors many times during the course of 2002. I observed tutorials and lectures and observed and interviewed the students as they were reading for a particular essay assignment. Ethnographies, most essentially, interpret culture (Wolcott 1987). But the way in which I understood the term 'culture' in terms of this study needs definition. I did not explore the general cultural characteristics of each site. Rather, I looked more narrowly at the ways in which all the participants had used and experienced print within the context of their shared experiences of life, work and education: hence 'culture' was understood more in terms of 'shared literacy practices'.

It is also important to establish that this study was not a classic, but a *critical* ethnography. Critical ethnographers, such as Carspecken (1996, x), 'are all concerned about social inequalities and direct [their] work towards positive social change'. They 'use research to uncover the subtleties of oppression so that its invisibility to those affected by it might be removed; so that oppression might become challenged and changed' (p. 7). Therefore I sought answers to the problems of unequal epistemological access not only in the reading histories of the students themselves. But, even more crucially, the students were disadvantaged by the wider, institutional contexts and structures in which they were attempting to make their way. I argue in this paper that the problem of 'underpreparedness' can be more usefully illuminated and addressed within these disciplinary and institutional structures.

Another useful analytical insight for this study was provided by 'Framing Theory': Frames are 'expectations' and Tannen (1993) shows that speakers bring expectations or frames about the context or activity in which they are taking part on the basis of their prior experiences. Watanabe (in Tannen 1993, 178) says that, 'frames guide interactants to appropriate interpretations of what is going on in situations at each moment'. Reid and MacLachlan (1994) were the first to use Framing Theory in relation to reading and the categories they devised for the particular kinds of frames that readers bring to textual interpretation were particularly useful for making sense of the research data – they refer to 'extratextual', 'intertextual', 'circumtextual' and 'intratextual' frames. Briefly, *extratextual* frames refer to the kind of outside information or experiences that readers bring to texts in order to make sense of them – a kind of top-down processing; *intertextual* framing concerns the ability to see a text's links with other texts, genres and discourses; *circumtextual* framing refers to a reader's use of the

details that immediately surrounding a text, such as the back cover, diagrams, maps, dates of publication and so on; and, *intratextual* framing concerns the ability to decode and use the information on and within the pages of the text (Reid et al. 1994). The latter involves paying close attention to the graphic display on the page itself – a kind of ‘bottom-up’ processing. In this study both the students’ and lecturers’ reading frames were intensively analysed within each of these categories.

## THE STUDENTS’ READING FRAMES

What follows is a generalized, ethnographic portrait of the complex matrix of frames about reading that were generated within the students experiences of print and literature at home and in school.

The students’ reading histories suggested that during their childhoods there was little time or opportunity for extensive, enjoyable reading either at home or school. Books and reading were associated with schoolwork rather than recreation. ‘Play’ signified outdoor, communal, physical activities such as street soccer or cricket, skipping games, rounders, boxing, hide-and-seek, marbles, catching snakes, hunting birds in the bushes, playing with sand or ‘with tin toys made by my father’ or ‘with dolls made from the tree’. One woman student mentioned playing ‘schools’ because her ‘cousin-sister’ had a board and chalk and they could therefore role-play teachers and pupils, but in these school role-playing games, the child who was the ‘teacher’ might carry a stick rather than a chalk or pencil suggesting an authoritarian frame for learning.

The students had had very limited access to libraries, newspapers, magazines or printed children’s literature: they generally lived in ‘print-poor’ rather than ‘print-rich’ environments. The exception to this was sacred literature, such as the Bible, and books and stories involving cultural traditions. Some of the rural children were told ‘iintsomi’(folktales) by their grandmothers after dark. These stories were often both frightening and humorous (at the same time) and were accompanied by songs, dance and acting. Because of the close association with sacred literature and cultural beliefs, it is not surprising that literature was strongly associated with ‘truth’ and the building of moral behaviour and should therefore be regarded with respect – it seldom represented an imaginary world that was playful or light-hearted. As Grabe and Stoller (2002, 60) point out: “Some social groups see texts as sacred and unchanging . . . others view texts as sources of truth to be studied; yet others value texts as alternative interpretations of realities and facts that can be disputed . . . L2 readers moving from one orientation to another are likely to encounter some difficulties in reading texts that do not complement their cultural assumptions”.

None of the students’ home or school environments was conducive to quiet, individual activities. One student reported that he had no quiet place to read in his small, township home where he lived with his parents and three other children:

I would be reading here, and someone would be doing this other thing there, or watching TV, which was not good'.

Referring to later in his life, he recalled: 'If I want to read I have to go to school [but] at school there is a lot of chaos . . . when you arrive at school there are kids playing and they are confusing me'.

Early reading at school was associated with memorisation and recitation. The students understood reading within the Cognitive model, primarily as a decoding, rather than as a comprehension skill. It seems that they became 'sound-centred readers' (Devine 1988, 133). Devine distinguishes between 'sound-centred' and 'meaning-centred' readers – the former have an excessive reliance on the graphophonic cueing system as a way of comprehending text which ironically results in quite poor comprehension. Reading was taught by means of rote and drills – the word used repeatedly by the student-participants in relation to early reading was '*pronunciation*'. This word occurs so often in the data as to be highly salient. Texts were often written down word for word (e.g. from the board at school), and then memorised and carefully reproduced.

Most of the student-participants had a primarily *instructional* frame for reading (Heath 1983), that is, reading is for the acquisition of important truths or for 'getting on in life' – in the case of these students, for getting a job and overcoming poverty. Reading was perceived as 'necessary pain'.

There was also a strong tradition of reading as a communal activity, at home and at school. In the students' accounts of their school experiences they often refer to a particular 'class reader', an almost celebrated figure, responsible for reading aloud while the rest of the class listened. In fact, reading often signified passive listening rather than active engagement with the graphic display on a page. The broad, general themes of a reading were often transmitted orally, not by wrestling with the details of syntax or vocabulary. So reading became primarily a top-down process, as the students grew up: comprehension was reached primarily by accessing extratextual knowledge. There was often a pattern of 'reading-then-telling' in the classrooms with most textual meanings being transmitted orally, often in the students' home language.

At home, children who could read were sometimes expected to read aloud to the rest of the family as a sort of service or proud display of their new-found literacy. Parents warmly admired and encouraged the literacy development of their children but did not see themselves as having any direct involvement with it – it was the school's responsibility to teach their children to read. Reading was understood primarily as a church- or school-related activity.

Reading for the students usually implied reading *in English*. This caused problems, firstly, because of the struggle for basic, textual comprehension at every

stage in the education process. Secondly, it could signify a threat to one's personal and cultural identity: reading was subtly linked with loss of cultural affiliation, of being 'colonised' (Gee 1990) or of becoming upwardly mobile in an English-dominated society. Reading and being well-educated were admired and seen as useful, but they also carried the risk of becoming alienated from one's peers or community. When the students were asked to think of rough equivalents for the word 'bookworm' or 'nerd' in Xhosa, they offered: '*ungqondongqondo*', which connotes "someone too bright for their own good" or a person with a hint of arrogance; *umfundimani*, a term used by less educated people to refer to more educated people who are assuming a superior status; and *ikumsha*, which simply means someone who can speak English well, but who may use such knowledge to undermine the authority of those who cannot.

Understanding what reading has signified in the students' prior experiences is important for lecturers: any reading curriculum should surely be developed on the basis of a thorough grasp of such significations. Yet the following section shows that the lecturers' Expressive notions of what reading connotes predominated.

#### THE LECTURERS' READING FRAMES

Unsurprisingly, the lecturers' frames for the nature and purpose of reading represent a radical contrast to those described above. In the students' very first encounter with the department, in the first lecture of the year, a lecturer in the study talked to all the first-year students about 'the development of a good, enquiring, critical mind through engagement with a range of books' and he encouraged them to use the library to locate relevant reading resources for the course. In these few introductory words the discipline was expressing its fundamental frames about learning and literacy. Spelt out, the message to the students was that they were expected to become self-directed, reflective readers, driven by personal interest, independently locating a wide range of relevant reading materials. It seems independent, self-directed learning in a 'print-rich' environment with plenty of exposure to interesting reading would be sufficient to enculturate the students into the values of the discipline. Another lecturer said:

basically we throw [the students] in. We give them readings, we respond to what they are doing . . . you dialogue . . . it works by trial and error: you correct them until they get the right idea . . .

Clearly the Expressivist value of *exposure* is being expressed here.

The lecturer went on to describe a good student as one who shows 'interest and enthusiasm . . . who asks questions of what a lecturer is saying . . . and asks questions of a reading' (The use of the preposition *of* in this quotation is worth

noting: he did not use *about*, therefore implying that the content of the book or lecture is already understood and a further, more advanced stage of critical evaluation is expected). Another lecturer described a good student as

'bright, alert and curious . . . excited by the acquisition of new knowledge'.

Passion, interest and excitement in the encounter with new knowledge was a central value. In a similar vein, a good student would have

interesting new ideas and angles on an issue.

The notion of challenge – the adversarial voice – seemed to be an important quality for successful studenthood in this discipline.

The department seemed to take content knowledge for granted: it was described disparagingly as mere 'facts'. The students were told: You can always find content in books, journals, the Internet. There was an explicit rejection of set, standardised texts for the course. One lecturer used a 'baking' metaphor: she described content knowledge as the mere ingredients, which, having been assembled and mixed, need to be baked, undergoing transformation from batter . . . to cake, in the process of being subjected to mental heat. What this 'baking' metaphor seems to show is that, whilst the department does indeed require content knowledge, it is assumed to be already in place (through wide reading) and it is much more important for the students to develop and express views about the knowledge, the 'baking', rather than the 'ingredients'.

A good student is one that shows a personal involvement, or '*immersion*' in the course, an ability to discuss, argue and transform information convincingly, even passionately, in tutorials and essays. Wide, reflective reading would expose the students to the development of these qualities. In this discipline the students are assigned quantities of unmediated readings – quite often whole books as well as being actively encouraged to locate their own reading around the topics being studied.

Critical reading skills are central to the discipline's values – '*an ability to see what lies beneath what is written*', as such skills were described by one lecturer. Students must '*get away from being in awe of the written word in books*' and must be able to look for the ideology underlying a text.

I have linked Reid and MacLachlan's categorisation (1994) of the different kinds of frames involved in reading comprehension with my observations of what frames the students would need to read productively on this first year course: This list includes a complex matrix of extratextual, intertextual, circumtextual and intratextual frames. Students, for example, would need to be able to use an academic library and online research tools and resources – these are mainly extratextual skills. Having located relevant sources, they would need to be able to critique and evaluate them. They would need to be able to identify, contextualise

and make use of a wide variety of textual genres – this is a kind of intertextual framing. They would need to use circumtextual frames effectively, such as being able to locate and make sense of dates of publication, indexes, contents pages, references or footnotes. They would need to be able to skim and scan texts (using intratextual framing) whilst at the same time making broad judgements as to their relevance (using extratextual frames). They would need intratextual frames to make sense of the difficult academic language itself, the like of which many students would be encountering for the first time. They would need an extensive set of frames about world affairs, both past and present, that is, extratextual frames.

Clearly, from the descriptions of the students' reading histories above, very few of these frames were available to them, with the result that during the course of the year, rather than becoming 'engaged', 'passionate' or 'interested' learners, I observed that they were anxious, withdrawn and passive, with very low levels of participation.

### A CONFLICT OF FRAMES

The Expressive model of literacy failed to inspire or provoke active learning in these students. In a department that explicitly valued individualism in academic endeavour and the development of passionate, personal, independent views, the data shows that the student-participants brought a history of shared, co-operative reading and learning in public rather than in quiet, private domains. The physical contexts of the participants' crowded homes and classrooms meant that habits of 'sustained silent reading' were never strongly developed.<sup>5</sup> Reading was often about careful, sustained listening, either to the text itself being read aloud, or to oral explanations of its meanings. The broad ideas of the text would then be negotiated in group discussions. Thus it seems there is a conflict of frames in the sense that there is a *collective* rather than an *individual* understanding of what reading and learning signify.

The departmental expectations were that students from 'print-poor' environments could manage the 'print-rich' environment of a university, and choose, often in their first encounters with libraries, appropriate academic reading materials without explicit guidance. The students' lack of experience of a range of different kinds of reading conflicted with expectations that they would be able to recognise and process the wide variety of textual genres. Their lack of experience of general reading meant that they were often unable to use appropriate extratextual or intertextual frames to make inferences about textual meanings. They often found themselves reaching for embarrassingly inappropriate frames. For example, I observed the students confusing 'CFCs' with 'KFC' or 'think-tanks' with a kind of war machine in a tutorial about environmental issues.

The data showed that *all* the first-year students, not merely those in the study, were often seen in tutorials to be engaging, 'top-down', with ideas that were related to a reading but not as often, in a disciplined and systematic way, with the

text itself. This approach cannot be conducive to building a 'reading culture'. On the contrary, it seemed to encourage a culture of the 'personal voice', a tendency that typifies the Expressive model. Northedge (2003, 24) says that 'everyday discourse tends to be urgent, personal, emotive and tribal . . . [whereas] . . . the academic voice is unhurried, speculative, analytical and uncommitted, objective, rational'. There is a risk that the explicit encouragement of 'personal voice' in this Humanities discipline may affirm students in their use of 'everyday discourse' and not encourage 'the academic voice' (p. 24). This approach could inadvertently de-emphasise a serious engagement with print.

The students often expressed a need for more content knowledge, or extratextual frames, on which they could viably base their personal responses and opinions. But sufficient content was assumed by the department. It was a 'given': there was a much stronger emphasis on interest and interpretation. But a passion for, and interpretation of academic knowledge must surely be contingent on a rich source of well-understood and well-digested content knowledge. To use the 'baking' metaphor described above a 'cake' cannot be baked without 'ingredients' and 'a clear method', however much 'mental heat' one might apply to it.

Finally, there is a mismatch with regard to the ways in which students originally valued reading as having a moral or religious purpose. It is difficult to be critical about books that have previously represented sources of literal truth, deserving of honour, respect and unquestioning reproduction. It is difficult, with this literacy history, ". . . *to get away from being in awe of the written word*", as their lecturer had encouraged them to do. It is also difficult to adopt a strong, critical stance when one hopes that acquiring an education will mean, eventually, physical survival in the form of a job. A submissive, unquestioning attitude to texts may, on the face of it, seem far safer.

## CONCLUSION

Ascribing student failure to cognitive or linguistic rather than socio-cultural factors means that lecturers can avoid their responsibilities to teach in imaginative and accessible ways: if students have 'language' or 'literacy problems' then language or literacy specialists must be called in to address them. But understanding student failure as a mismatch of socio-cultural frames implicates lecturers much more radically in the learning process because it requires that they reframe *their* assumptions and address issues of their own practice *before* they can expect the radical reframing they require of students.

It is dangerous and alienating to assume that "osmosis pedagogy" (Starfield 1994, 17) would work equally well with all the diverse socio-cultural groups that typify the South African academic environment. Expressive ideas of literacy, which, as I have shown, inform the discipline I studied, assume a Western, middle-class view of literacy where reading in a print-rich environment for many and

varied purposes is a cultural norm. Therefore Expressivist ideologies must be surely characterized as elitist. Delpit refers to the 'insidious benevolence' of Expressivism which in fact 'promote[s] a situation in which only the brightest, middle-class, monolingual students will benefit' (1997, 14).

Yet I have shown in this paper that the poor, working-class students in this study are indeed, in a non-traditional sense, an 'elite' body as they represent the surviving 2 per cent of their original year group. It would appear that lecturers need to revise their ideas of an elite in the South African context: their elite students may well be underprepared for academic literacy as they have traditionally understood it. These students' potential to become an academic elite needs to be deliberately recognized and managed within the learning structures lecturers prepare for students.

I believe that it would be unhelpful to valorise or romanticise the frames that the students bring with them into the academy – they are clearly underprepared for academic reading tasks. But a critical response to the data must surely result in lecturers recognizing their own underpreparedness as teachers unless they realign their own frames. There needs to be a rapprochement of frames.

I also do not believe that the lecturers in this discipline were deliberately obstructive of their students' learning. I would suggest, rather, that they had simply failed to denaturalize or deconstruct the practices that had served them well in the past. Nevertheless this denaturalization needs to be undertaken with some urgency if we are to serve our diverse student population more honourably and usefully. When we do so, the students' potential to become better academics will be realized. But even more importantly, the deliberate and creative accommodation of diverse literacies within the academy could result in the development of a more authentically indigenous South African academic culture.

## NOTES

1 At Rhodes University the name of this course is *English Language for Academic Purposes* (ELAP).

2 Of the Rhodes University Humanities and Commerce students who took ELAP as a subject between 1994 and 1998 only between 25.6 per cent and 38.7 per cent eventually went on to complete their degrees although the percentages are now somewhat higher. Further evidence of the relative underperformance of foundation year students in the Humanities is offered on the basis of their pass rates in History 1 and Sociology 1. In 2001, of the 12 students who registered for these subjects, only six passed History 1 and four passed Sociology 1, all with grades below 60 per cent.

3 In bottom-up processing the reader creates unit-by-unit mental translations of a text with little reference to his/her background knowledge.

4 Top-down processing in reading refers to the ways in which a reader brings a set of expectations to a text which s/he uses to confirm or reject hypotheses proposed by the text.

5 Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) is classroom or home time devoted to silent reading of personally chosen materials without instruction, evaluation or interruption.

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Exploring first year students' and their lecturers' constructions of what it means . . . .

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## Appendix B

### Critical reflections on the role of identity in two respondents' formative assessment practices

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This article reports on a research project that two lecturers on an Academic Literacy course at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (Pietermaritzburg), conducted into their own assessment practices. Noting the contrasting ways in which they had responded to a set of students' essays, they reflected analytically on these differences in terms of a conflict between their professional and personal identities. Using Elbow's notion of 'free writing' (P. Elbow, 1973. *Writing without teachers*) they explored their underlying, implicit motivations as respondents and realized that these were sometimes in conflict with their espoused, conscious ideologies. They had assumed that their shared ideological approaches, centred on Genre Theory and Process Writing, and on a Socio-cultural model of writing in which students are apprenticed into a new discourse (J. Gee, 1996. *Social linguistics and literacies: Ideology in discourses*). In fact, while recording in detail the comments that they had made on the students' essays, it became evident that much of the feedback did not reflect these theoretical approaches, but had more to do with less conscious wishes, processes, and identities (J. Kristeva, 1999. *Revolution in poetic language*). Some of their comments reflected models that were either 'traditionalist' or 'progressivist' (B. Cope and M. Kalantzis, 1993a. *The Power of literacy and the literacy of power*). Using a Critical Action research model, they revisited the research into formative assessment and developed a number of principles of good formative feedback. In the light of these principles and ideologies about literacy, they reflected critically on their assessment practices, and resolved on future directions for research into an improved, more theoretically grounded 'praxis' (W. Carr and S. Kemmis, 1986. *Becoming critical: Education, knowledge, and action research*).

**Keywords:** Academic literacy; assessment; genre; process writing; identity

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This article explores the notion that our roles and identities as lecturers who respond to student writing in the academy are constituted within a number of shifting – sometimes conflicting – notions of ‘self’. In the stressful context of an academic semester, and faced with the daunting task of providing formative written feedback on the first academic essays of large numbers of vulnerable first year students, these conflicts between what we know to be good practice, and what we actually write on the students’ essays, become glaringly evident. This article evaluates the nature of this incoherence and attempts to make sense of its origins. It explores the interface between theory and practice and between our personal and professional identities as we enact our various roles and functions as educators.

The first section of the article describes the context for this research project, how the project grew out of our everyday practice as lecturers on a particular programme. It presents a rationale for using Critical Action research as a model. Thereafter, it gives a brief overview of some of the principles of good formative feedback. We then reflect honestly and critically, using the idea of ‘free writing’ (Elbow 1973), on our variable ‘subject identities’ (Kristeva 1999) as we came to perform the complex task of providing useful formative feedback on our students’ essays. To illustrate this, we record some of our comments on the essays, both those that represent our stronger, more tutored practices and others that represent our more personal motivations and identities. Finally, we reflect on ways in which our awareness of this ideological incoherence could lead to a transformed, improved, professional practice.

## **The research context**

The context for this research was an Academic Literacy course at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. This course is part of a broader Access (Foundation) Programme, which is designed to help first year, mostly Zulu first language students, from impoverished educational backgrounds, adjust to the reading and writing requirements of a Humanities or Social Sciences degree in English. We are both tutors for this course, sharing the teaching of some 70 Access students. During the first semester of 2006, the outcomes of this course were, initially, that the students develop a broad grasp of the notion of ‘genre’ and gain exposure to several varieties of spoken and written genres. Thereafter we focused on writing in one particular genre – the formal academic essay. During the final weeks of the semester, the students were extensively supported in the writing of a first draft, an optional second draft, and then a final version of the essay. The students were required to read and then write, from a variety of source materials, describing the role of radio and television in shaping the lives of South Africans before and after 1994. We responded extensively, and, we hoped, formatively, to the first drafts of the essays but only graded the final versions.

## **Methodology**

The first stage in this essay-writing process was the starting point for this research

project. Between the first and final drafts of the essay, we swapped our students' scripts, initially with a view to standardising our marking criteria for the summative assessment at the end of the semester. This gave us unexpected opportunities for observing, in detail, each other's styles of formative feedback, because the students were required to submit their first drafts alongside their final versions. We started to note the surprisingly different ways in which we gave formative feedback. We considered and discussed these differences and speculated about where they originated. We had assumed that we were from similar ideological 'stables' – Genre Theory<sup>1</sup> and Process Writing.<sup>2</sup> But we wondered if our responses truly conformed to any of the substantial research into good formative feedback from within these theoretical approaches (e.g. Macken and Slade 1993, Macken-Horarik 1996). What exactly were the underlying principles informing our responses, if indeed they were 'principled' at all? We also speculated about whether our comments were experienced as helpful by the students. Which particular interventions were effecting real changes in the students' final versions? Finally, how were our personal and professional identities shaping the kinds of feedback we were giving?

Within this welter of self-reflection, we saw that, in a spirit of collegiality, there was rich potential for peer- and self-evaluation of our assessment practices in general. However, we selected to focus – initially – on only *one* aspect of these practices: the ways in which our own identities as assessors of student writing influenced the nature of our feedback. We were well aware that this would provide only limited insights into a much broader, more complex issue. But by using a Critical Action Research paradigm, which is cyclical by nature, we hoped to initiate a small, practical project into this aspect of our assessment practices and to explore other dimensions in future, on-going cycles of research.

### **The research paradigm: Critical Action Research**

Action Research fitted well with our intentions, because it aims to understand and improve on particular aspects of professional, educational practice – in this case, the quality and nature of our written formative feedback on essays. Action Research usually takes place within 'a relatively circumscribed domain' (Carr and Kemmis 1986, 205). In this case, the context was narrow: an existing group of first year students, the first drafts of their essays, and the written feedback of two tutors.

Besides being an 'activist' model, Action Research is usually also 'critical' (p. 205). This is because it aims to expose and identify the self-interests and ideological incoherence of educators. By reflecting on why they act in particular ways, the educators can then resolve to act in theoretically stronger ways. In this instance, we, as tutors, began to interrogate our identities as respondents and the ideologies driving our formative feedback. Having noted some incoherence within our practices, we wanted to revisit the theoretical frameworks for a better practice, and to develop a stronger, more accountable 'praxis' (p. 190). Another reason why Action Research is 'critical' is

because it aims to be 'emancipatory' (p. 202), that is, to generate real change, bringing 'transformations of consciousness' into 'transformations of social realities' (p. 181). Giving written feedback on first year essays is extremely time-consuming: we needed to be sure that it did indeed transform and empower our students' writing in observable ways.

The 'spirals' or 'cycles' that characterize Action Research involve four phases: planning, acting, observing and reflecting (p. 186). This 'self-reflective spiral' (p. 184) gives evidence of the 'dialectical quality of action research: the dialectic of retrospective analysis and prospective action', (p. 185). This article describes the interface between the observation and analysis of what we actually wrote on the students' scripts, reflections on our identity as respondents, and a revisiting of some of the theories about good assessment practice. Our plans to introduce a sounder more coherent praxis emerged from this process.

Finally, Action Research is 'participatory' and 'inclusive' in character (p. 191). Therefore, this project aims, over time, to work collaboratively with a larger group of tutors, involving them in the research process. At best, this type of research develops 'self-reflective communities' (p. 201). In a context where there are usually seven Academic Literacy teachers, including some fairly inexperienced Master's and doctoral students, across the Pietermaritzburg and Howard College campuses of the University of KwaZulu-Natal, a project such as this one has the potential to be mutually developmental, building capacity within a 'community of practice' (Rowan 1981).

### **Good assessment practices: An overview**

The following ten points were developed as an overview of some of the general principles of good assessment practice. They are based on a variety of research initiatives into this topic from the past 15 years: some are from within Genre Theory and some are not. We have numbered them, and used them as a template, to make our data easier to analyse and refer to later on. They are based on reading extensively around the kinds of feedback practices that support learning: Macken and Slade (1993), Elbow (1994), Boud (1995), Ofsted (1996), Black and William (1998), Torrance and Pryor (1998), Ivanic, Clark and Rimmershaw (2000, 51–65), Luckett and Sutherland (2000), Weeden, Winter and Broadfoot (2002).

1. Good formative feedback builds and protects students' self-esteem and confidence. It should be *task-involving* (focusing on the writing) rather than *ego-involving* (focusing on the writer).
2. The criteria for evaluating the task must be shared openly with the students at the outset of the assignment. Tutors must make sure that students fully understand the criteria.
3. Feedback on the assignments must target only these pre-planned criteria: extraneous issues or superficial errors can be temporarily ignored.

4. Feedback should occur *quickly* if it is to be helpful to the student.
5. Feedback should 'feed-forward' – it should inform future drafts or tasks. It is assessment *for* rather than *of* learning. It should give constructive, realistic, staged advice on how to improve the next draft or assignment and on how to close the gap between what they wrote compared to an ideal answer.
6. It should identify misconceptions. Therefore, it should be *meaning* or *content* focused, identifying the substantive issues, and being selective about which surface errors to correct.
7. Feedback should develop a sense of *partnership* with the student: it should be dialogic and democratic (Ivanic, Clark and Rimmershaw 2000). Facilitative, supportive, collegial feedback deconstructs the image of the tutor as powerful, all-knowing judge. Ivanic, Clark and Rimmershaw (2000) suggest that engaging in dialogue and debate with the student in a collegial manner 'should be the major function of tutor's responses, [but] we have found it to be surprisingly rare' (2000, 57).
8. Elbow (1994) says that feedback in the form of 'descriptive, observational responses . . .' helps students to gain a meta-cognitive awareness of their own writing and thinking processes.
9. Good feedback avoids 'final vocabulary' (Boud 1995). Comments such as 'disappointing', 'you can do better than this' or even 'excellent work' should be avoided.
10. It also avoids overgenerous and unfocussed praise because it can actually reinforce under-achievement. Black and William's (1998) research into feedback says that feedback that provides only a grade, or 'praise and a grade' not only fails to improve students' writing, but also sometimes actually deteriorates it.

The above list is by no means exhaustive. We will refer to all of these principles when we evaluate our own responses and comments on the students' essays.

## **Our identities as respondents**

McLellan (1995) has pointed out that the self is a disappearing phenomenon in the postmodern worldview. As a result, 'rational consciousness is decentred and subject to unconscious wishes, desires, and processes' that are achieved at the expense of a unified image of the self (Weedon 1997, 84). Rather, the individual takes up a unified and rational self as a function of the discourse in which she is engaged (Kristeva 1999, 72). But this position is only temporary, because within another discourse the self can take up another identity. Therefore, in Kristeva's terms, our subject identity is constantly changing, influenced by the repressed meanings of our unconscious. (Weedon 1997, 85; Kristeva 1999, 74–75). Personal identity, therefore, can be adjusted to fit the context and the discourse – while retaining some sense of continuity. We explore this idea as we attempt to make sense of the shifting interactions between our personal and professional

identities as they are reflected in our feedback. The paragraphs that follow are based on a free writing exercise (Elbow 1973, 4). Here, we attempt to break the habit of trying to write and edit at the same time so that words, when they finally come off the end of the pencil or keyboard onto the page or screen, express something of the inner consciousness that we are trying to suppress through editing. Through this exercise, we were trying to expose and make sense of the various identities that come into play as we respond to the students' writing.

Penny wrote:

What I am really interested in is getting the students to write clearly. For me, incoherence is the enemy. I hate muddle and confusion. (On a personal level as well – in my home for example!) So I think hard about what I think they are trying to say in their essays and offer them the language to try and say it. So I probably do offer more linguistic, structural help than I should. I want to help them to “dignify” what they are saying so that it sounds more convincing. I am powerfully motivated by empathy. I have a strong sense of the students' vulnerability and I really want them to feel better about their writing and feel that they have a place in the university. I often find myself considering “ego” issues while I am giving feedback. So I am perhaps more “ego-involving” than I should be and perhaps that is not helpful. I have a sort of “encouragement is all” mindset and am very anxious about causing hurt or offence. This probably means that I tend to praise too much, making bland, global comments. If I am honest with myself, I think that I don't really see myself and the students as “equals” or “partners” in any real sense. There is still a strong power differential in my mind. I want the students to learn a way of writing in the university that empowers them to “make it” and survive. I want them to “mushfake”<sup>3</sup> convincingly. I see myself as having a strong obligation to help them get by. So there's little discussion about possibilities or alternatives. I tend to say: this is the way to do it . . . do it like this, and you will be “safe”! I think this is what motivates my comments. I am ashamed to say there is a maternal instinct operating here.

Billy wrote:

Although I share a commitment with Penny to essay process, I have perhaps been more strongly influenced by genre studies and the necessity to strongly direct students into the correct generic forms expected in academic discourse. To this end, I find that the shortness of time in a semester long program leaves little space for the niceties of self-esteem building. I am inclined to be tougher on the students than Penny is!

I want to be explicit about what is wrong with the essay and to stimulate the students cognitive processes by asking questions about what they have written, redirecting them to the reading to find more information and curbing their natural instinct for plagiarism. At times, I know that combining this with corrections of grammar and structure can be overwhelming for the students so I am willing to sacrifice grammatical correctness and a measure of coherence in my feedback in the hope that as the students' thinking becomes clearer, these problems will sort themselves out. I can be quite hard on the more able students because I want them to push themselves. I am also not afraid to let students “fail” at the drafting stage because I believe they are strongly motivated by marks and can sometimes be lulled into a false sense of security if they think their first effort was just good enough to pass.

## The Data

As we recorded the many comments on our students' essays we began to understand them in terms of the conflicting, underlying identities that were powerfully influencing the kinds of comments we had chosen to make. We noted that two clear contrasts emerged: first, between our own different feedback styles, and, secondly, between what we metaphorically termed our *above-ground* practices based on a tutored, conscious set of values and *underground* practices based on the subconscious identities which we had explored in our free writing. We ascertained that at least some of our practices did conform to the 'Good Principles' we outlined earlier. Others plainly demonstrated our untutored *raw* identities. We will deal firstly with examples of our *above-ground* praxis and then examples of comments that are driven more powerfully by our *underground*, more personal, identities.

### Feedback that supports learning

The assessment criteria for the essay were shared with the students in advance (Good Principle 2); and each essay draft was accompanied by an assessment sheet outlining these criteria. In addition, our students had the first drafts of their essays returned to them within a week (Good Principle 4). We also found not many of our comments were unrelated to our criteria (Good Principle 3). Clearly these are 'tutored' practices that are helpful to the students.

In addition to these fundamentally good practices, we identified a number of particular personal strengths. Penny's desire to build her students' self-esteem, and to be 'descriptive and observational' (See Good Principles 1 and 8) are often evident:

"Nice summing up sentence here"; "Better here: more relevant"; "This is a nice introduction"; "You have tried really hard with your linking language and nearly succeeded"; "Nice transitional sentence that leads the reader into the next section".

These comments are bland, but are undoubtedly kind and attentive, building self-esteem in the students.

Theories about helpful feedback inform us that it should be meaning and content focused. It should identify substantive, conceptual issues in the students' writing and help them to focus on the content of the essay readings and clarify what they mean (Good Principle 6). One of the strengths in Billy's feedback is his attempt to get students to reflect accurately the content of what they had been reading and stretch their conceptual understanding of what they are writing about. We noted the following examples in his feedback:

- "What kind of places did people live in and why did the government want to keep them there? You must explain the government policy here in as much detail as you can"; "Theatre for Development is not radio or TV. The point is that the producers of these SABC programmes were inspired by the methods of Theatre for Development"; "You must have two separate

paragraphs here. One should explain why Soul City is effective and the other should focus on the violence and gangsterism in Yizo Yizo and say why this programme is less successful.”

There were numerous examples of the ‘feed-forward’ principle (Good Principle 5) aimed at helping the students to improve each subsequent draft of their essay. But the focus of the ‘feed-forward’ was different. Penny’s suggestions were often aimed at helping the students build a more coherent structure for their next draft:

“You need to reorder your paragraphs. Discuss all the pre-1994 paras<sup>4</sup> together and keep all the post-1994 paras together”; “Shouldn’t this paragraph be placed earlier in your essay?”  
 “You could split the paragraph here because you are moving on to a different topic.”

However, Billy’s ‘feed-forward’ comments reflect the stronger conceptual focus we noted earlier:

“Make sure you are using your own words here. See also my suggestions for where you need to explain more”; “You need to rewrite this so that it answers the question: it must explain how the SABC were trying to influence young people using popular soap operas”; “Your first paragraph needs to explain in more detail how the SABC supported the Bantustan policy.”

## Feedback that may not support learning

However, our ‘underground’ identities were also in evidence in our feedback: sometimes our comments may have failed to ‘build and protect students’ self-esteem and confidence’ (Good Principle 1). Billy, for example, was very forthright on a number of occasions when the students’ conceptual grasp of the readings and organisation of information tested his patience. For instance:

“This is wrong! The point is that by questioning tradition the plays were questioning the whole idea of separate traditional cultures and the idea that people should live in traditional homelands”; “You have quite some work to do. I expect more sophistication in your argument”; “Your information is totally disorganised and the same points are repeated again and again”; “You just write down any idea that comes into your head without thinking about how it relates to the topic or to the rest of the ideas in the paragraph.”

Often Penny’s personal motivations led her to comment on students’ essays using ‘Over-generous and unfocussed praise’ (Ofsted 1996, Good Principle 10) and ‘Final vocabulary’ (Boud 1995, Good Principle 9). The following ‘end-comments’ (the tutor’s final comments in the space at the end of an essay) are examples of this; they do not specifically guide the students on ways to improve their drafts and may give them a false sense of the quality of their essays:

“A good effort, but this could be improved in the final draft”; “Some nice paragraphs but I think your essay could be more coherent. You also need a clearer thesis”; “You tried hard

and this is a really good effort!” “Apart from language errors, this essay is quite strong. But there's room for improvement! Good luck!”

Penny later reflected painfully on the patronising tone of these comments.

In contrast, some of Billy's end-comments were vivid and unsparing: 'This is a fail'; 'Pass, but you need to do a lot more work'. This is in keeping with Billy's free writing: 'I am not afraid to let students fail at the drafting stage . . . because they can be lulled into a false sense of security.'

We think it is also significant that, in keeping with our personal identities, we found almost no evidence of Good Principle 7 in our feedback. This principle sees the responder in partnership with the student, dialoguing with her in a supportive, collegial way. The following example of this kind of comment was almost unique in the data: 'Have you said enough about whether their influences were successful or not? Do you need to point this out more explicitly?'

Rather, we observe ourselves deliberately helping our students to 'mushfake' (Gee 1996) their entry into generic forms. However, it seems we do this in rather different ways. In the following example, Penny offers the student language to help him express his meaning in a more convincing, academic way although the student's original meaning is reasonably clear. In the final sentence of his conclusion one student had written: 'In my point of view media is good especially for education but the main problem is misconception and propaganda.' Penny had suggested he change this sentence to: '(Therefore in my opinion) (the) media (can be)(a positive influence,) especially for education, but the ( . . . ) problem is (that it can cause) misconception(s) and propaganda (as well).' (All the underlined parts in brackets are what Penny suggested he add or take out of his original sentence.) Billy's feedback also provided strong, detailed directives rather than setting up any sort of dialogue with the students:

“Using your own words try to explain what Radio Bantu was trying to do in order to support the apartheid government. Begin like this: 'The first example of how the SABC tried to influence the lives of a group of SAs was IsiZulu and IsiXhosa dramas on Radio Bantu in the 1970s . . . .’”

It would appear that our interest in teaching generic forms takes different forms: above Billy gives a helpful way in which a concept could begin to be generated, whereas Penny is inclined to provide linguistic forms that specifically model the academic voice and manner.

Other examples of Penny's drive to help students' writing to look and sound more authentically 'academic' led sometimes to her giving 'extraneous' comments that were not central to the assessment criteria, (in defiance of Good Principle 2): 'It is always good at this point to write out the essay topic in full, word for word'; 'Find another word for "discuss" in this paragraph'. (This student had used 'discuss' three times in a paragraph: this did not affect meaning but is purely a stylistic issue); 'This vague word should be avoided in academic writing'. She was referring to a student's repeated use of the word 'thing'.

## Conclusions

We have drawn a number of conclusions from this project in professional self-reflection. First, we need to take account of the fact that we are dealing with a course aimed specifically at assisting many of our students to deal with linguistic and cognitive under-preparedness for university study. These are clear and bitter consequences of apartheid education and the continuing crisis of education in our country. This context may perhaps necessitate overtly directive feedback, which is less about partnership and dialogue between tutor and student, (as Ivanic et al. 2000, illustrate in their paper on tutor's feedback), and more about building capacity and identifying misconceptions. It is very difficult not to be prescriptive when the students are so new and inexperienced in the academic community.

It is possible, however, that students may benefit from a more tentative, democratic and collegial voice in their respondents' feedback (Good Principle 7). Investigating how the students experienced our comments would entail yet another cycle of planning, acting, observing and reflecting (Carr and Kemmis 1986). At this stage, we can only recognize that, in different ways, we both tend to be strongly prescriptive, even controlling, in what we write on students' essays. We clearly assume a significant power differential between ourselves and the students, but are not yet able to ascertain the effects of this on the students and their writing. It is possible that a strongly prescriptive approach alienates students as they attempt to develop independent identities as meaning-makers within the academic discourse community.

While Penny's comments may seem less obviously prescriptive than Billy's, they are often driven by a sense that the students can usefully develop some superficial skills and competencies which will help them to survive the complex, seemingly irrational demands of the academy. This approach may have its practical usefulness in helping the students to 'fake' academic literacy, as Gee (1996) describes. But we have speculated that what she has assumed is 'empowerment' is in fact an assumption that the students cannot be trusted to make meaning on their own, in their own way. It would seem that Penny's personal interests and identities may well skew her more measured, professional ones at times. In her feedback, it seems that Penny sometimes enacts models of writing that are more technical and instrumental than she likes to admit. This could suggest that she works at times in a 'traditionalist' paradigm that assumes literacy is a kind of micro-level skill that can be transmitted independently of context or meaning (Cope and Kalantzis 1993a). For Penny, this is an uncomfortable, but instructive insight. But in the academic community in which harsh judgements are often made on the basis of superficial linguistic issues, or on 'non-standard' usages, the instinct to protect vulnerable students is powerful.

On the other hand, there is some evidence that Billy seems to assume that as the students find what they *mean*, the language for expressing the idea will follow naturally and automatically. Billy seems at times to *exhort* the students to better writing. But maybe the exhortations are not clear and concise enough. This model of writing could

be more 'expressivist/progressivist' (Cope and Kalantzis 1993a), (a model of writing that suggests that plenty of unstructured exposure to interesting ideas and materials will encourage the student to make meaning independently of the educator). Billy may be less of a Genre theorist than he might think.

To sum up, it would seem our assessment practices are located within a number of conflicting principles and identities. It is important not to simplify or bi-focalise these identities. It appears that a 'syncretism' is at work: sometimes we work in one mode (a more professional, tutored mode) and sometimes in another (a personal, even sometimes 'parental' mode) and sometimes in both. There appear to be multiple identities informing our feedback. We have observed for ourselves the shifting nature of our 'subject identities' (Kristeva 1999). Whilst we recognize that we enact a number of helpful and positive practices in the ways in which we respond to students' writing, in the heat of responding extensively to some 35 essays within a working week, our intuitive, untutored responses became embarrassingly evident in places. (There were even some examples of unfinished sentences, confusing abbreviations and unreadable scrawls in our feedback, clearly generated by the pressured circumstances.) Therefore, although we do indeed share many of the ideas of Genre Theory and Process Writing, and are influenced by some ideas from a Socio-cultural model of literacy we also have quite distinct and different personal identities and models, which drive other aspects of our feedback practices.

At this stage in our action research cycle, we are only dealing with our input into our students' written texts. We recognize the limits of this perspective. In the next stage, we hope to address the students' experiences of our comments and what they take up into subsequent stages of the writing process. We plan to interview a new set of students at the same stage in the essay process in the next academic year. We need to ascertain what they found helpful or hurtful, expected or unexpected, useful or useless, discouraging or transformative. We also need to track in detail the kinds of changes that students make in their essays in subsequent drafts and why they chose to make those kinds of decisions. We have also planned a workshop with tutors and colleagues to encourage them to engage in similar reflections and discussions about their own feedback practices, thereby enriching their professional practice as respondents.

We believe that we can assume that there have already been some 'transformations of consciousness' (Carr and Kemmis 1986) in our roles and identities as tutors. There is also some evidence in our plans for the assessment workshop with tutors and for further cycles of research with the students, that this initiative will gradually make a more general impact on the quality of the assessment practices within our module, thereby generating 'transformations in social reality' (1986) as well.

## Notes

1 Billy is most strongly influenced by Genre Theory, which in itself is a product of systemic functional approaches to language. The attitude of Genre theorists to writing instruction is summed up in the following quotation:

A genre approach to literacy teaching involves being explicit about the way language works to make meaning. It means engaging the students in the role of apprentice with the teacher in the role of expert on language system and function. It means an emphasis on content, on structure and on the sequence in the steps that a learner goes through to become literate in a formal educational setting. (Cope and Kalantzis 1993b, 1)

2 Our course is located most fully within a process based approach to writing in which the students are expected to draft and redraft their writing tasks at least once and in this way take more responsibility and ownership of the process of getting their writing into an acceptable format. As Carter (1996, 15) argues,

Research in domains of both first and second language teaching shows that we do learn effectively by making things our own, and by being personally involved in the process of constructing a text. It has been demonstrated that process-based approaches to writing with an emphasis on ownership of the text lead to increased motivation to use language.

However, this approach with its emphasis on individual responsibility is not totally incompatible with the Genre approach that informs some of our pedagogy. Again, following Carter,

recent work on modelling in relation to joint and individual construction ... operates successfully to show writing to be both *process* and *product*-based, and that work on genre can be integrated with more holistic approaches to language learning and development. (Carter 1996, 16)

Our approach to writing can therefore most accurately be described as syncretistic and eclectic.

3 A term meaning to fake or mimic competence, used in the academic context by James Gee (1996).

4 At this point, we should be clear that spelling and abbreviations have been reproduced exactly as they were written on the students' scripts.

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# Appendix C

## Understanding the Impact that Principled Formative Feedback has on First Year Students' Writing: Is it Useable or Not?: An Action Research Project

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*Abstract: This paper reports on the second cycle of a broader critical action research project that is investigating the uses of formative assessment in an academic writing course for first year students at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa. This stage of the project explores the impact that lecturers' written comments on an early writing assignment had on the 12 students who received them. The students' prior experiences of assessment are investigated, their emotional responses to the formative comments, and whether the lecturers' feedback was comprehensible and useable or not. Following Black and Wiliam's (1998) extensive review of the generally positive effects that improving formative feedback has on learning, the lecturers involved in the study assumed that their careful and principled formative comments on the students' essays would be helpful and developmental. In fact, their comments and intentions were often misinterpreted and misunderstood by the students and possible reasons for this are implied by the data. The findings led the lecturers to conclude that their mode of giving formative feedback needed to be re-evaluated and redesigned. In the light of these insights a possible way forward into the next phase of the project is envisioned. Different ways of giving formative feedback, more closely tailored to the students' past educational experiences and actual needs, are planned for the next phase of the project.*

Keywords: Assessment, Academic Literacy, Useable Feedback

### Introduction

**T**HIS PAPER REPORTS on the second stage of an ongoing critical action research initiative broadly exploring the use of formative assessment in an Academic Literacy course at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa. In the first cycle of this research, we, as the two lecturers who teach this course, gathered data on our formative assessment practices and reflected critically on the different ways in which both our personal identities and our ideological principles shaped the nature of our written feedback on students' writing. We observed conflicts between our principles and our practice: some of our feedback was strongly principled, yet other feedback entailed less conscious, personal agendas. Furthermore, the nature of the feedback each lecturer was giving on the students' essays for this course was significantly different, implying that we valued and noted different qualities and problems in the students' writing. As part of the initial project, we revisited some of the research literature on good formative feedback practice (Boud, 1990; Macken and Slade, 1993; Elbow, 1997; Black and Wiliam, 1998; Torrance and Pryor, 1998; Ivanic, Clark and Rimmershaw, 2000: 51 – 65; Weeden, Winter and Broadfoot, 2002; Lockett and Sutherland, 2000). We then recorded, analysed and evaluated our written responses on the students' texts in the

light of these principles. The data showed clearly that our comments were driven by personal values, on the one hand, and, on the other, by a more tutored awareness of the nature of good feedback practice. This cycle of research provided us with opportunities for professional self-reflection and an improved "praxis" (Carr and Kemis, 1986) by making us more aware of the way our identities could interfere with our assessment (Meyer and Niven 2007).

In this next cycle of the investigation we responded to the first draft of a set of students' essays, this time with more deliberation and self-awareness. For example, we avoided all summative-style comments and grades and all unfocussed praise or criticism, whilst giving clear, detailed 'feedforward' advice for improving the text, rather than 'feedback'. We also tried to focus the students on meaning-related issues rather than superficial language corrections, at the same time avoiding comment on anything extraneous to the pre-set criteria for evaluating the task. In other words, we consciously adhered to the principles of good formative feedback which we had outlined in the previous cycle of the research, (Meyer and Niven, 2007). As a further revision to our practice, we decided to experiment with the *colour* of our comments on the students' essays: to distinguish between "text-based" and "surface-level" revisions, (Faigley and Witte, 1981). So we agreed to use a green pen for text-based, meaning-related



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comments and a pink pen for surface-level 'corrections'. We hoped that this would help the students to be more aware of the different kinds and levels of comment on their essays and both lecturers explained th's usage to the students in advance.

### Critical Action Research

The plan outlined above was in keeping with the principles of action research which is always "...experimental ... [focusing] on the effects of researcher's direct actions of practice ... with the goal of improving the performance quality of ... an area of concern," (Dick, 2002). In this case, the area of concern was the effectiveness of formative assessment in a writing programme. Furthermore, "... action research involves utilizing a systematic cyclical method of planning, taking action, observing, evaluating ... and critical reflecting before planning the next cycle", (O'Brien, 1998). It always aims to implement a change and improve a community – in this instance, a small learning community of 1<sup>st</sup> year students and their lecturers. Action research is also participatory, (Carr and Kemis, 1986). It is "co-research, by and for those to be helped", (Wadsworth, 1998). "It tries to be genuinely democratic and non-coercive" and is often "consultative" (ibid). It concerns empowerment and would thus avoid seeing students, as in this case, as mere passive recipients of the research process.

A weakness in the initial action research cycle was that it did not incorporate the students' perspectives on the 'drafting/ feedback/ redrafting' process. We were aware that the students' responses to feedback comments were a central concern – the nature of a lecturer's written *inmut*, however good, is only as useful as its potential *uptake* in the students' future writing projects (c.f. Heift 2004, Panova and Lyster 2002). This second cycle of research, therefore, focused on the *recipients* of the feedback and sought *their* subjective experiences of formative assessment, involving them more directly as participants in the research process. Given that the kinds of feedback the students were now receiving was theoretically stronger than in the initial phase of the project, we still needed to establish how useable or effective it was. This cycle, therefore, has a particular focus on the students' past and present experiences of assessment, especially their emotional responses to it, and on how understandable and useable it could be for the improvement of their academic writing.

### The Research Context

The twelve students selected for this project were chosen from a group of some 60 students, all of whom had been selected for the 'Extended Curriculum' programme at the University of KwaZulu-

Natal in Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal. This means that none of the group had qualified, by the usual criteria, for admission into a mainstream 3-year degree programme because of their low Matriculation (school-leaving) points and some even lacked a university exemption. All of them come from poor socio-economic backgrounds, are supported with Financial Aid packages, and their schools are poorly resourced in terms of books, teaching, buildings and equipment. All the students in this study use English as their 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> additional language. Although they had been identified as 'disadvantaged' in terms of their relatively impoverished prior educational experiences, they were all understood to have academic potential given the right kinds of social and emotional support and academic nurture in the initial, and later, stages of their university experience. The Extended Curriculum is an initiative that aims to improve throughput levels in students who, for all the reasons mentioned above, may be at risk of academic failure.

The 4-year Extended Curriculum provides, in the students' first year, an academic writing course called Academic Literacy, English language development, computer literacy training and a broad introduction to the Social Sciences in a course named 'Africa in the World'. The Academic Literacy course makes extensive use of process writing methodologies and formative assessment. In the second semester of their 1<sup>st</sup> year, and in their second and subsequent academic years, the students are provided with integrated, but ever decreasing, academic support within a range of mainstream disciplines in the Humanities.

To understand the place of this project in the cycle of our teaching it is important to know that the first semester of Academic Literacy develops an awareness of academic discourse to the point where the students can produce a full academic essay by the end of the semester. One of the first exercises in the Academic Literacy course entails students telling stories, recording a chosen story, listening to, transcribing and redrafting the story in a written form for final assessment. In a later exercise they learn about the features of some basic academic genres and they read a short article on some of the differences between spoken and written language. The assignment in this research cycle fits in after this: the students write two basic paragraphs, a 'mini' essay, illustrating the premise that the mode and the channels of written and spoken language are different. These paragraphs are formatively assessed and then rewritten by the students. In a later exercise they practice paraphrasing an informal magazine style article into more formal academic discourse. Towards the end of the semester they are extensively supported in the writing of two drafts of a longer essay, the

final version of which represents the main, summative assessment of the semester.

The twelve students who were approached were willing to be interviewed and for the short essays they had written on the two modes of language to be analyzed. We photostatted the first-draft essays including our feedback, and subsequently the second draft, and thereafter conducted informal interviews with each of the students. The questions were based, broadly, on the questionnaire in Appendix A. The interviews were recorded and we then selectively transcribed the data and analysed the students' responses.

### The Research Plan

We sought answers to the following five questions:

1. What prior experiences of 'marking' or written feedback had the students had at school? This question was founded on the assumption that their prior experiences of assessment would influence their ability to respond positively to the formative assessment methods that they would encounter on the Academic Literacy course.
2. Did they experience this kind of assessment as encouraging or discouraging/ motivating or demotivating?
3. Did the use of colour in the written comments (pink and green) help the students to understand the distinction between surface-level corrections and meaning-related feedback?
4. Were the tutors' comments on their essays understandable?
5. How useable were the lecturers' comments in the redrafting process?

### Literature Review

Black and Wiliam (1998) surveyed much of the research literature on the topic of formative assessment and whether it can significantly raise standards of learning. They reviewed nine years' worth of articles on formative assessment in more than 160 journals. They read 580 articles or chapters from books on this topic. They then wrote the report, *Inside the Black Box : Raising Standards through Classroom Assessment*, which references 250 sources. This report finally concluded that the practice of strengthening formative assessment does offer substantial learning gains. This seems to hold true in a variety of contexts – in several countries and age groups – including university undergraduates. They came to this conclusion mainly on the basis of quantitative measurements, by comparing average improvements in test scores. The typical effect sizes for formative assessment experiments were between 0.4 and 0.7. They explain this as the equivalent to a gain of two

to three grades at GCSE in English schools. The evidence also seems to indicate that the practice of using and improving formative assessment assists low academic achievers more than high achievers, a fact that is particularly significant in terms of this research context (see Section 3 above). Black and Wiliam's high view of the potential of formative assessment to enhance learning holds good despite the fact that they acknowledge that it is often ignored, misunderstood, a major chore for teachers, and is not always of a high quality, (Black and Wiliam, 1998).

Formative assessment aims, quite purposefully, to "aid learning", (Weedon, Winter and Broadfoot, 2002:19). Other types of assessment have quite different aims: diagnostic assessment identifies students' current competencies and problems; summative assessment reviews learners' performances and certifies that a certain standard of learning has been attained – it also predicts future performances. Evaluative assessment sees how teachers or institutions are performing, (Weedon, *et al*, 2002:20). But it is in the very nature of formative assessment to help students to "... understand the purposes of their learning and thereby grasp what they need to do to achieve", (Black and Wiliam, 1998:10). It concerns *learning goals*, rather than *performance goals*.

Weedon *et al*, (2002:36) represent the difference between formative assessment and summative assessment in terms of "weighing pigs... the pig doesn't get any fatter just by being weighed ... it is about involving the pig in its own fattening and about constructively using the information from the scales to help decide on feeding programmes". In other words, summative assessment measures performance but this does not necessarily result in change. Alongside measurement there must be some action: formative assessment clarifies learning goals and sets out strategies for improvement. Assessment that does not do this is not really 'formative', but some other kind of assessment. Wiliam (1999) quotes an example of research by Butler (1988) in which a group of learners were divided into four. The first group were given feedback in the form of comments on their work; Group 2 were only given grades; Group 3 were given praise and Group 4 received no feedback at all on their tasks. Those in the first group, the ones who received comments only, scored higher on later tests than those in any other group. The students given praise thought they were doing better than the others but were, in fact, scoring no higher than those who had been given grades or no comments at all. This research questions the value of feedback in the form of both praise and grades. Yet these latter forms of feedback are probably the commonest ways in which educators assess their students.

Effective formative assessment relies on students becoming self-assessors, (Tanner and Jones, 2003). High achievers intuitively self-assess, whereas lower achievers find this more difficult – they are either complacent or overly hard on themselves, (Weedon *et al*, 2002: 76). Educators' comments on their students' writing should be designed to help students to reach a point of independent self-reflection or meta-cognition. Good formative assessment sets up a dialogue between teachers and learners that recognises a shared responsibility for learning. It enables students to manage their own learning development. Formative assessment that works well sets the students clear targets. These targets must be 'SMART': Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant (to the outcomes) and Time-related, (Weedon *et al*, 2002: 38). The targets set should be challenging and educators should follow up on them.

Another important aspect of the literature on assessment concerns the link between assessment and student motivation. Reineke (1998) makes the claim that while instruction touches the mind, assessment touches the heart. Assessment affects students emotionally. Comments that teachers and lecturers make on the margins of students' assignments often "... remain with them for a lifetime and substantially affect their capacity for future learning", (Reineke, 1998:7). Students feel elation, dejection, fear, excitement, anger and disappointment, but are rarely neutral about the comments that are made on their work, (Weedon *et al*, 2002: 15). It is not surprising therefore, that what lecturers tell students about their writing powerfully impacts their self-esteem and academic motivation. If the feedback acknowledges what they have achieved and then offers them clear steps to remedy what they have failed to achieve, then they can see the way ahead and are enabled and encouraged to move forward. This, in turn, builds confidence and motivation. Weedon *et al*, (2002: 15) say that: "It is almost beyond belief that the role of emotion in learning, and in assessment in particular, has received so little attention within ... educational research".

However, it is also important to point out that the literature on assessment does not favour indiscriminating praise, (Black and Wiliam, 1998). Whilst praise certainly builds confidence, it will not, of itself, improve performance. In fact, shallow, unfocussed praise can actually deter progress (*ibid*). It is better to describe exactly what was done well or to show students how to improve their performance further, which, when they meet the expectation, in turn helps improve motivation.

The research reported above illustrates some general truths about the effectiveness of formative assessment, but Hyland's article about the usability of teacher written feedback (1998) explores this issue

in a more individual way. She reminds us that "... skilled teachers will vary their feedback according to textual features, including the target genre, the ability, and the personality of each individual student", (Ferris, Pezone, Tade and Tinti, 1997, in Hyland, 1998:256). Her longitudinal investigation into the individual responses of six students' responses to two teachers' written feedback suggests that it can be very difficult for teachers to meet the varied expectations of all their students. "Individual students may have very different perceptions of what constitutes useful feedback", (Hyland, 1998:279). Positive feedback and praise can be distrusted if it is not frequently given in the students' own culture. The six students, who were of various ages, backgrounds and proficiency levels, had highly individualized expectations of useable written feedback. The feedback situation, she concluded, "... has great potential for miscommunication and misunderstanding", (1998:255), and that there needs to be more dialogue to clarify what teachers and students expect of each other. "Teachers need to allocate some time for face-to-face discussion with the individual student on feedback issues, to gain an awareness of the student's perspective and an understanding of what each student brings with them ... in terms of past experiences and expectations", (1998: 280).

We felt that, as teachers of academic writing, we had significantly raised our standards of formative assessment. We set out to discover how the students had experienced this improved level and whether for them it had resulted in significant learning gains.

## Findings

The first question in our interview questionnaire (see Appendix A) explored the students' previous experiences of assessment at school. The responses that students gave us largely confirmed our intuition that the feedback they had received on their assignments had been meagre and primarily summative in purpose. The teachers' interventions had been largely confined to correcting superficial errors of grammar, spelling and punctuation. There was also an indication that they understood the teachers' comments and interventions as negative judgments on their work: no comments at all implied success and approval, that '... *I was doing fine*'.

- *Actually, in high school I did not get a lot of comments [on my written work] because I think I was doing fine ... maybe I got comments like I need to structure my essay in a good way;*
- *They said my language is a little bit poor and there is a problem with punctuation. They did not make much comment about my ideas or explain any problems in person;*
- *Just corrected the spelling and the punctuation;*

- *[In English] it was just commas and grammar and he put the mark on and he did not explain why we got the marks. In other subjects we did not even get commas;*
- *Usually it was about spelling, punctuation; he didn't explain it to us; you just take your work and put it in your file;*
- *They just gave marks and sometimes ticks;*
- *They used to write 'give examples' or 'try to be clear' and 'correct spellings';*
- *They used to say 'good work', 'keep it up' 'excellent' and stuff like that.*

None of the students in this study ever reported experiences of their work having been marked formatively. Their experience had been that assessment invariably implied *grading* and that any comments that were made were usually negative – it was better not to get them. Some teachers tried to give formative advice, such as *'try and be clear'* and *'[you] need to structure [your] essay in a good way'*, but failed to give specific help about how this might be achieved. It also seems that some teachers praised their students' work, recognising the need to build self-esteem, but did not tell them why they had done well, or suggest strategies for further improvement. One student remarked that she always got *'about 38 out of 50'* and the remark *'well done'*. No advice appears to have been given on how she might have attained a higher mark than that.

Their teachers also seem to have graded work fairly infrequently. In response to Question 2 (see Appendix A) which explores how often they had had written work assessed in their final year at school, their answers ranged from, *"I can only think of one"*, to *"three essays"*, to *"not more than five times"*. Clearly the students had had neither extensive nor frequent experiences of assessment before they came to university.

Given the relative paucity of these prior experiences, we explored whether the large amount of written feedback on the students' essays on the Academic Literacy course seemed surprising to them (Question 3: Appendix A). Some interviewees responded to this question with nervous and profuse apologies and promises to do better, which showed that they actually interpreted our attempts at discursive formative feedback as criticism and an indication that they were not performing to expectations. Two extracts from interviews, recorded below, are particularly poignant examples of this:

1)

Tutor: *But were you surprised that I wrote so much [on your essay]?*

G: *I was surprised because I thought I did better but ...*

Tutor: *So all of that stuff I wrote was a bad thing. ...Lots of feedback on your assignment shows you are doing badly?*

G: *Yes*

Tutor: *You don't think of it as giving you help?*

G: *I didn't know...*

(2)

C: *I am apologizing for that [... all the comments on my essay]*

Tutor: *You don't have to apologize; I am trying to understand how I can explain to you better what I want. What can I do better?*

C: *Everything you thought about is right, but I will try to add more, and next time I will sort it out.*

Sadly, the rest of the interview was taken up with the tutor's assurances that the student was not about to be excluded from the programme forthwith. It was from these responses that we deduced the students' feeling that quantities of written feedback on their work implied, not care and concern as we had imagined, but criticism and failure. The concept of building a helpful dialogue with students through the medium of their written work was completely alien to the students and the motives for the feedback comments were misinterpreted by both parties. These confused, negative emotions, recorded above, surprised us because we felt that our feedback had been deliberately kind and helpful.

In another response to Question 3, a student described herself as *"... frightened at first. I was angry. I couldn't take it. After 2 days you explained it to us in class, then I was OK"*. This student had plagiarized her first essay, almost word for word. In response the lecturer had commented, quite kindly and constructively she thought, as follows: *"These are nice ideas from Ferraro and Palmer but you really need to learn to paraphrase the ideas of other writers. In academic writing we get our ideas from other writers but then we try and say them in our own words. What is your understanding of F + P?"* We were interested to note that in contrast to the initial negative reaction, this student clearly found the extensive oral feedback given to the whole class, after the essays had been returned, helpful and restorative. Yet another student described herself as feeling *"...very uncomfortable... at school I always had perfect feedback. I wasn't offended but I was shocked ... At school I was the one who was very good in English"*. Even within the very limited scope of our study these findings strongly confirm the findings of Reineke (1998) and Weedon *et al* (2002) about the central role of emotions in colouring students' ability to accept and respond to formative feedback.

Some students saw our comments in a positive light: *"I must say, your feedback is quite nice: You don't, like, judge"*, and, *"Actually it helped me. I*

saw my mistakes. I wasn't disappointed". However, it is important to recognise that these students are still seeing the lecturer's comments in terms of "mistakes". This is confirmed by a similar response: "I was not disappointed because I took your comments as corrections" [our emphasis].

We also discovered that the students did not always understand the feedback on their essays: For example, one participant reported that:

- ... what usually happens is that I think I understand the feedback that is being given to me and I think I've got the right instructions, but when my essay is returned then I am surprised and think maybe I misunderstood something... For instance repeating yourself, I did not recognize that I was repeating myself. I thought I was trying to explain different things.

Another said:

- Next time ... I should come to you and maybe ask you to clarify your comments, because sometimes I think I have understood the comments but then I don't.

Several students talked about understanding most of the comments but often simply excluding problematic sections where they could not make full sense of the comment: "I left it out because I didn't understand it fully". As Hyland (1998) also found, the feedback situation carries great potential for misunderstanding and miscommunication that can only be clarified by a face-to-face dialogue.

A related issue is that although the student may think she understands the advice the lecturer has given, she finds it very difficult and complex to enact during the redrafting process. The following comment demonstrates this frustration:

- everything was clear and I got the point of the comments, but I just don't know how to improve from that ... that's my problem ... For some of the points, they were like hard to clear up, I don't know why ... I think I just didn't take much time to like rethink and consider them thoroughly and so that's why ... You know, to be honest, I'm not good at, like, thinking or deeply thinking about something... I just write ...

Content-focused feedback makes unexpectedly difficult cognitive demands on this student. She blames herself and says that she is not good at 'thinking' and she 'just write[s]' but it is possible that she was unable to make use of the feedback because she had had no prior experience of this kind of feedback and no explicit directions about how to solve her cognitive confusion.

Another student demonstrates the same problem, illustrated in the following exchange:

Lecturer: *Did I not tell you what to write about?*

S: *You wrote that [my essay] was a good start and I had to go further.*

Lecturer: *Didn't I tell you to go and read the chapter again? Did that not give you any more ideas?*

S: *Quite a few ideas, but I could not understand it and put it in my own words. I could not use your feedback because I did not understand [the reading].*

It seems that even if a student understands our advice, it is a rather more complex task applying it. The advice, in this case, was un-useable. Simply suggesting that the student 'go further' and 'read the chapter again ... for more ideas', was not nearly detailed enough to be helpful to the student. Although the student was able to use the first part of the advice, to develop some more ideas, he needed further help to proceed in clear stages.

The attempt to differentiate between surface errors (pink pen) and content/cognitive (green) feedback was a disaster. Even though we both thought that we had explained the use of different colours on the essays, we were clearly unsuccessful: For example, these rather amusing responses:

- *I thought you had just run out of pen.*
- *I thought the other colour was the other lecturer.*
- *I thought it was something to do with the computer colours for showing mistakes*

Only two students more or less understood it:

- *Green for adding stuff like a topic sentence; pink for language such as changing the 1st person to the 3rd person.*
- *The pink one was for punctuation and constructing the sentence and the green one means there is not enough information or it was not clear.*

This was another example of miscommunication: we decided to mediate the use of different colours for different kinds of feedback much more thoroughly in future, or we felt the students might abandon this experiment as merely confusing for everyone.

Not all the students were intimidated and discouraged by the amount of feedback on their work. Some found it practically helpful:

- *It was helpful because I was able to progress with the second draft, especially when it comes to sentence construction.*
- *No I am not discouraged at all: instead I'm like telling myself to do better and better.*

- *The comment that says I am repeating myself [was helpful] and also where you comment that I should explain more and give examples. I think I tried to fix that and I think I did it right because I don't see any comment on the second draft which says I am not clear enough.*
- *Rewriting is good because it's teaching you that you are supposed to make your essay like this. So when you are writing another essay, you know, I mustn't do my essay like this otherwise I will lose marks: I must be concise, specific and write my essay in full sentences ...*
- *Second time I was imagining you [the lecturer] reading my writing ... I was improving ... it was better ... and you were congratulating me.*

The final comment clearly indicates that the student is beginning to develop a sense of real audience and affirmation for her writing, possibly for the first time in her academic life. Other comments indicate that they have not engaged the meaning-related, conceptual feedback, because they specifically mention only form- or language-based issues as having been helpful.

Significantly, there are indications from the data that these students find spoken feedback more helpful than written. Several students mentioned that they talked to peers to gain help with their essays: *"I spoke to another student for help"*, and *"Fortunately I was with 'X' [another student]. He taught me how to reference"*. Yet another student claimed that, *"... the speaking feedback in class was more useful [than the written comments]. I prefer to listen to feedback"*. These comments above seem to suggest that *peer* feedback and *spoken* feedback, whether it is given to the whole class or individually, is less intimidating than quantities of formative written feedback on their essays.

These findings have challenged us on several levels. Firstly, we have had to revisit some of our well-established assumptions and espoused theories about what works well with our students. Our process approach to writing tuition, using extensive written formative assessment at particular stages, seems not to have been as helpful as we had imagined. Secondly, if our approach is to work better, we need to mediate it more thoroughly before we use it, and change or improve our formative assessment practices still further. Thirdly, the information about the students' prior experiences of assessment helped us to understand more clearly what they were bringing with them into a new learning context. We realized that we would need to accommodate their perspectives as we came to redesign our approaches to giving feedback. We discuss these insights in more detail below.

## Conclusions

We were surprised that the effort we had put into giving strong formative feedback on our students' first essays had not been more successful. Black and William's 1998 review would certainly suggest that it should have been. But it appears that we had failed to help our students engage with the meaning-related aspects of their writing. Most saw the re-drafting process, so integral to our practice as writing teachers, as merely 'doing corrections' or a 'tidying up' operation. Our attempts, through the use of the colour, to raise awareness of the differences between surface-level corrections (pink) and the creation of sense, meaning and coherence in their writing (green), following Faigley and Witte (1981), were lost on most of the students – as illustrated by comments such as *"We thought you had run out of pen"*. In some cases our feedback had even humiliated and angered the students, despite our awareness of the place of self-esteem in assessment.

We also failed to help the students become self-assessors who evaluate their own writing in terms of the learning outcomes of the task and the criteria for how it was to be assessed. Knowing that effective formative assessment relies on students becoming self-assessors, (Tanner and Jones, 2003) we explained the assessment criteria to the students at the beginning of the writing task. But this was not enough to challenge the students' underlying notion that assessment is intrinsically summative and that the comments that lecturers make on their writing mean that they have failed in some way. Assessment, in the students' view, is entirely the lecturer's concern, while they simply do their best and are then judged on their efforts. The conception that they could learn from the writing process and that our comments were helping them towards that goal, was strange to them. However, they *do* appear to have understood the idea of learning as a shared enterprise because they mention discussing their work with other students on several occasions in the data. But the lecturer is not perceived as a learning partner, but as a judge.

This should not have been unexpected, given the insights that emerged about the students' prior assessment experiences that had consisted, almost entirely, of fairly infrequent grading, some praise, and interventions involving language-related matters. The student who claimed always to have had *"... perfect feedback"* was implying that her previous writing had had hardly any comments on it because *"... at school I was like the one who was very good in English"*. Comment-free work was a matter of pride. It is no wonder that they were ashamed and offended by the extensive formative comments on their essays.

Despite our improved formative feedback practice, there were still places where it remained unclear or

misleading. Our lack of explicitness in certain places, such as suggesting that the student do the reading again to glean more ideas to extend their essay, did not help. We were reminded that good feedback is 'specific' and 'attainable', (Weedon *et al*, 2002: 38). In this instance it was not specific enough: the advice needed to be much more staged to make the learning outcome attainable.

We need to be much clearer about our expectations. Because so many of our assumptions about learning and assessment were a new discourse for the students, they needed introduction and explanation. For example, the idea of different levels of lecturer response, some conceptual and some superficial, needed fuller elucidation before we described how these would be represented with different colours. We need to explain the differences between norm-referencing and criterion-based referencing before we present them with the criteria by which we will respond to their essays. We need to look at the different types and purposes of assessment, such as diagnostic, summative and formative (Weedon, *et al*, 2002:20). Then we can explain that they would meet with a different type for a different purpose – formative assessment – in Academic Literacy. We also need to discuss the nature of relationships between educators and learners in university contexts, that the relationship is less hierarchical than in their school experience. The relationship could, at times, be more usefully seen as collegial – a partnership – and that as lecturers we could be a watchful, sympathetic audience for their writing, not always judges. This could help them to make more sense of the lecturer's formative comments and questions that they would encounter on their essays.

Clearly, we did not know enough about the students' prior assessment experiences. We knew, of course, that they had been selected for the Extended Curriculum on the basis of prior 'educational disadvantage', but we had no nuanced concept of what this meant. Hyland's advice (1998:280) that students and lecturers should talk together in detail about their aims and expectations with regard to feedback is particularly apposite here. We felt that this research cycle had begun to establish this dialogue and that some progress had been made towards a rapprochement of expectations. In our own learning context it is certainly more difficult to reproduce Black and William's findings, that strengthening the practice of formative assessment enhances learning (1998), but we believe that we still have the potential to do so. Bearing in mind that Black and William show that the highest gains accrue to the lowest academic achievers, it is important that we ensure that the benefits of formative assessment are made available to our students.

As we reflect on these findings and conclusions, in the spirit of critical action research, we plan another cycle of action and observation to improve our course and empower the students. Our proposals are tentative and follow in the final section below.

### Areas for Future Research

In the next cycle of research we plan to implement a more radical phase of preparation for the assessment discourse of the Academic Literacy course before we use the formative approach that is so new to the students. We will introduce ideas around norm-referencing as opposed to criterion-based assessment; formative versus summative assessments and their purposes; surface/grammatical feedback rather than conceptual/meaning related feedback; and a discussion of roles of teachers and students in an academic environment, deconstructing the idea of tutor as 'judge'. We will also investigate the potential uses of peer assessment in academic writing. Our data in this paper suggests that students seem to have asked each other for academic help quite easily and naturally. Clearly this is a model of formative help that is common in these students' earlier educational experiences, although precisely how it has been used needs further investigation. We suspect the idea of the peer study group is accepted as normative by our students. So we could potentially provide formative help in small groups of peers, with one respected student as the leader of the group. It is possible that a plan which employs the notion of a small peer learning community has the advantage of being much less intimidating for students who are new to the academic environment. The role of the lecturers would be to set up the experiment, train the assessment groups, monitor the progress, step in when it is not meeting the learning outcomes, and be the final, summative assessors. This plan dovetails with students' expectations more comfortably and could set up a bridge between prior (school) and current (university) modes of assessment.

Time also needs to be set aside to give verbal feedback on the students' academic writing, either in groups or individually. Our data suggests that students prefer *listening* to advice about their writing, rather than reading it. This could be in the form of an individual conference. This may be a chore for the lecturers, but it is also extremely time-consuming to provide written formative feedback on a set of students' essays – in our experience at least ½ hour per essay – so the time could possibly be better spent providing oral feedback, negotiating meaning and discussing particular problems and successes with the students.

Whole class, oral 'give back' sessions also seem to have been seen as formative and helpful. This is

especially important for saving our time and energy when most students often need the same advice to improve their assignment, rendering copious handwritten comments particularly repetitive and therefore irksome. Both models, individual and whole class, could be incorporated and tested within the next cycle of research.

The broad outcome of the following phase of research, therefore, is a commitment to a concerted search for and evaluation of alternative models for richly formative yet effective feedback on students' writing. We plan to attempt this alternative model of providing useable formative feedback with a new set of students at the beginning of 2008.

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## Appendix A

### PLEASE BRING DRAFTS 1 AND 2 OF YOUR PARAGRAPHS ON THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN SPOKEN AND WRITTEN LANGUAGE TO THE INTERVIEW

#### INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- 1 Can you remember what kinds of feedback/comments you got on your written work (for English) at school?
- 2 Can you remember how often your written work (for English) was marked at school during your Matric year?
- 3 What sort of comments did the teachers make on your work?
- 4 Were you surprised by the feedback you got on your 1<sup>st</sup> assignments?
- 5 Did you understand why the different kinds of feedback were in different colours? (Explain...)
- 6 Did you understand most of the comments that were made on your work?

- Were you confused by them?

- Could you read them?
  - What did you do when you didn't understand the comments?
- 8 What did you feel about your work being covered with the tutor's writing in green/pink ink?
- Discouraged/encouraged?
  - Sad/ happy?
  - Motivated/de-motivated?
- 9 What did you think about there being no grades/marks on the first versions of your paragraphs? Discouraging? Liberating?
- 10 Did you find it easy to make changes on your work for the second draft?
- Which were the easiest changes?
  - Which were the hardest?
  - Did you ignore some of the tutor's comments?
  - Did you solve some problem/s simply by leaving some suggestions out?
  - Which was the most useful comment that your tutor made?
- 11 When you got your final mark, what did you feel?
- 12 When you were writing this assignment, did you imagine the tutor noticing/reading what you were writing?
- More the second draft? Why?
- 13 Ask some questions about the individual changes that were made on the students' drafts... and what motivated them.

## About the Authors

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Penny Niven has been a lecturer at the University of KwaZulu-Natal since 2005. Apart from teaching the Academic Literacy course in the Foundation year, she is in charge of a recently established extended curriculum project in the Faculty of Human, Development and Social Sciences which aims to support the learning of disadvantaged ESL students in eight Humanities and Social Science disciplines. Before coming to UKZN she taught and studied at Rhodes University where her Masters research explored socio-cultural aspects of reading in a first level History class. Her current interests include an ongoing project exploring the effectiveness of formative feedback in developing Academic Discourse and the implementation of the extended curriculum modules.

### *Dr. Billy Meyer*

I have twelve years of experience in teaching Academic Literacy for the Science Foundation Programme and the Humanities Foundation Year at the University of Natal / KwaZulu-Natal. The experience of working in both these programmes includes working in collaborative teams, at both programme and discipline level, which are constantly engaged in curriculum review and development. In 2003 and 2004 I coordinated a curriculum review process for the Humanities Foundation Year of the University of KwaZulu-Natal during which the offerings in Academic Literacy and English Language Development were completely rewritten. My Research record is strongly focussed in Academic Discourse Development. My PHD is a study of the Primary and Secondary Discourses of Theology Students and how these discourses impacted on their development of Academic Discourse. I have written three papers based on this research. In addition, I have research in to Academic Discourse development of Science Students and I am continuing similar research into the Academic Discourse of Humanities Students.

# Appendix D

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## **‘Quit school and become a taxi driver’: reframing first-year students’ expectations of assessment in a university environment**

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*The context of this research is an academic writing course for first-year Social Science students on a four-year extended curriculum at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. This course traditionally uses written formative feedback on drafts of students’ assignments and the lecturers were frustrated by the students’ negative, minimal responses to the extensive advice they were offering. Drawing from a wide range of perspectives and theories, one of the lecturers explored the reasons for the students’ reactions and planned a curricular intervention to address them. A series of classes raised students’ awareness of assessment issues, introducing some basic principles of assessment which were then applied in a peer assessment task. The data emerging suggest that students’ school-based understandings of assessment were reframed and that this, in turn, had an impact on how they made sense of the writing process in a new academic context. This study also reframed the lecturers’ notions of the ‘self-evident’ value of written formative feedback on students’ assignments — to be effective it needs scaffolded mediation within the particular socio-cultural environment in which it is offered. Another outcome was the lecturers’ critical interrogation of some of the pedagogical ‘orthodoxies’ which commonly frame academic writing courses in South African universities, like Process Writing and Genre Theory’s notion of feedback as ‘expert’ advice offered to ‘novices’. Formative feedback may be more useable if novice writers are trained to peer-apprentice each other, thereby becoming more ‘self-regulated’ in the process.*

**Keywords:** academic literacy development; formative assessment; framing theory; useable feedback

### **Introduction**

I report on one cycle in a broader research initiative which has explored various aspects of the use of formative assessment in an academic writing course for Social Science students at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. An earlier cycle in the research had shown that despite the lecturers’ consciously strengthened assessment practices (Niven & Meyer, 2007) the students’ reactions to the extensive feedback on their assignments were still often negative or confused. It became clear that many of the students were overwhelmed, seeing the comments on their drafts as evidence of humiliating failure, or as a source for the correction of superficial language errors (*ibid.*). In this article I review a subsequent stage in the research in which the lecturers explored the potential of peer assessment as a possible means of training the students to respond more positively to the formative feedback that they would often encounter on the course. Strongly influenced by Genre theory (Cope & Kalantzis, 1993; Macken & Slade, 1993), the lecturers had viewed themselves as ‘experts’ guiding their ‘apprentices’ into powerful new writing genres. They assumed that Process Writing (Elbow, 1998; Murray, 2004), involving stages in the drafting and re-drafting of assignments, should be an integral part of any academic writing course — a self-evident ‘good’. But the findings from the earlier papers jolted these presuppositions. It seemed that written formative feedback on the students’ texts was not as useable as the lecturers had imagined and in some cases it even alienated them. I describe one practical response to this disheartening evidence. I explore the potential of peer assessment as an alternative or complementary means of making formative feedback more accessible. A series of classes that deliberately taught some of the basic discourse of assessment was prepared and the

students were trained to peer-assess a particular task (see Appendix). By involving the students in the process and practice of assessment, could feedback become more authentically developmental?

### The research aims

The research aims were defined as follows:

- To develop an impressionistic portrait of the students' earlier school experiences of being assessed and of working in peer groups;
- To teach the differences between formative and summative assessment as a means of encouraging an understanding of academic writing as a mentored, recursive *process* rather than a one-off *product*;
- To introduce the idea of criterion-based assessment to help the students to see their own and their peer's writing tasks in terms of a set of 'desired goals' (Sadler, 1989);
- To ascertain whether teaching some basic ideas about assessment and their application in a peer assessment task could challenge the students to become more reflective, self-regulated writers.

### Theoretical perspectives: why good formative feedback can be unuseable

The following review integrates a number of theories and perspectives to make sense of why even good formative feedback can be ineffectual. Firstly, it briefly reports on the most comprehensive review of the research into formative assessment and its potential benefits for learning to date (Black & Wiliam, 1998). It then employs Framing Theory (Tannen, 1993) to describe the mismatches in learning expectations between students and their lecturers. Seeing feedback as 'appropriation' (Tardy, 2006) was a useful notion in making sense of the students' resistance to written feedback on their texts. This section also reports on the research into peer conferencing by Villamil and de Guerrero (2006) which employs Socio-cultural Theory (Wertsch, 1979) to evaluate learners' 'stages of regulation' during peer learning. Similarly, although more superficially, this research employs notions of 'object', 'other' and 'self-regulation' to evaluate a peer assessment project. Hyland and Hyland (2006) offer an extensive review into the potential benefits and pitfalls of peer assessment, and Sadler's theory about the principles of effective formative assessment (1989) were used in the design of the classes that were used as the framework for this project.

Black and Wiliam's (1998) impressive review of nine years' worth of research into formative assessment and its effects clearly shows that the practice of strengthening formative assessment does indeed offer substantial learning gains in a wide variety of learning contexts, from primary to tertiary levels, across many countries and disciplines and for both high and low achievers. The evidence provided by this review is extensively reported in two earlier papers arising from this project (Meyer & Niven, 2007; Niven & Meyer, 2007). Black and Wiliam's research inspired the lecturers to revisit and improve their formative feedback practices in the confident expectation that by doing so they could raise the standards of their students' academic writing.

But, as the earlier papers show, this confidence was ill-founded (Meyer & Niven, 2007; Niven & Meyer, 2007). The students' usually minimal, often embarrassed and sometimes even angry responses to feedback comments disappointed the lecturers. In response to the lecturers' written comments on essay drafts, they reported feeling "*frightened at first. I was angry. I couldn't take it*", and "*uncomfortable ... and shocked*" (see Niven & Meyer, 2007). However, Black and Wiliam do recognize that formative assessment is no "quick fix" (1998:15). They point out that the effective use of formative assessment requires a radical change in classroom pedagogy and the entrenched attitudes of both teachers and learners need to be challenged (*ibid.*). Formative assessment is never a "magic bullet ... that can be added to existing practice with the promise of rapid reward" (1998: 15). The effects can only be felt "relatively slowly and through sustained programmes of professional development and support" (*ibid.*).

In the light of this, it is not surprising that earlier efforts to improve the feedback practices on

the course had had a poor initial result. One well-meaning initiative which focused on changing aspects of the lecturers' practice could not make an immediate or significant impact. Besides, the students' perspectives and attitudes were not fully understood. *Their* prior learning experiences could have precluded a positive response to the feedback.

Framing Theory (Tannen, 1993) proved useful as the lecturers came to make sense of how students interpret feedback comments on their draft assignments. The basic premise of Framing Theory is that we interpret messages on the basis of various framing devices or "structures of expectations" that we bring to any communicative event. Tannen claims that

The only way we can make sense of the world is to see the connections between things ... between present things and the things we have experienced before or heard about. These vital connections are learned as we grow up and live in a given culture (1993:14).

Thus socio-cultural 'frameworks' form around what we have already experienced and we only acquire new frames by making connections with old ones. This idea is not unlike theories of 'schemata' or 'scripts', (Brown & Yule, 1983; Minsky, 1980; Schank & Abelson, 1977, in MacLachlan & Reid, 1994). But these terms, from cognitive psychology, are understood as units of background knowledge stored in the memory and used for interpretation, (MacLachlan & Reid, 1994). The differences between 'schemata' and 'frames' are rather subtle, but frames are, "more of an act rather than a stable given" (MacLachlan *et al.*, 1994:6) and they assume a recognition of genres and discourse types which are used to make sense of oral and written texts. The idea of framing emerges from more socio-cultural understandings of interpretation, so that frames are considered "organised bundles of related world knowledge: they represent our generalized experiences of stereo-typical activities, conventional processes, syntactic and linguistic structures ... and so on" (MacLachlan *et al.*, 1994).

All first-year students bring school-based learning frames into a tertiary academic context, but whilst some of these may assist learning, others can impede students' attempts to make sense of the new learning environment and need 'unlearning'. First-year students, enculturated into ways of understanding feedback comments as either bland ('*Well done*'; '*Pull up your socks*') or insulting ('*Quit school and become a taxi driver*'; '*Go back and fetch your school fees in primary school*')<sup>2</sup> may find themselves in conflict with certain styles of formative feedback practice simply because they have either had poor or very little prior experience of it. This research shows that a kind of formative feedback was offered in schools, but seldom, and in a different mode. However, lecturers often have no real information about their students' learning frames and how these may influence or undermine current learning (*ibid.*).

Another theoretical perspective that sheds light on why even good formative feedback can be unhelpful concerns the idea of *appropriation* (Tardy, 2006). Well-intentioned lecturers can be overly directive, appropriating students' essays, taking ownership of them, forcing new identities, meanings and ideologies in ways that become overbearing. Quantities of written feedback occupying the spaces and margins around a student's essay could panic and pressurise the recipient who may follow the directives whether they are understood or not. Tardy (2006) says that a student's attention can be drawn from 'this is what I want to say' to 'this is what you the teacher are telling me to say'. Furthermore, feedback is usually conceived of as *unidirectional*, from lecturer to student (Tardy, 2006). This also could generate resentment in students who may feel that their writing is being 'colonised'.

The notion of feedback as 'appropriation' challenged the lecturers' elevated sense of themselves as "cultural informant[s] and liaison between the student-writer and the target discourse community" (Reid, 1994 in Tardy, 2006:61). The lecturer is the 'expert' and the students are 'novices' who are 'apprenticed' (Cope & Kalantzis, 1993; Macken & Slade, 1993). But it seemed that frames like these could, in some contexts, encourage passivity, dependence, resentment and even resistance.

The advantage of peer feedback is that it can side-step such reactions and encourage a more interactive, democratic mode for giving and receiving feedback. Students, enculturated into the

traditional, hierarchical relationships of teacher/learner or lecturer/student, can more easily 'talk back' to a peer's feedback. By training students to own and share some of the responsibility for assessment, lecturers allow students a transitional space in which they can safely venture into new writing identities. The advice the peers offer may not be technically as helpful as those offered by the 'experts', but there may be other gains such as more investment and independence on the part of the student writers.

### **Evaluating a peer assessment project**

Research by Villamil and de Guerrero (2006) who use Socio-cultural Theory (SCT) to analyse the effects of peer conferencing in a group of Puerto Rican students studying English proved another useful source for making sense of the assessment relationship. Their research was extensive and long-term, but the idea from SCT that was most helpful to this project is that the mature mind is *mediated*, either through others, ('other-regulation'), or by the self ('self-regulation'), or mediation can be by artifacts ('object-regulation') (Wertsch, 1979:90 in Villamil *et al.*, 2006). Villamil *et al.*, (*ibid.*) observed the students progress from object and other-regulated behaviours, gradually becoming more self-regulated over many peer encounters. Object-regulated students demonstrated lack of interest, avoidance, frequently turning to jokes and other off-task behaviours. Other-regulated students demonstrated hesitancy, a need for help and even despair at times. But self-regulated learners showed increasing independence. Over a number of meetings students who had been fairly acquiescent and dependent became more self-regulatory, incorporating or rejecting their peers' suggestions, making suggestions of their own and interrogating ideas from their advisors.

This project does not rigorously apply SCT in the way that Villamil and de Guerrero do. Instead, Wertsch's ideas about stages of regulation provide a broad template for evaluating the impact of the planned pedagogical intervention. In the giving and receiving of peer advice, students' responses could be observed in Wertsch's terms, and indications of more self-regulated behaviours could demonstrate some success because they would show that the students were behaving independently, taking control of their writing.

### **The drawbacks and benefits of peer assessment**

Some research demonstrates that peer feedback can be less effective than teacher feedback. Hyland and Hyland (2006) present a number of potential drawbacks: for example, the peer assessors' tendency to focus on surface errors rather than cognitive revisions, the difficulty in establishing trust between assessor and the assessed and the problem of misleading advice. They quote Connor and Asenavage's research (1994) which showed that peer feedback generated only marginal improvements in students' writing. In a South African example of a peer assessment experiment in an Introductory Economics course for 600 students (Snowball & Sayigh, 2007) mostly positive results were seen to accrue, but a number of negative outcomes were also observed. The students saw it as time-consuming, it was not taken seriously enough and it was perceived as lacking objectivity. Some saw it as boring and repetitive and felt that the peers were not knowledgeable enough to give "proper advice" (Snowball & Sayigh, 2007:328). However, the benefits noted in the same research were that peer assessment was seen to give students opportunities to read and compare their approach with others', it increased their responsibility and independence, it helped them to develop empathy with the marker and it increased the students' awareness of marking criteria (*ibid.*).

Almost all the potential pitfalls and benefits reported above emerged during the peer interactions in this study but the central question we ask in this study is whether or not the students gained regulative value from the process.

### **Designing the classes on assessment (see Appendix)**

For any peer assessment initiative to work well, students need to understand the learning goals for a particular phase of study. Many who have tried to develop self or peer-assessment skills in

students have found that “the first and most difficult task is to get the students to think of their work in terms of a set of goals. Insofar as they do ... it becomes possible for them to manage and control it for themselves” (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall & Wiliam, 2003:49). So training the students to think about their current learning targets and then to consider how the assessment criteria link with those targets is fundamental for success. Thus in this project the students were first required to identify the learning outcomes of the writing task and then to convert these learning outcomes into ‘criteria for assessment’ (see Stage 3 of Appendix). Black *et al.* (*ibid.*) also recommend that students need to be deliberately taught the language of collaboration. This idea prompted Stage 4 of the classes in which language constructions for the giving of respectful, formative advice are deliberately taught, such as “*I suggest that you ...*” or “*You could change this by ...*”.

Sadler’s theory about the principles of effective formative assessment also guided the design of the classes. Sadler identifies the elements of useable formative feedback as follows:

The core of the activity of formative assessment lies in the sequence of two actions. The first is the perception by the learner of a gap between the desired goal and his or her present state of knowledge (and/or understanding and/or skill). The second is the action taken by the learner to close that gap to attain that desired goal (1989:120).

Sadler’s analysis, therefore, identifies three elements that need to be present for feedback to be effective. Firstly, it should provide information about the “desired goal” for learning. Secondly, the assessor should indicate the learner’s “present state of knowledge” in relation to that desired goal. Thirdly, some way to “close the gap” between these two stages above should be offered. The learner must make sense all three of these stages and the links between them before they can take action to help themselves or others to improve their learning. So the ‘Assessment Sheet’ (see Stage 3 in the Appendix) has three columns. The desired goals appear as the ‘Assessment Criteria’ in the left-hand column of the grid. Information on the *present state of knowledge* is provided in the middle column as ‘Levels of Success’. Finally, advice about how to close the gap was offered in the third, right-hand column as ‘Advice for Improvement’.

### The research participants

The data for this stage in the research were collected from 73 first-year students in the first semester of 2008. All of them had been selected for the four-year ‘Extended Curriculum’ programme at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Although most had matriculation exemptions, they had not met the university’s other requirements for admission into mainstream Humanities degree programmes. Many of the students on the four-year programme come from poorly-resourced school backgrounds and most require financial aid because their families cannot support their tertiary studies. Another factor is language because in a context where the language of teaching and learning is English, the students’ home language was mostly isiZulu. In their high schools they had been officially taught in English, but in reality they had learnt mainly in a mixture of English and isiZulu, and their cognitive academic proficiency (CALP)<sup>3</sup> in English is generally quite poorly developed (Taylor & Vinjevold, 1999; Cummins, 1996).

### Collecting and analysing the data

All 73 students on the Extended Curriculum programme followed the classes on assessment in Week 5 of Semester 1 as an integrated aspect of the course curriculum. Firstly, the students’ written notes taken during the group discussions about their school learning experiences were collected (Stage 1 in Appendix). Secondly, the researcher collected the first assignment drafts and recorded the feedback comments that the peer assessors had given. Finally, copies of the students’ written reflections after the final assessment were retained (Stage 5 in Appendix). The data, therefore, consisted of records of the students’ voices, remembering, commenting and reflecting. They gave written consent for this information to be used for research purposes and ethical clearance was applied for and granted by the institution.

These three sets of data were then analysed as follows:

- In the notes taken during the students' discussions about school learning, prior experiences of formative and criterion-based assessment were noted and recorded. Commonly expressed themes in their accounts of *how* and *how often* their work was assessed emerged and were given particular focus. With regard to former peer-group learning, the researcher sought out comments that described the most essential features of those lived experiences. Thus in this section attempts a 'mini-ethnographic' account of a learning culture at work.
- The peers' comments on each others' written tasks were analysed in terms of what they could demonstrate about 'shifting frames' about assessment. The researcher sought out a *new tone* in their assessment comments. A range of feedback comments were identified and recorded, from those most reminiscent of students' school experiences (such as those reported in the first set of data in the section immediately below), to those which showed evidence of the training the students were receiving about a more developmental role for assessment.
- From the reflection papers the researcher ascertained whether the students were able to use the new meta-language of assessment that had been taught in the classes and how they were doing this. Attempts were made to establish whether this was giving them better opportunities to 'other-regulate' as well as 'self-regulate' their writing. Issues of appropriation and trust in the assessment relationship were observed.

What follows is a summary of the essential themes that emerged from the data.

### School assessment and learning practices: the students' frames

The students remembered high school assessments as meagre, infrequent and almost exclusively summative in nature. They paint a fairly bleak portrait of discouraging feedback comments, mostly impersonal, non-developmental, and occasionally harsh and abusive. Often their assignments were just shelved: *'The language teachers ... they took our work but would not bring it back or they would bring it back when you have forgotten about it'*.

They did remember some written comments on their assignments and the following examples are typical — and some provoked wry laughter: *'Be relevant'*; *'Your grammar is bad'*; *'Bad handwriting'*; *'Room for improvement'*; *'You are out of the topic'*; *'I can't read your mind — explain!'*; *'You are lazy'*; *'You failed to think'*; *'Pull up your socks'*; *'Quit school and become a taxi driver'*, and to a learner at matric level, *'You have to go back and fetch your school fees in primary school'*. Another student reported that *'They would encourage — via corporal punishment — but it made our work better'*. Interestingly, the students understood no feedback comments as a sign of favour: the absence of comments signified *'perfect feedback'*.

These comments defy all the principles of good feedback practice (see Meyer & Niven, 2006:124 and a similar list in Luckett & Sutherland, 2000:126) in which such issues as protecting self-esteem, setting specific and realistic goals, and responding to substantive issues (rather than surface-level errors) are seen as central to good practice. These teacher remarks are too punitive or too vague to be formative; they positively discourage self-regulated learning. It is clear that the students in this study did not have any expectation of learning support in the form of individual, written feedback. For them, this is a 'foreign' frame.

The idea of criterion-based assessment was also foreign: for example, one group reported that *'we didn't understand why we failed and the teacher never explained'*. In fact, if they asked why they had been given certain marks, the teachers often felt that their authority was being challenged. One student remembers: *'nasty comments, low marks, and not being told where I had gone wrong'*.

However the students did have memories of another kind of oral formative feedback. Some teachers *'would call you and comment personally'*. The students remember developmental feedback given to classes as a whole, especially after a poor test performance: *'they [the teachers] came to class and addressed common problems'*. So students do have frames for formative feedback, but it seems it was almost always within an oral, group context, after an assessment rather than during

learning, and it was occasional rather than common practice.

Another school-based frame system is that of learning within informal, oral, peer-managed groups. These would often be friendship groups that met outside of class time. They seem to have relied on the knowledge base of one or two better-performing peers: *'the one who was wiser than the rest of us'*. They mentioned sharing homework problems, practising past papers, correcting each others' mistakes, simplifying notes and generally *'taught each other what we lacked'*. The students reported that they understood better when a peer explained because they could use their own language more and that it was easier to ask a peer for an explanation rather than a teacher. It appears that in the absence of substantive formative help from their teachers, the learners sought it from each other. Generally this model for teaching and learning appears to have provided a degree of helpful 'other-regulation' and, for *'the one[s] that were wiser than the rest of us'*, self-regulation. It appears that most of the formative help that the school learners receive is within this kind of peer context.

This research attempts to employ a well-established socio-cultural learning practice but in a managed, scaffolded way to avoid some of the potential pitfalls of peer learning (see Hyland & Hyland, 2006; Snowball & Sayigh, 2007 in the theoretical section above).

### The peer advice: evidence of shifting frames?

Some of the students' comments on each others' assignments disappointed the lecturers: *'Your work is good but you could have done better than this by putting [in] more effort'* suggests they are using old frames. There were examples of comments that focus on surface-level issues: *'I suggest you practice your tenses well'* or, *'Try to manage the spelling'*, but with no indication about which tenses or spellings were problematic. There was even evidence of misleading advice: *'I suggest you use 'however' in your paragraph to try and make a connection with the other sentence'*, in a context where this logical connector had already been used successfully. These examples recall the problems with peer assessment noted earlier.

However, there were many other comments that strongly suggested reframing. Almost all the students preceded their advice with the language constructions we had taught in Stage 4: *'I suggest that you ...'*, or *'You could change this by ...'* or, *'Don't you think you could/should ...?'* This may be what Gee calls 'mushfake' (1990) but is an attempt to 'try on' non-judgmental, supportive approach to assessment. The tone of the following remarks shows a new awareness: *'When we reference we do not use first names. So you reference like this: (Meyer, Jackson & Niven, 2007)'*. There are examples of remarks that deal with text organisation: *'I suggest you structure your ideas, put them step by step, do not mix them up ... The supporting ideas from the first paragraph should not be put in the second paragraph'*. Another responds to a substantial misunderstanding: *'In content you have some errors like saying spoken language is usually formal and written is informal. Did you mean that spoken language is informal and written language is formal?'* This advice is respectful and useable.

In fact, most of the peer advisors focused their suggestions on the particular issues that they had identified as the assessment criteria for the assignment, such as the need to reference: *'It is very important that you reference because you could be accused of cheating and lose a lot of marks'*. These new frames may not be fully internalized — but many of the peer comments in the data are markedly different in style and tone to those of their high school teachers.

### The written reviews: evidence of more self regulation?

The students' reflection papers showed that many had developed a clear, theoretical grasp of the differences between formative and summative assessment: *'In summative assessment a student sums up his/her partner's work with a mark ... you weigh what the work is worth. In formative assessment you decide what your partner should learn from the assignment. It suggests ways to improve your partner's work'*. But most of the students expressed the idea in rather personal terms: *'Formative assessment is good for me. Sometimes I submit an assignment and get a low mark. I become*

worried what I should do to become better. I hate repeating the same mistakes. I would rather know my mistakes and find a solution. Summative assessment is very bad because does not allow a person to learn'. This naïve, a-theoretical understanding recalls Elbow (1991:162) who suggests that "the best test of whether a student understands something is if she can translate it out of the discourse of the textbook and the discipline into everyday, experiential, anecdotal terms". Criterion-based assessment was also understood in this way: 'It is like you have something to look for when you do the assessment ...' or 'Criteria can guide you so that ... you are able to do as you are told'. Another student had realised the strategic value of criteria: 'Criteria are guidelines or instructions about the assignment. It helps you to strategize your work to the point that you can score higher marks if you follow [them]'.

As the students reflected on the degree of trust that they were able to feel for their peer advisors, we see ambiguity: 'Sometimes I didn't trust because I knew that he did not know much about assessing and he may judge me on character and not on the work I did ... but in the end he had some constructive comments'. In this case, trust was tentatively established, despite initial scepticism. Others remained unconvinced because 'we [the peers] are all in the same boat'. In other words, writing is better assessed by lecturers who know rather more about academic writing practices. However, a gratifying number of students had decided that they did have grounds for trust, because, for the first time, they understood how assessment *should* work: 'Yes, I did trust my peer because she was using criterion-based assessment'.

Interestingly, the few students who took offence at their peer advice did so in terms of 'appropriation' (Tardy, 2007): 'I was offended because he wanted me to write in his way. He thought it was not like his way, so it must be wrong ...'. Another student shows a similar spirit of independence: 'he said my topic sentences were not interesting ... [but] I didn't change them because I thought there was nothing wrong with them!'.

### The lecturer's reflections: evidence of success?

The data reported above suggest that for many of the students — by no means all — new frameworks for understanding writing in the Social Sciences were being set up via the medium of assessment. The careful structuring of the classes was crucial. The first stage raised the students' meta-awareness of their inherited assessment frameworks. Next, the students were provided with the elements of a new discourse of assessment which they then applied in a peer setting. As they began to employ the new terms and concepts they were beginning to understand the writing process differently — that it can be a supported, recursive *process*, not merely a one-off *product*, arbitrarily judged. Feedback can, in fact, *nurture* writing. It can be 'goal-driven' and these goals can be clearly expressed and attainable. As they supported others in terms of these goals, they were, in turn, becoming more self-regulated as writers. Finally, as they reflected on their new assessment experiences, some students seemed to have developed the means to appropriate or reject feedback, instead of feeling negated or overwhelmed by it. The fact that this research employed an already normative socio-cultural practice for learning — the peer group — may account for some of its success, although what was not normative was that the process was highly scaffolded.

This research could be critiqued on the grounds that tertiary institutions themselves are not sites of good feedback practice, any more than schools are, whatever their principles and policies. Exploring these practices in Social Science disciplines may well be as discouraging as those reported from the schools. Nevertheless academic writing courses need to establish ideas about writing as a goal-driven, developmental process because writing for academic purposes is almost always recursive — 'writing as process' is a useful frame to develop in first-year Social Science students, all of whom need help in learning to write in radically different ways if they are to be successful. The fact that the assessment practices of tertiary institutions may be as stagnant and theoretically unsound as those of school makes an explicit pedagogy of assessment all the more empowering.

Black and Wiliam's incontrovertible evidence for the effectiveness of good formative assess-

ment was the starting point of this study because the lecturers had assumed that if they improved their formative feedback practice, the students would 'naturally' improve. Another assumption, grounded in Genre theory, is that lecturers are 'experts' guiding their 'apprentices' into powerful, new discourses. Furthermore, for very good reasons, academic writing courses in South African universities often use process writing methodologies — this course is no different. But the application of these pedagogical frames needs refinement and recontextualisation. In fact, South African students need to be deliberately trained to use respondents' written feedback, otherwise for the many historical and socio-cultural reasons I have alluded to, they are inclined to find it difficult to use. In the South African teaching context formative feedback needs to be sensitive to students' earlier learning environments and a new set of frames need to be developed in order to make this kind of help accessible. The 'expert/novice' relationship is by definition hierarchical, but students can be trained to apprentice each other and benefit themselves in the process. Peer apprenticeship is already a normative learning frame for many of our students so this is not surprising. Therefore the most noteworthy outcome of this stage in the larger research project is that it has generated a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which students in South African universities can be assisted as they attempt to establish themselves as writers in the Social Sciences. The aim is to prevent students from 'quitting' so that they can 'drive', not 'taxi', but a new society.

## Notes

1. The term 'assessment' is used to refer generally to the whole process of evaluating students' assignments, both summatively and formatively, and 'feedback' will refer specifically to the written formative comments offered to students at the end or on the margins of their written tasks.
2. For more examples see the section on: 'School assessment and learning experiences: the students' frames'.
3. 'CALP' refers to Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency and is contrasted with 'BICS' which refers to Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (Cummins & Swain, 1986).

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## Appendix

Please note: The following document is a summary of the original teaching materials.

### UNDERSTANDING ASSESSMENT

#### Stage 1

##### A: Remembering your school assessment experiences

Here the students were required to spend 30 minutes discussing six questions focusing on their school assessment experiences: eg., 'What kind of comments did the teachers make on your written work?' These discussions took place in small groups and one of the group members was the note-taker. These notes were submitted to the lecturers.

##### B: Group learning at school (informal — out of normal class time)

Here there was a further set of questions about peer learning groups: eg., 'How did you decide who would lead these groups?' and 'How often did you meet?'

#### Stage 2

##### Learning to become a peer assessor

The students were divided into pairs and given an opportunity to read their partner's assignment. They had to make an initial decision about what they thought the assignment may be worth and make a comment.

**Class discussion:** 'How did you decide what mark to give your partner?'

#### Stage 3

##### Developing criteria for assessment

It was established that the measurements (or 'criteria') that are used for evaluating any assessment should be directly related to what had been taught (the learning outcomes). There was a discussion about what exactly the students had learnt to do on the course so far: e.g., 'Each paragraph should have only one main controlling idea'. The students were then required to come up with five or six criteria for evaluating the assignment, and once they had agreed on the wording, to fill them in on a grid, as follows:

ASSESSMENT SHEET

ASSESSMENT CRITERIA	LEVELS OF SUCCESS					ADVICE FOR IMPROVEMENT
E.g. 'Each paragraph should have one controlling idea'.	1	2	3	4	5	'I suggest you revise sentence 2 which seems off the topic of the paragraph'.

Each 'Level of Success' was assigned a value: e.g. Level 1 was '80+', Level 2 was '70+' and so on.

**Stage 4****The differences between 'summative' and 'formative' assessment**

This section taught these differences e.g. *'There are a few different types of assessment. Sometimes lecturers don't only want to know what your work is worth — sometimes they want you learn while you are doing the assignment.* This would be assessment for learning, rather than assessment of learning — 'feedforward' rather than 'feedback'.

The students then gave summative and formative feedback on their peers' assignments. They were asked to use the assessment sheet and use the margins of the assignment. They were asked to give lots of advice and make sure that it was friendly and encouraging. It was suggested that they use language like this:

- "I suggest that you ..."
- "You could change this by ..." (give a specific suggestion)
- "Why don't you ...?"
- "Do you mean that ...?"

**Stage 5****Review**

*The students wrote informal reflection papers based on the following kinds of questions:*

- What have you learnt about the differences between formative and summative assessment?
- Explain how you understand 'criterion-based' assessment?
- Did you trust your peer assessor's comments on your paragraphs?
- Were you offended or hurt by anything she said about your work?

The reflection papers were handed in to the lecturers.

# Appendix E

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## Intersecting epistemologies: first-year students' knowledge discourses in a Political Science module

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This paper identifies the epistemological values of novice students and their lecturers in terms of a 'farming' metaphor. It argues that each occupy essentially different kinds of epistemological 'farms', involving different 'crops' and 'methods', and lecturers often fail to provide effective access to their disciplinary communities because they do not recognise or respond to this fundamental epistemological disjuncture. This issue is explored in relation to a first-level Political Science module in a South African university. Using Discourse Theory as the primary means of interpretation, the project identifies the students' home, community and school-based discourses which construct their values and ideas about learning and knowing and therefore their ways of reading and writing in the academy. The data was collected in four workshops in which the students employed a variety of media to explore their past and current experiences of learning. The multiple perspectives afforded by this mode of data collection generated rich, ethnographic descriptions of the students' social epistemologies. Their values are contrasted with those that may be considered normative in a Social Science like Politics.

**Keywords:** epistemological access; discourse theory; academic development; learning in higher education

### Introduction

In this paper I am in search of what I hope will prove a powerful heuristic in accounting for first-year students' access to the disciplinary 'territory' of Political Science (Becher and Trowler 2001), that is, the underlying epistemological assumptions and values that shape novice students' academic practices and behaviours in this domain. The context is a historically 'white' South African university and the participants in this study are from traditionally disempowered communities: all are beginner students from under-resourced economic and educational backgrounds and all use English as an additional language in a context where English is the language of teaching and learning. This study identifies elements of the participants' 'social epistemologies' (Anderson 1995; Goldman 2001). Because all share a home language (isiZulu), a cultural heritage, and are from similar kinds of school, community, religious and family backgrounds it seemed possible to map out some shared epistemological frames and relate these to whatever prior experiences, histories, philosophies, institutions, discourses, texts or environments may have formed them.

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I explore 14 students' informal discourses about teaching and learning in an attempt to bring their deep epistemological assumptions to the surface.

### Background to the study

There are inordinately high drop-out rates, particularly at the end of the first year, amongst students in higher education in South Africa. Scott, Yeld, and Hendry (2007) in their analysis of a cohort of South African students who registered in institutions of tertiary study in 2004 show marked racial inequities in participation rates – for example, 61% participation rates amongst 'whites' as opposed to only 12% rates among 'black' and 'coloured'<sup>1</sup> young adults. Thirty percent of the whole cohort were excluded or dropped out at the end of their first year. After five years of an undergraduate degree normally designed to take three years, only 50–53% had graduated, a smaller percentage were still registered, but a staggering 38% had 'disappeared' from the system altogether – some 15,000 people. These statistics also show that about 5% of young black people are succeeding in higher education in South Africa. Thus despite improved formal access to higher education, racial exclusion persists in practice.

This is an issue of social justice which is 'bad for social cohesion and economic growth' (Pandor 2005, 15). Many blame the schooling system, claiming that 'most of the country's first-year students cannot read, write and comprehend', according to a recent report by Higher Education SA presented to a parliamentary portfolio committee (Ncana and Swart 2009). The school is seen as the primary locus for intervention (Bloch 2009; Ramphela 2008) but at least some of the responsibility for this failure must surely reside in the educational processes within higher education itself, for example, in teaching approaches, curriculum framework and design, assessment and student support. This paper focuses on the provision of 'epistemological access', a term coined by Morrow (1993, 3) to draw attention to the importance of enabling students to become participants in the shared ways of understanding and constructing knowledge that characterise disciplinary discourses. Without *epistemological* access widening *formal* access to tertiary learning contexts becomes a superficial, self-defeating enterprise.

This study is one in a series of critical action research cycles that have sought to understand and improve my own and colleagues' teaching and our students' learning practices in the first year of a Humanities curriculum (Meyer and Niven 2007; Niven 2009; Niven and Meyer 2007). Carr and Kemmis (1986) describe action research as being not only about the improvement and understanding of practice in the researcher's immediate environment but also about the improvement of the situation in which the practice occurs so there is an ongoing concern for criticality and emancipatory change in all the research initiatives. In a later cycle I plan to unravel the complex ways in which students' epistemologies might intersect with those of their Political Science lecturers.

### Epistemologies: social, disciplinary and developmental

A broad definition of epistemology sees it as '... having to do with the creation and dissemination of knowledge' (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy 2006). A *social* understanding of epistemology is one in which knowledge is believed to be whatever

is considered to be true or justified in any given community, culture or context (ibid). Thus social epistemologists identify the social-cultural or socio-historical dimensions of knowing (Anderson 1995, 53). They pay attention to the interrelationships between ways of knowing and social categories such as race, class, sexuality and gender. Feminist social epistemologists, for example, are interested in the ways in which the norms and processes of knowledge production affect women and how they are implicated in systems of gender oppression (Goldman 2001). Ways of knowing are hegemonic: some, those of dominant cultures or classes, are considered to be the 'normal', 'natural' ones. Over the past 20 years feminist social epistemologists have developed rich, normative epistemological accounts of women's ways of knowing (for example, in science – Longino 1990). In so doing they have been able to separate out epistemic normativity and the hegemonic dominance of masculine understandings of knowledge production (Goldman 2001).

Disciplines also have their own epistemic norms. Each discipline has specialist ways of thinking and practicing and each is undergirded by a set of beliefs, values and attitudes which impact on the ways in which knowledge is understood in that domain. A discipline is a 'given way of knowing the world' (Kegan 2002, 1), is its own kind of 'territory' (Becher and Trowler 2001) and has its own '... peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding and arguing that define the discourse of [the] community' (Bartholomae 1985, 134).

However, these norms are not static. They have evolved over time, 'emerging out of complex historical conditions ... reforged and remade in the equally complex present' (Boughey 1999, 30). Trowler challenges the idea of 'epistemological essentialism' (2009, 181). Disciplinary territories will always be provisional, shifting and contested. Kegan too maintains that epistemologies are more dynamic than stable because they concern 'the activity of our knowing ... [They are], after all, not about *what* we know but about the process by which we *make* reality ... or *create* knowledge' (2002, 2).

Kegan presents yet another view on epistemology. He is a developmental psychologist and understands epistemologies in *age-related, developmental* terms. At different stages in human development, he claims, people 'make sense' in different ways (1994). His 'Theory of Meaning Making' claims that human epistemologies evolve over a lifetime and he uses the metaphor of 'farms' (2002) to represent the various stages of meaning-making through which humans are understood to progress. One 'farm' is the one which most late school-age and undergraduate students occupy. Here they are guided by an epistemological assumption that *knowledge is certain and held by 'authorities'* and this obviously impacts on how they learn, read or write. Most lecturers or post-graduate students, on the other hand, are more likely to believe that *knowledge is relative to context, contested, and acquired through enquiry*, a quite different order of knowing. Kegan argues that there is a fundamental disjuncture in the ways in which most undergraduate students and most lecturers understand knowledge and that this is primarily a developmental issue that needs to be addressed pedagogically. Without the readiness to 'farm' in different ways novice students need explicit guidance to be able to 'farm knowledge' in any kind of new disciplinary domain. They would need conceptual bridges to be able to make successful transitions from one way of knowing into another.

This paper adopts a social perspective on epistemology but Kegan's theory affords a useful point of comparison and tests the validity of a generic,

developmental model of knowledge formation. In my view Kegan's theory cannot accommodate the complex and diverse interactions between the multiple ways of knowing that characterise social groupings, settings or disciplines in universities world-wide. But I have adopted Kegan's metaphor of the 'farm'. Boughey refers to the 'respective *worlds* students and lecturers draw from' (2005, 240) [my italics] and Becher and Trowler (2001) use the idea of *tribes* and *territories* to represent faculty and disciplinary ways of knowing. But the idea of a 'farm' serves this study well: it implies growing various kinds of knowledge crops in diverse soils and climatic conditions. It suggests that knowledge is organic, and that its nurture is dependent on farmers' decisions and workers' labour. Good 'knowledge crops' are a mutual endeavour.

But whether the dimensions of an epistemology are social or developmental, idiosyncratic or disciplinary, lecturers do need to grasp the idea of epistemic divergence and complexity, however provisional or contested the notion of normativity might be. Lecturers are already deeply knowledgeable about the rhetorical dimensions and content domain of their own disciplines (Geisler 1994) but are probably less well-informed about the epistemic norms that accompany beginner students as they enter their classrooms. Nor are they fully aware of the implications for social justice and equity implied by such naiveté. Ultimately I hope to show that it is in the intersection of social and disciplinary epistemologies that student access to academic discourses is most crucially lost or gained.

### Discourse theory

Because this study attempts to uncover students' epistemological frames through their informal discourses about prior and current learning experiences a brief introduction to Discourse Theory is indicated and follows below.

In the late 1980s and during the 1990s the term 'discourse' developed a specialised meaning amongst a body of socio-linguists, educational theorists and ethnographers in an area that became known as the 'New Literacy Studies' (for example in the work of Baynham 1995; Gee 1990; Kress 1993; Street 1995, and others). A 'discourse', in their understanding, is language that gives expression to values and beliefs that are social, cultural and political. Discourses organise how a topic is talked about, understood and acted on (Kress 1989). Thesen (1998, 38) describes the power of discourses to 'structure systems of thought . . . and their associated patterns of communication'. Gee (1990, 143) draws a distinction between 'Discourse' (upper case 'D') and 'discourse' (lower case 'd') to signal the latter's specialised meaning as 'a socially accepted association among ways of using language, of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing and acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or "social network"'. Discourses, furthermore, are inclined to be hegemonic: some, quite arbitrarily, are far more 'dominant, popular or elevated' than others (McKenna 2004, 12). Academic study, therefore, is primarily a social practice with profound implications for people's roles and identities (Boughey 2006, 138). Becoming academically literate concerns the acquisition of ideologically-laden 'discourses', rather than independent, autonomous skills or strategies. Novice students need to develop radically new ways of thinking about themselves and what it means to be knowledgeable. Teaching first-year students in universities is about

enabling the kinds of epistemic shifts that enable membership of new disciplinary networks.

### The research methodology

This study used an unusual, multi-modal approach to the data collection. I took the view that interviewing the students about their past learning lives might promote self-consciousness and so instead I decided to observe and record their informal discourses as they spoke, acted, drew and wrote creatively about learning experiences in various imagined settings and genres. The participants formally agreed to take part in four, two-hour workshops. In workshop 1 they wrote and acted out short plays based on a remembered incident from a school classroom. In workshop 2 they assumed the role of journalists from a popular magazine, interviewing a partner and writing short biographical sketches about their educational experiences. In the third meeting they made posters or cartoons based on their perceptions of 'good' and 'bad' learning behaviours at school and university. Finally, in workshop 4, they wrote text messages to friends, poems or rap songs about their early learning experiences at university.

This mode of data collection was undoubtedly a risk. In the creative atmosphere of the workshops the students may have playfully exaggerated their experiences, turning them into entertainment or parody. Encouraging the participants to explore their memories in multi-modal, multi-lingual workshops was fun (and probably therapeutic) but might not have yielded entirely reliable data. The performance-orientated approach may have skewed the data, privileging the aesthetic aspects of the practices. So in the end not all of the data was useable and some of it was discarded. For example, I eventually excluded all the data from the posters on the grounds that the illustrations they provided may have been skewed by the implied moralism of the frames – 'good' and 'bad' – I had set up.

However action research occurs within the hurly-burly of everyday practice and can only yield 'possibilities, not certainties' (Walters-Adams 2006). Hamilton (1981) says: 'to generalize [from action research] is to render a public account of the past, present or future in a form that can be tested through further action and inquiry'. In fact, action research always generates understandings that are contingent and contested and knowledge is seen to develop reflexively, cyclically, dialectically and collaboratively within relevant communities. My own 'public account' of this research cycle is offered in this spirit: it makes no claims to universal truth or a perfect research design. It was unapologetically experimental.

However, action researchers are also concerned with validity and committed to rigorous examination and critique of their practice, including their research practice. For this reason I made very thoughtful, sometimes painful, decisions about which data to include or exclude. Fortunately the participants were part of this decision-making and validity-checking. In each workshop they were given time to comment on each other's plays, poems or posters, particularly with regard to how authentic they seemed in relation to their own experiences. Detailed accounts of each workshop were typed up and circulated at the start of subsequent workshops and the participants were given time to check and give written comments on the transcripts. They responded with various affirmations and annotations: 'Yes, this is what happened'; 'Quite accurate, well done'; 'A full description'. They sometimes

clarified and extended accounts: *'It was not only Home Economics which I was top learner . . . I was top learner in other subjects as well'*. On a few occasions some showed scepticism: *'This never happened in my school'*. Thus I was careful to record only the most recurrent themes and narratives, those endorsed by most of the participants. The light-hearted aspects of the workshops were balanced by the participants' understanding of themselves as a research community: they were responsible commentators in a serious enterprise, an aspect of the researcher's doctoral studies.

Sections of this paper and a poster based on it were formally presented to the Politics lecturers in the institution and to other colleagues at a small conference. So 'outsiders' and 'critical friends' were also involved in the interpretation of the findings (Walters-Adams 2006). Some, especially the lecturers, were uncomfortable with the findings and challenged them, whilst others affirmed them. But again, this dialectical approach to interpretation is an affordance of action research and lends it criticality. A final validity claim rests in the interplay of the various modes in which data was collected: what emerged in one media (e.g. a play) could be confirmed, refined or challenged in another (e.g. a poem or text). Selected data from the workshops is reported below.

#### Novice students' discourses about teaching and learning

In the first workshop the participants were divided into four groups and each was asked to compose and act out short plays based on any remembered learning experience from their school days. Their plays had to be based on true, not imaginary, incidents. Three of the sketches involved impatient, abusive teachers. In the first play a teacher bursts into a classroom and quickly writes up a Maths problem on the board, shouting *'Hurry up! Proof! Proof! One minute!'* When the learners were unable to answer correctly, he strikes them on their hands and tells them that they were *'izilima'* ('idiots'). In a subsequent scene, a learner goes home weeping and nursing his painful hands. He reports the Maths teacher's behaviour to his parents. But their gentle, resigned response was: *'That is how we get an education'* and *'That is how it should be'*. Several other students later responded with comments such as, *'My mother was just the same'*.

Firstly, it is clear from this play that knowledge is *reproduced*, often under duress. The idea that mathematical concepts can be nurtured through engagement and dialogue is not expected. Learning Maths is scary, stressful and could even involve shame. A second observation from this play is that the family encourages uncomplaining submission to the teacher as the sole knowledge source. Learning, the families seem to be saying, is inevitably tough and unpleasant – a discipline to be bravely endured. There is a discourse of 'learning as suffering' and a teacher's knowledge and methodology may not be challenged. Knowing is by means of obedience and submission.

In another play, the students recalled an English teacher: She says, *'I was marking your papers yesterday and it was very bad! Guys, do you want to learn? It seems like I am wasting my time in this class! My time and my ink. You are not progressing in any way . . . You are the most pathetic students I have ever had.'* The teacher then assigns a writing task: *'Class, you know how to write an essay. It must have an introduction, a body and a conclusion which is your opinion about the topic. Am I making myself clear? Any questions? Right, no questions! Write your essay on*

"*Crime*" and bring it tomorrow'. In the following scene the essays are returned to the class. A few students 'got it right', and the teacher initiates a congratulatory clap for 'the clever ones', referred to as 'the clevers'. The ones who 'got it wrong' are simply told that they must 'do it again'. In the final scene one of the 'clevers' sits side-by-side with a failing student and successfully teaches him the skills to complete the task.

It seems here that knowledge is gained through extra practice and repetition – '*do it again*' – not by further elucidation of expectations. Few conceptual bridges are provided although peer support compensates. Learners are understood as intrinsically 'clever' or 'not clever'. Again knowledge is a 'product' which one can 'get' or 'not get' – even, it seems, in essay writing. Knowledge is transmitted and even the nature of the transmission is hierarchical: a teacher passes knowledge on to 'the clevers' who 'get it'. They then pass the knowledge down in an extensive, well-established system of peer support (see also Niven 2009). The data often suggests that learners relied on each other in a lateral system of concept or skills development although it seems that the study groups sometimes initiated formal approaches to teachers requesting re-clarification, but only after they had tried to work something out for themselves. So the classroom is not the primary site of learning and it is more likely that peer study groups generate learning. One participant reported that he dealt with academic problems at school by asking '*this guy who was a genius . . . and he was very helpful*'. His comment implies 'comradeship'<sup>2</sup> in learning, the sense of a kind of political brotherhood in the struggle for knowledge. The knowledge-bearer is '*a genius*', someone deserving special esteem. This insight is confirmed in Poem 1 later.

In the third play a teacher insults a class: '*You did extremely badly [in this test]. You are just wasting my time. Go and wash the dishes and clean the yard – you are very stupid*'.<sup>3</sup> This time a rather different discourse emerges: the students respond aggressively. They shout the teacher down and physically push her out of the class. Other students in the research group recalled many similar experiences: '*The teacher was rude and the students decided to be united and the boys hit him so badly and after that he behaved softly*', and, '*We as learners were negatively affected because all our teachers were scared of us and thought we were all bad and violent*'. Another example recalls the Soweto uprisings of 1976<sup>4</sup>: '*The students threw stones at the vice principal because we didn't want to learn Afrikaans and it was stopped soon afterwards*'.

Here we observe powerful socio-historical forces shaping student epistemologies. The participants are using a discourse of resistance, a familiar political discourse, but in an educational setting. Knowledge, they seem to be suggesting, is acquired by means of struggle, by resisting oppressors. Learning is interlinked with the struggle for rights and political self-realisation. This contrasts sharply with the earlier narratives where learning relates to submission. But both discourses respond to authoritarian (sometimes abusive) learning environments and both are rooted in South African history in which submission to colonialism and apartheid was followed by decades of violent and non-violent resistance, much of it (after 1976) sustained by young school-going children in the townships.

The following two poems from the data strengthen these interpretations. The first one is written as a praise poem – South Africa's most characteristic form of indigenous literary expression (Groenewald 2001, 31). Praise poems are usually oral, public performances for special occasions or ceremonies and in praise of important figures, to honour their character or position. The praise poets (*imbongi*) declaim, loudly and rhythmically, shaking sticks or spears, and often wearing skins (ibid, 35).

Audience response is often expected (ibid, 49). Sometimes the poems are used in gatherings of a liminal nature, such as at times of adult initiation or marriage (ibid, 31). The praise poets use improvisation and adapt and innovate from formulaic usage (ibid, 34). Repetition and parallelism of sounds, words, phrases or grammatical structures is typical of the genre (ibid, 39). They are almost always a kind of panegyric in which the heroic or even warrior status of a person is celebrated. The student who wrote the poem below is a trainee *imbongi* so it is not surprising that he uses the genre, but it is interesting that he links it to a celebration of first-year university students. The stage between school and university is a liminal space. Students are seen as heroes, even warriors, and as comrades united in a struggle for knowledge.

### Poem 1: 'Heroes win'

*In political practice. Amaqhawe ayanqoba (heroes always win).  
Heroes never give up. Amaqhawe akahluleki (heroes never fail).  
We're heroes because we are studying heroes.  
We're studying power! Amandla!*

*The heart of politics is authority.  
That's what makes us heroes.  
Singamaqhawe obumbano (we are united heroes).  
Simunye ngomqondo (we are together).  
Sehlukile ngombono (even though we have a variety of views).  
Ngomqondo (we are of one mind).  
That is what makes us heroes.*

*Heroes never give up.  
Akukho ukungobaza ngobuthina (There is no doubt about us).  
We don't doubt our potential!  
Learning needs heroes.  
Amaqhawe obuqotho.  
Heroes fight with books and a pen.  
Impi iliwa ngepeni (We are using a pen to express our views).*

*This is our chance.*

Here learning is seen as a titanic struggle for educational opportunities and the political influence that may follow. Maybe learning itself is also a struggle because it is stressful and painful, requiring strong motivation, passion and encouragement. We know that the chances of making it to university from these students' backgrounds is extremely slim (see Scott, Yeld, and Hendry 2007 above) and we have seen that the chances of getting an undergraduate degree are even slimmer, so the final line is extremely poignant. The complex interplay of English and the student's home language of isiZulu – unusual in praise poetry – suggests the students' dual identity as proud members of indigenous culture and proud members of a new English-speaking academic world. There is the implication of shifting, unstable identities: they are 'between farms'. The poem also suggests interlinkages between the study of Political Science and political activism, implying the student has not yet disentangled

the study of Politics as a discipline and politics as a civic struggle for rights. Learners are 'studying heroes ... who go for victory'. The cry of 'amandla' ('power and freedom') is used at political rallies, followed by the response 'awetho' ('it is ours'). Here the cry is for the empowerment of learning.

**Poem 2: 'Learning to sing an academic tune'**

*Hello my boy and welcome to my world.  
Everybody in this place plays by my rules.  
If I say 'right' you go right  
And if I say 'left' you go left  
If you fail to comply  
I will have no choice but to kick you out!*

*Do not worry.  
I will give you all required resources and tools.  
(You will bring them back to me when you are finished because they are mine!)  
I will give you guitar, drums, keyboard, microphone ...  
Now prepare a good song and sing it to me!  
You may begin, my son.*

*It better be good, son.  
I have given you very expensive resources, boy.  
So, please, do not disappoint me.*

*I listen to jazz.  
People say I am boring.  
I do not care.  
I am boring in my own place.  
This is the only music genre I listen to.  
Remember, this is my place, my studio.  
You are obligated to do everything my way.*

*So, are you ready?  
You may begin.  
In three, two, one ...  
SING!!!*

Here the submission to an authority figure seems strategic: the 'boy' (the new student) clearly understands the need to submit to the rules of a dominant discourse (represented by 'jazz' as a genre). He understands that he is being patronised by the lecturer and that his own 'musical genres' (or discourses) are being discounted, but he is compliant. The lecturer pretends assurance and support ('*Do not worry*'), but is in fact authoritarian ('*Everyone in this place plays by my rules*'). He veers between calling him 'boy' (indicating contempt) and 'my son' (indicating patronage). The new student seems to resist the new 'academic tune' and sees himself as having to perform in rather humiliating terms. The new university environment is represented as fundamentally unsafe, tacitly authoritarian and lacking in compassion. This poem is a reaction against the hegemony of academic discourses which are, in fact, boring, exclusivist and rather self-important (see the penultimate verse).

### The dimensions of a social epistemology

What, then, does the data above reveal of this cohort of novice students' epistemological frames? Firstly, we observe submissiveness or obedience as learning values. We observe an epistemology that sees knowledge as 'suffering' or 'brave endurance'. Students are *not* accustomed to finding knowledge intrinsically interesting or even comprehensible: learning has been boring and uneasy and participation in learning was limited to peer groups outside of classroom settings. Even in these settings it seems that someone (*a 'genius'*) taught while the others in the peer group listened respectfully. Knowledge is passed down hierarchically, often orally, from person to person. There is a complete absence of the idea of learning from internet or library sources – most learning is, quite literally, 'by word of mouth'. Knowledge in this kind of epistemological farm is a final, objective *product*, (as from a factory), not a growing, organic *process*. It is usually not contested although teachers (the 'farm managers'), are implicated in a hierarchical, authoritarian system that is oppressive and an appropriate response of the learners (the 'farm workers') is sometimes aggressive resistance. Students who get to university do so under great duress and are worthy of respect – they are heroes or warriors, future political leaders of the country.

Knowledge is often acquired by means of supportive peers, the 'comrades'. Peer groups have been a crucial, valued site for conceptual development. Learning is seldom conceptualised in individualistic, competitive terms and is more often understood as a shared, united effort – a struggle for a victorious outcome. In Poem 1, the praise poem, the learners have '*a variety of views*', but these are subsumed by the need for a united front. '*We are of one mind*'. In a community whose recent history was one of humiliating political oppression, knowledge implies empowerment and the development of social- and self-esteem.

### Implications for epistemological 'farming'

The students in this study were successful school learners, representing that 12% who gain formal access to tertiary institutions. Their ways of knowing had served them admirably in the harsh, dull, sometimes even violent school environments represented above. They had adopted the approved ways of valuing, thinking, behaving, reading and writing to survive, and even thrive, in earlier contexts and they had 'made it', despite significant educational, social and familial deprivation. Yet, ironically, the epistemological values that had sustained them in their former schools and communities are suddenly, confusingly, at odds with the academic communities they seek to join: these are very different kinds of farms.

This study has shown that epistemic norms have their roots in the particular socio-historical, socio-economic and socio-cultural dimensions of the students' earlier environments. It seems quite clear now that broad, staged models of epistemological development, such as Kegan's (1994) above, are largely unhelpful beyond the context in which they were originally generated. This study attempts more specific, situated and nuanced descriptions of a particular student cohort's epistemological world. Many novice students from quite different socio-cultural, socio-economic worlds may also find their epistemological values at odds with their lecturers, for similar or different kinds of reasons. Many may find it difficult to

identify exactly what is expected of them in a newly-encountered discipline with its array of teachers. But I have elucidated the knowledge values of South African students from rural or township schools where the epistemological disjunctures might be understood to be particularly complex and acute.

South African lecturers are discouraged by the consequences of an undoubtedly problematic school system (Bloch 2009; Ramphele 2008; Report of the Task Team for the Review of the Implementation of the National Curriculum Statement October 2009). Yet reading novice students exclusively in terms of deficit is equally problematic. Early students can and often do present as poorly-schooled, bored, disengaged, unmotivated, inclined to plagiarism, unable to write formally, conduct basic research or find a critical authorial voice. Yet I have offered narratives that accommodate alternative constructions of early student practices. Their epistemological resources may be difficult to recognise or acknowledge but could be more inspirational and useable than other kinds of epistemological resources from much more privileged social worlds. Social epistemologies, I have shown, have unique and particular features and they must vary widely from community to community and country to country. But I believe that lecturers need detailed, ethnographic information about their students' learning histories. Effective, ongoing, pedagogical planning is contingent on such insights. It is dangerous to ignore real students' situated ways of knowing, risking '... a disintegration or fragmentation of the normal patterns of studying', a tendency observed in students who are academically unsuccessful (Richardson 2000 in Haggis 2003, 99). Nor can lecturers assume that their own ways of knowing are the more natural ones. Affirmation of students' existing patterns of study would be a much safer course to pursue, along with overt explication, scaffolding and sustained practice in the new ways of growing knowledge in new conditions.

### Notes

1. In the discourse of post-Apartheid South Africa, these terms are still used as categories for social analysis: they refer to communities of European, African or mixed race origins, respectively.
2. The term 'comrade' is commonly used in the discourses of political youth leagues in the country.
3. These attacks on the students' academic self-esteem can be seen to have their roots in the ideologies of Apartheid education which deliberately prepared black students for menial labour (Bloch 2009).
4. The issue that sparked the uprisings was the decision to use Afrikaans as the medium for instruction in black schools. The school-children were successful – the decision was soon revoked.

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# Appendix F

## Teaching Political Science to first-year university students: Challenging ‘taxi-rank’ analysis?

### Abstract:

This paper explores the situated and contested nature of the epistemological values of a social science discipline as it finds expression in the context of a particular department. Using an anthropological approach, it analyses the disciplinary “territory” of Political Science as it is inhabited by “tribes” of disciplinary experts, in this case the lecturers (Becher and Trowler, 2001). It provides an ethnographic account of a disciplinary community doing the work of inducting first-year students into new ways of knowing with a particular focus on the lecturers’ perceptions of the resources and capabilities that first year students bring with them into the academy. The study also describes some of the “teaching and learning regimes” (Trowler, 2009) that characterise the department and the ways these appear to shifting. Finally, the impact of these insights on the epistemological access of newcomers to the discipline is considered.

**Keywords:** disciplinary literacies; teaching and learning regimes; epistemology; teaching social sciences

### Introduction

Students entering universities for the first time encounter the phenomenon of disciplinarity in a much stronger form than they have experienced at school. Whilst they may have been aware of the varying literacy expectations of different school ‘subjects’ these will probably not have been articulated nor understood as particularly significant. Yet the literacy practices of different disciplines in universities are widely divergent and beginner students need help in making sense of these variations. In Humanities faculties, students meet ‘new’ disciplines (such as Psychology, Philosophy or Politics) for which they have only the most reductionist or populist notions. Little in their school experiences can have prepared them for the specialised ways of knowing, thinking or practising that they encounter in disciplines such as these. This paper addresses this issue in relation to Political Science. It argues that novice students’ predilection for ‘taxi rank’ analysis<sup>1</sup> can set up both affordances and constraints in the introduction of this particular discipline.

As a researcher in the field of Academic Development, I am an “outsider” in the discipline of Politics but with a professional interest in what happens on the “inside” of the teaching and learning of various Humanities disciplines (Jacobs, 2005). For some years I was the coordinator of an Extended Studies programme which facilitated novice students’ access to various disciplines. This role generated a series of research projects of which this paper is the most recent.

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<sup>1</sup> In South Africa, because of the prevalence of the taxi as a means of transport for many poor or working-class people, the metaphorical term ‘taxi rank analysis’ (coined by one of the lecturers in this study) refers to entrenched, unsubstantiated views about current political issues or events. Every culture has its own version of ‘taxi rank’ analysis: for example, in traditional European societies, the community might have met at the ‘village pump’ to exchange strongly-held views on political issues of the day.

The data for this study were mostly collected during 2009 for a study that intended to contrast the epistemological values of students and their lecturers in a first-level Political Science course. I soon discovered that I could not do justice to both groups in a single paper and therefore focused my attention on the students and wrote 'Intersecting epistemologies: first-year students' knowledge discourses in a Political Science module' (Niven, 2011). This earlier paper identified elements of a group of students' social epistemologies and argued that it is in the intersection of social and disciplinary epistemologies that student access to academic discourses is lost or gained. I turn now to the data that concern the *teaching* and *teachers* of Political Science in an attempt to understand how lecturers conceptualise the epistemology of their discipline and how this plays out in their curricular decisions, approaches to teaching and constructions of students' learning.

Using a concept from Anthropology, in this paper I am "studying up" (Nader, 1972), that is, the researched have considerably more "social" and "symbolic capital" (Bourdieu, 1986) than the researcher in this context. Nader writes: "There is a certain urgency to the kind of anthropology that is concerned with power, for the quality of ... our lives may depend on the extent to which [we] understand those who shape attitudes and control institutional structures", (1972: 283). Students need to be able to decode the implicit knowledge assumptions underlying a new discipline and it is one of the roles of AD researchers to start this process of decoding on behalf of those who seek access to the social and symbolic capital of disciplinary membership.

This paper limits itself to a first-level course, in one department, discipline and university in South Africa over a limited time period (2009 to 2010). Lecturers from other departments and disciplines may recognise some elements of this narrative and others will find it unrepresentative of their own contexts. What this paper *is* able to demonstrate is the particularity a disciplinary epistemology as it is enacted in one community of practice. Although there were common values, there appeared to be no stable, unitary 'epistemic order' to which all the lecturers implicitly subscribed. This has implications for how students are taught in the initial phase of their disciplinary apprenticeship and I will explore how the lecturers' values played out in curriculum and pedagogy.

### **Anthropological understandings of university literacies**

My aim was to develop rich, ethnographic descriptions of Political Scientists doing the work of inducting newcomers into the cultural ways of knowing that inform their discipline. To unpack these 'cultural ways of knowing' I have made use of theories with an anthropological orientation, including Becher's ideas of disciplines as "academic territories" (the content areas of disciplines) inhabited by "tribes" (the practitioners within the disciplines), (Becher and Trowler, [1989]/2001). But Trowler's later work has avoided the potential for "epistemological essentialism" (2009) implied in Becher's earlier, generic analyses of the knowledge characteristics of disciplinary cultures. Instead he has advanced the idea of "Teaching and Learning Regimes" (TLRs) to represent the underlying values and assumptions at work in disciplinary environments (2009). These 'regimes' include eight dynamic and interrelated aspects<sup>3</sup>: tacit assumptions; implicit theories (of teaching, learning and assessment); recurrent practices; conventions of appropriateness; codes of signification; discursive repertoires; subjectivities in interaction and power relations. TLRs enable an analysis of unique configurations of particular disciplinary cultures.

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<sup>3</sup> Trowler terms these eight aspects of a disciplinary culture as "moments" (2009) probably to signify their provisional, unstable character.

An Academic Literacies approach to understanding learning in HE also has an anthropological orientation because it understands literacies as cultural phenomena (eg., Street, 1993; Baynham, 1995; Barton, 2000). Ways of using reading and writing are particular to socio-cultural communities – including disciplinary communities. Thus literacy practices are “complex, contested, specific and ... contextualised” (Haggis, 2004: 100). This approach argues that there is no generic ‘academic literacy’ that can be applied across all disciplines because each discipline has its own “... peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding and arguing that define the discourse of [the] community” (Bartholomae 1985, 134). So learning needs to be conceptualised in varieties of patterns and frameworks that fit more closely with *disciplinary* ways of knowing as well as with *community* or *social* ways of knowing that accompany both students as they enter the academy and lecturers who teach the disciplines. Lecturers need to be conscious of the divergent frames for knowledge-building that they and their students bring to the teaching/learning environment and they need to be conscious of potential areas of epistemological tension.

In an Academic Literacies model, learning is “an apprenticeship”; it needs “a number of years to develop”; “new forms of expression will need to be explicitly modelled and explored” and this can only occur “within the teaching of the subject” (Haggis, 2004: 101). Lecturers are disciplinary experts who induct novices – the students. So the literacy expectations of disciplines cannot be prepared beforehand at schools, or on Access courses through the teaching of generic, transferable skills. They are best taught by the ‘tribal’ specialists from within disciplinary ‘territories’.

Northedge and McArthur (2009: 113) have extended the idea of learning as situated apprenticeship. They explain that: “The route to construing unfamiliar meaning is not through formal, logical steps but through experience of participating in the flow of meaning making within relevant discursive contexts” (2009: 113). It is about “becoming immersed in the ways of thinking and knowing of a knowledge community” and “learning to partake in its trade in knowledge” (ibid). They avoid the much-used metaphor of ‘scaffolding’ learning for students, seeing it as an “arm’s length” concept (p 124). Rather they see learning as students and teachers “diving into the turbulent waters of the disciplinary discourse community together” (ibid) and entering into “acts of shared meaning making” (p 113). Northedge and MacArthur (2009: 107) understand learning in HE as essentially comprised of both “outer aspects” (the intellectual-cognitive dimension that privileges the discipline and its discourses) and “inner aspects” (which emphasises personal-social conceptions of learning -- a more constructivist notion). They argue that *both* aspects are necessary for successful learning.

### **Collecting and analysing the data**

I gathered data from a range of different sources over 2009 and into early 2010. First, I conducted extended, semi-structured conversations with four of the lecturers involved in the design and/or delivery of the 1<sup>st</sup> semester course and had another conversation with the Head of Department. I taped and later transcribed all five conversations. I also collected a number of documents: the ‘Introduction to Political Science’ tutorial book which assigns readings and short written assignments; copies of the first and second essay assignments for the semester; a copy of a lecturer’s teaching portfolio in which she sets out her teaching philosophy; a record of an email conversation between one of the lecturers and the subject librarian on how to help students locate suitable readings for their early essays; finally, a departmental ‘flyer’ which introduces Political Science to incoming students.

I analysed the data in terms of the theories and models briefly outlined in the section above. I sought evidence for the territorial and tribal nature of this discipline and department (Becher and Trowler, 2001); I identified Teaching and Learning Regimes (TRLs) in the department (Trowler 2009); I adopted an Academic Literacies perspective on learning as ‘situated apprenticeship’ (Haggis, 2004; Northedge and MacArthur, 2009) and mapped the lecturers’ approaches against Northedge and McArthur’s analysis of HE teaching as focusing on “outer” or “inner” aspects of learning (2009: 110).

The lecturers in the study read and responded to transcripts of their interviews and read earlier versions of this paper. I have incorporated many of their ideas and comments into the final version of this paper.

### **The ‘territory’ of Political Science 101**

The course to which this study refers is ‘Introduction to Political Science’ and the ‘territory’ is, firstly, some of the *“basic ideas, concepts, institutions and processes in Political Science”*, (Dept of Politics Flyer, 2009). The students are introduced to concepts such as ‘government’, ‘democracy’, ‘constitution’, ‘legitimacy’, and ‘ideology’ and so on. This is followed by four country case studies – India, South Africa, Nigeria and Britain – in which basic forms of government of each are compared and contrasted. The traditional expectation during this first 13-week semester is that the students write two essays of about 1500 words each, and three shorter tutorial assignments of about 500 - 600 words. The tutorials are based on full-length academic articles which analyse the political structures of the countries above. The essays are expected to refer to between six to eight reputable sources, none of which are recommended by the lecturer, although in 2009 some recommended texts were on ‘short loan’ in the library. However, most readings are located by the students themselves. The first essay is *“guided”* in the sense that it is broken down into three sections: 1. *“Define and discuss the concept of democracy”*; 2. *“Distinguish between liberal and social models of democracy”* and 3. *“Appraise the problems of democracy in any one African country (excluding Nigeria, South Africa and Zimbabwe) since 1990”*, (Dept of Politics, 2009: Essay 1). The second essay asked students to *“Critically assess the challenges to federalism and democracy in India”* or *“Critically examine the contributions of civil society organisations and the mass media to the restoration of electoral democracy in 1999 in Nigeria and the role they have played in democratic consolidation since then”*, (Dept of Politics, 2009: Essay 2).

This was the basic design of the curriculum in 2009. However, the territory is shifting. During 2009 the first essay was being replaced by an MCQ test and much shorter, mediated pieces of writing. A new, young lecturer in the department is challenging the content of this introductory curriculum, wanting to give it a stronger theoretical and philosophical basis. He says of the current course: *“It doesn’t ground [the students] enough – we need to look at classic readings and figures -- like Plato, Machiavelli, J S Mill, Rousseau. This course emphasises democracy, although this is not explicit.”* My impression was that he understood the curriculum he had inherited as a rather tired, idealistic model developed in the 1990s during the period of the newly-established democracy in South Africa. He claims that students are now *“smarter, better prepared, have better English and have more political knowledge ... the ways of learning have changed, and we need to adapt”*. Plans are now afoot to redesign this curriculum and the ways in which it is assessed.

Northedge and McArthur describe a traditional ‘Oxbridge’ model of teaching and learning that assumes that students will “read” subjects for themselves (2009). Students are assumed to have enough background knowledge in the discipline to acquire new content knowledge they

encounter: university teachers can assume students' independence. In this department students are similarly deemed competent enough to locate suitable reading materials for their essays and capable of appropriating and "*appraising*" the content (Dept of Politics, Essay 1: 2009). This seems to be a "tacit assumption" of the departmental culture (Trowler, 2009).

Yet the quietly desperate tone of the following email conversation in March 2009 between one of the lecturers and the subject librarian shows that it may be an unrealistic assumption. The librarian writes: "*Your students are dribbling into our offices in the library – many of them don't know where to even begin with the essay .... Can we not arrange a session to teach them how to find journal articles, newspaper articles and books?*" The lecturer replies: "*We have 315 students in this class, with 17 groups of 15 – 17 students per group. I suppose organising [library] sessions for them will be a logistical nightmare. If we decide to run a session for each group, we will have to do it 17 times. I am not sure how to go about this. Any ideas?*" The librarian responds: "*The problem is the essay deadline which is sometime next week ...*". Showing remarkable professional dedication, they organise classes on basic information searches for 315 students during the course of a week. Nevertheless this does appear to be an 'ad hoc' response to the realities of students' actual resources.

### **The Political Scientists: the 'tribes'**

As I came to study this department, my first response was to problematise Becher's concept of 'academic tribes'. These lecturers were varied and idiosyncratic individuals who brought a complex of language and cultural backgrounds, life histories, prior educational and teaching experiences, ages, and political views to the teaching of Politics, illustrating Pace's claim that "a host of personal [...] factors mediate between the patterns of a discipline and their expression in a particular situation" (2009:96). However, one of the lecturers in this study responded uncomfortably to this idea: the department sets parameters within which lecturers operate regardless of their backgrounds. He thought that "*there is an institutional and procedural ethos to which we defer*", so this remains an open question.

The Head of Department is a middle-aged, West African man most of whose tertiary education had been in 'ivy league' American universities. He has held the post of Head of Department since the mid 1990s and his position of leadership and strong personality exert a powerful influence on the departmental culture. The students and junior departmental members seem in awe of him and his nickname is "*The General*" and although this is respectful and affectionate, it is suggestive of hierarchical "power relationships" in this context. I will refer to him as 'G'.

The curriculum 'territory' represented in this paper was mostly designed and taught for many years by a white, Zimbabwean woman, now in her late 50s, and although she no longer teaches it, it bears her imprint. She was an undergraduate at a South African university in the 1970s and her postgraduate studies and early academic teaching experience occurred in an embattled, crisis-ridden ex-Rhodesia where she was taken on by the local university as a 'temporary teaching assistant'. She later taught Politics in the United Kingdom and was appointed to her current post in South Africa in the mid-1990s. I have quoted from her teaching portfolio in this study. She is represented as "mothering" the students. As a feminist it is perhaps surprisingly that she is tolerant of the label: "*If the students are comfortable with that label, if it is enabling ... then there is nothing wrong with it ... We are caught up in a gendered matrix ... Students turn things into a family situation and [they] need fathers and mothers ... [I] leave it as it is ... You have 'The General' at one end of the system*"

and 'The Mother' at the other – I guess we balance each other out. It's important that staff operate together ... the system works". Since she accepts the label, I will refer to her as 'M'.

Two PhD students from a West African country were responsible for the teaching of the Politics 101 curriculum in 2009. Both were graduates of universities in their home countries but had come to South Africa to complete their doctoral studies. Their sensitivity to the institutional culture of a South African university, highlighted by the comparisons they were able to make with their home universities, provided illuminating perspectives. I will refer to them as 'DS 1' and 'DS 2' (Doctoral Students 1 and 2). DS 1 coined the term 'taxi-rank analysis'. He explains: "Everyone ... has an opinion about virtually every political issue ... even one who has never been to school. Whether they can substantiate their views or offer coherent/logical/factual premises to support such views is a different question. They make arguments from the heart (characterised by emotion) rather than the head (characterised by a reasoned approach). I paint a scenario of a taxi rank ... where one might find people arguing and holding on to entrenched opinions but they are not thinking carefully and close their minds to alternative, perhaps valid, explanations. I do not use this analogy to stifle personal views ... In fact I encourage students to contribute to class discussions but I follow any views with the "why" question ...".<sup>5</sup>

Towards the end of 2009 a new member of the department was appointed and he took over the teaching of Politics 101 in 2010. He is a young, black South African man in the first years of his academic career, but all his post- and undergraduate studies were in the university department and institution in which he is now employed. His school and family background had not prepared him for university study. He explains that, "I knew no one who had been to a university, absolutely no one, not even the teachers ... I was a 'walk-in' student. I walked in to the university and said I wanted to come". His reflections on the introductory course as a new lecturer in 2010 and as a novice student himself in 2001 also provided interesting, alternative perspectives. I will refer to him as NL (New Lecturer).

The roles of metaphorical 'Generals' and 'Mothers' in learning processes align with Northedge and McArthur's model of teaching as fundamentally focussed on either "outer" (discipline-centered) or "inner" (learner-centered) aspects of learning. These approaches might initially appear to be incompatible, but both are necessary for effective learning. For example, lecturers need to be a primary source of disciplinary knowledge – an 'outer aspect' – but, at the same time, hold back, to provide students with spaces to learn in their own ways – an 'inner' aspect. Similarly, lecturers need to gain insights into the minds and lives of their students but also keep up with recent developments in their discipline. They need to set disciplinary standards, but also encourage students in their own interim understandings and connections. The students need to acquire "a disciplinary voice ... but also retain and develop their own voices" (McArthur, 2009: 119). This department sustains the interplay of inner and outer aspects of learning in the balance represented by the two senior figures: each privilege different aspects of the learning process but there seems to be a fundamental complementarity along the lines of a traditional family system.

### Teaching and Learning Regimes

There seemed to be divergent "tacit assumptions" (Trowler, 2009) about the nature of new students and their resources for learning. G's assumption is not tacit: "Students have been socialised like kindergarten children. They have no understanding of what it would take to

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<sup>5</sup> This explanation was provided by the lecturer after he read an earlier draft of this paper. He felt it needed a fuller, more nuanced account of the notion of 'taxi rank' analysis.

*make them successful. I blame the schools. They come with certain behaviours that are in conflict with university learning ... they don't know how to behave appropriately". DS 1 contrasted this with his own experiences of studenthood in West Africa in the late 1990's: "You could have power cuts for days so no access to computers, no up-to-date journals. We had to rely on books, sometimes outdated. We didn't have tutors or mentors that supported us ... they didn't listen to our stories. There was no 'spoon-feeding'. We had to exert ourselves to survive the system. [However] ... There were surprisingly few drop-outs... The environment was so competitive that getting a place at university was a privilege. The social life was nil, zero, we buried ourselves in work".*

Set against this account, South African students present as dependent, disempowered or confused. For example, Consultation Times (a "recurrent practice" in this department) are misused by new students who understand them as a site for "*querying assignment marks even when they have not taken time read the formative feedback provided on their marked assignments*" (D1). Regarding students' office visits, G says: "*They come to consult me ... but don't write anything down. They ask for clarification two or three times but don't write – they come without pen or paper*". This conflict in "conventions of appropriateness" is often observed in lecturers' discourses about undergraduate students. For example, Boughey (2006) records her experience of a student knocking on her office door requesting a personal explanation for instructions that are already clearly written down on a Notice Board outside. She interprets this in terms of an orientation to oral learning grounded in prior educational experiences. My earlier paper exploring beginner students' epistemological values (Niven, 2011) also suggests that there is very little in many students' earlier experiences of learning that could prepare them for the appropriate conventions of learning in university settings. When lecturers are strained by students' violations of the conventions, they reach for resources in their own "discursive repertoires": students must not be "*spoon-fed ... we must not spoil them ... or they will not develop the necessary coping skills*" (NL).

An alternative construction of new students is expressed by 'M'. She claims in her teaching portfolio that one of the controlling ideas of her professional practice is the idea of teacher as "*primus inter pares*"<sup>6</sup>. She writes: "*It has been my experience that I can learn as much from my students as they can learn from me*", and "*I make approachability one of the top priorities as a teacher*". G wants to "*unscramble*" or "*tease*" students' knowledge, almost suggesting a necessary destabilisation of first-year students' ways of knowing - possibly in the Vygotskian sense of removing "fossils of old learning" (Miller, 1989: 158). M's discourse is different: "*If I look at my course evaluations and I see responses that speak of discomfort or alienation I feel I have failed*". Whilst M agrees that new students are bad at "*ordinary hard work*" and "*unwilling to put in the necessary effort*", as a Marxist she interprets student behaviours in terms of a capitalist ethos. "*Competition is necessary to survive and many students are not yet in a position where they can compete ... Competition implies hard work which is a scary thing to do because it invites you to fail if you come from a disadvantaged background. The project is just too overwhelming ... they are despairing ... and then they find ways around it such as plagiarising from Wikipedia. It's not just laziness or inherent ineptitude.*" M's interpretation of students' "subjectivities in interaction" (Trowler, 2009) also emanates from her Marxist outlook: "*The objective factor is always class ... not race. Race is subjective, temporary, short-term, abnormal. In the post-Apartheid era class kicks in but students hang on to their subjectivities – race*". In Marxist terms black students "*belong to two broad class categories – those who have been to either private or ex-Model C schools and those who have been through historically disadvantaged schools – but they are still*

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<sup>6</sup> "The first among equals".

*bound together by the subjectivity of race. Students from rural backgrounds try and recreate their cultural ground in inappropriate settings. [Yet] ... from any culture there are some very enabling, knowledge-grasping elements, as well as the opposite, so when you know what you are dealing with you know what to appeal to".*

A Marxist frame helps this lecturer make sense of why novice students present as they do. Her analysis suggests a pedagogical way forward: lecturers need to identify and use the epistemological resources that students' various class and cultural backgrounds can yield and use these as resources for building new kinds of cultural networks and territories that resemble those of academic Political Science.

The lecturers identified some "*knowledge-grasping elements*" available to beginner students in Political Science. They agreed that most students are willing to "*vocalise ... they have got good oral skills*". They "*challenge what you are saying. [Their claims] might not be well-grounded ... and be based on something they have read in the papers, or something someone told them once. We have heated debates ... I see some strongly entrenched positions, they get emotional, they use ideas from their communities or townships*". But D1 works with these discourses to explicate a new epistemological stance: "*I tell [the students] if you proceed on the basis of assumptions you have already got, it doesn't make you any different from the man at the taxi rank who has [also] got an opinion about something. But I don't want taxi rank analysis. We do have ways of testing what we say. You need to change your opinions when reason demands that you do so*". Rather than mocking or deriding 'taxi-rank analysis' he sees its potential as a "*knowledge-grasping element*". M describes this as "*the tricky part of teaching Political Science. We have to take what they think they know, for example, about political parties ... and reconfigure it in the language of political analysis rather in the language of ordinary conversation*" The trick is in the reconfiguring of students' everyday experiences of the political and social world into the formal discourses of a social science.

Beginner students make strong links between the academic discipline and issues of practical social justice. This can be frustrating: "*Students think that politics is to do with corruption ... or parliament, or elected officials, or elections or about us all having jobs ... no, no, no!*" (NL). Yet I observed the lecturers themselves making similar links. DS1 explains: "*I want them to link the concepts we teach with real-life events ... If they can go home and explain to the little ones, 'this is an election', 'we have parties, proportional representation', 'this is our system in South Africa ... we did this in our Politics class' ... that is what I want them to be able to do*". G too affirms Political Science's links with practical, ethical citizenship: "*I want them to be engaged, they can be part of a citizenship of the world – not to be great peacemakers, but their lives can contribute. They need to understand each other as human beings, engage with foreign students, respect refugees*". But the ethical content of the discipline is an affordance for teaching, not necessarily a constraint. The 'trick' of reconfiguring of 'taxi-rank' analysis into discourses of rational critique could well be easier if a personal passion for justice and equity is the starting point.

### **Concluding remarks**

Teaching Political Science is a subtle balance between a range of competing discursive regimes, those of students, lecturers and the discipline itself. I observed lecturers making some wise and fruitful links across these discursive boundaries thereby facilitating beginners' access into new disciplinary territory. This department was not a 'tribe': there were dramatic divergences of approach and attitude although there was a professional complementarity that sustained the community: the toughness of the disciplinary expectations were mediated by

discourses of support and nurture. I did not observe an uncontested disciplinary 'territory', as such, nor a clear, unitary epistemic order. These issues seemed to be in flux. There were competing assumptions about the nature of student learning: lecturers recalled their own learning histories to frame current students in a different world. The application of Marxist frames of class and capital provided a humane interpretation of students' apparent maladjustment to university learning. The seeking out of "*knowledge grasping elements*" from within students' cultural resources was particularly helpful. Thus "*taxi-rank analysis*" was understood as a useful point of departure into the discipline, as was the notion of Political Science's links with issues of practical social justice – although both ideas needed re-configuring in the context of academic study. Some of the students' prior literacies are recognised: students' orientations to oral learning were acknowledged and deemed useful. Yet lecturers appeared unrealistic about the students' preparedness for academic reading. Most students, whatever their class or background, come into universities under-prepared in this regard and require explicit guidance in the location and appropriate use of academic reading materials. It was not, in my view, "*spoon-feeding*" or "*spoiling*" to offer help with libraries and online searches as in the training offered to the students in 2009: it was excellent, necessary pedagogy.

New students need disciplinary experts who dive into turbulent disciplinary waters alongside them to model and explicate the ways of being in Political Science. Students need many opportunities to practice the peculiar ways of thinking, reading, speaking and writing that characterise the discipline. Without experts, disciplinary dialogues degenerate into superficial, generic 'chatter' and opportunities for growing confidence in a new disciplinary identity are lost to unchallenged "*taxi-rank analysis*".

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# Appendix G

## PHDS BY PUBLICATIONS: AN 'EASY WAY OUT'?

PENNY NIVEN AND CALLIE GRANT

### Abstract

PhDs by publications are a relatively new model for doctoral research, especially in the context of the Humanities or Education. This paper describes two writers' experiences of conducting doctoral studies in this genre and in these faculties. Each discover alternative ways of employing a body of published research papers in development of an overarching thesis. The writers argue that whilst it can be a pragmatic choice for some, PhDs by publications are more likely to be highly complex meta-narratives and that an overview of past research is fraught with theoretical, conceptual and epistemological challenges in the quest for coherence. They claim that the nomenclature 'PhDs *by* publications' or '*through* publications' is misleading; in the epistemological space of Humanities or Education studies, this mode of doctoral research is more accurately represented as a 'PhD *with* or *alongside* publications'. They conclude that the particular affordance of the model is that it privileges accounts of the process of knowledge building and of descriptions of the gradual emergence of 'doctoralness' in the person of the researcher.

In recent years the role of doctoral and research education has become a space of contestation and increasing complexity (Boud and Lee, 2009). The PhD thesis "is changing and metamorphosing rapidly into a wide variety of different forms of output" and there is diversification of the routes to the attainment of a doctoral qualification (Lee 2010, p. 13). While doctoral degrees 'by publication' or 'by and through projects' are more common in the sciences and in performance- or design-based disciplines (Allpress and Barnacle, 2009), they are less common in Human and Social Science faculties (Draper 2008). The landscape also varies from country to country, for example, PhDs by publications are fairly common in Scandinavian countries (Lee 2010), but much less so in the United Kingdom where, despite the availability of this model for doctoral students, its uptake has been limited (Robins and Kanowski 2008). In our own South African context, the opportunities for publication-based doctorates are often taken up in the natural and biomedical sciences, but they are rare in Humanities and Education faculties in which our research is based. To date, only one Humanities or Education faculty<sup>1</sup> in a South African university has endorsed this route to a doctoral qualification although other institutions are guardedly considering it and are allowing some leeway in the modes by which PhD theses might be submitted for examination.

One of the writers of this article, Callie, has recently completed a doctorate in a 'publications' genre and the other, Penny, is referring extensively to a body of her own published research papers in her as-yet-unfinished doctorate. At the outset of our studies we were largely unaware of the wide, international debates around innovations in doctoral education, the new variant forms of PhD, or the role doctorates are now

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<sup>1</sup> The University of KwaZulu-Natal formalised 'PhDs by Publications' in the Education and Humanities faculties in 2008.

playing in the global competitive knowledge economy (Boud and Lee 2009). The discussion that follows is grounded in our shared, personal experiences of working towards a doctoral qualification within the model of the 'PhD by publications' and how, in a relatively untutored, self-directed manner, we made sense of the genre for ourselves in practice. The purpose of this paper is to formulate insights into these sense-making processes in a bid to stimulate debate around some of the critical issues that we encountered. We explain why we defied convention and selected to do our PhDs in this alternative manner and outline some of the objections and challenges we faced. We became particularly interested in the different understandings of knowledge and knowledge construction which working within this mode seemed to generate. So it is on the basis of our own lived experiences of working within the parameters set by a body of prior publications that we believe we can now contribute, retrospectively, to theorising this kind of doctoral work.

Our research interests centre around teacher leadership within a distributed leadership framing in South African schools (Callie) and epistemological access in 1<sup>st</sup> year Humanities students from under-resourced backgrounds (Penny). As academics, we had both been publishing in scholarly journals for some years but began to experience either self-imposed or institutional pressures to raise our academic profiles. Feeling somewhat ambivalent about such pressures, as well as the prospect of launching into many more years of intensive study, the opportunity to do 'PhDs by publications' seemed to offer a pragmatic option. Besides, we felt, our papers had advanced our fields, demonstrated our competence as researchers, showed some originality, had undergone rigorous processes of review and redrafting and had been endorsed in respected, peer-reviewed journals. Perhaps, we speculated, this amounted to something roughly equivalent to a doctorate, or, at the very least, *half* of a doctorate? In the dearth of well-theorised, independent advice in the early stages of our studies, we decided that – on balance – our former publications did *not* display the full range of generic capabilities, skills or dispositions that would be expected of a doctoral candidate and that the presentation of publications in the context of a PhD study would need to reside in the framing of a substantial meta-narrative, as we will explain later on.

Our self-doubt was certainly reinforced by some sceptical voices amongst colleagues and in Faculty or Higher Degrees committees where PhDs by publications tended to be regarded as a 'quick-fix' solution or an 'easy-way-out' to the qualification. Concerns seemed to centre on whether doctorates based in a series of short pieces of writing could ever generate sufficient depth or engagement with the topic or argument (Lee 2010). We also acknowledge the inherent dangers in this approach. There is potential for theoretical, conceptual or methodological incoherence. The papers may have been written at different times and in different contexts using varieties of theories and approaches and they may be variable in quality and focus. Research papers offered to journals are often written in the hurly-burly of busy teaching schedules, demanding family commitments, or in response to institutional pressures to 'publish or perish' and may indeed fail to show the theoretical depth, range or originality that should be the hallmark of a doctoral study.

There seems to be general agreement that the crucial, defining quality of the doctorate is that it must display originality and it must constitute a contribution to knowledge (Draper 2008; Gilbert 2009; Lee 2010). This value was endorsed by the institution in which we were registered: a doctorate needs to "make a distinct contribution to the

knowledge or understanding of the subject and afford evidence of originality shown either by the discovery of new facts and/or by the exercise of independent critical power" (University of KwaZulu-Natal 2007, p.25). A doctorate by publications is not exempt from this condition. Yet the regulations and procedures that we anxiously consulted to guide us through the process seemed vague, generalised and unrealistic, or couched in terms very like the classic PhD.

In fact, there seems to be very little national or international consensus on what exactly a 'PhD by publications' should consist in. For example, in the Swedish context, this kind of PhD requires four journal articles in international peer-reviewed journals brought together into "a compilation for examination with an exegesis or 'cover story', that gives an account of the collection, the research that informed the production of the articles, and the 'doctoralness' of the body of work submitted in the portfolio for examination" (Lee 2010, pp. 12-13). In Australian universities, Robins and Kanowski (2008) advise that, typically, three to five research articles are required to constitute a PhD thesis, accompanied by introductory and concluding chapters. The University of KwaZulu-Natal rule states that a thesis of this kind would need to consist of one or more (published or unpublished) original research papers of which the student is the prime author "accompanied by introductory and concluding integrative material" (University of KwaZulu-Natal 2007, p. 27). As Draper (2008) argues, university regulations often provide little clarity on the number of articles required for a doctorate by publication, nor do they offer guidance as the purpose, format or length of the accompanying documentation. This contributes to the view that the PhD by publication is a 'quick fix' or 'easy-way-out' and this could leave candidates either vulnerable or cynical.

Nor were we the only ones struggling with what 'doctoralness' means in this context. Our supervisors, peer advisors and colleagues, and in Callie's case, the institutional and national examiner, all had little first-hand experience of this alternative mode of doctorate. They too were unable to draw on a substantial body of experience, theory, literature or expertise. Given the novelty of this genre in our faculties, and in the Humanities and Education faculties in the country as a whole, we were all pioneers on 'a road less travelled' though we appreciated the courage of the institution in making this doctoral model available to us.

On the basis of our experiences and subsequent reflections, we now wish to make several claims about the nature of PhDs by publications in the hope that this will generate some useful discussion on the issue. Firstly, we interrogate the way in which this kind of doctorate is named – 'PhDs by research papers', in the sense of *by means of*. In the Humanities and Education contexts we would argue that this is misleading. A PhD of this kind will always be merely '*accompanied by*' papers – '*with*' or '*alongside*' a main thesis. We prefer the term 'PhDs *with* publications'. Secondly, the 'integrative material' cannot merely 'accompany' the papers as though this is an extrinsic element that can be added on in the form of introductions or conclusions. Instead, the integrative material is at the heart of the thesis and the key to coherence and originality. The integrative process is in the construction of a substantial, overarching 'meta-inference' (Tashakkori and Teddlie 2003) or 'meta-narrative' and the work of this kind of thesis in a Humanities or Education context is in the identification and fashioning of the meta-narrative. Our third claim resides in the alternative epistemological values that are inherent to this kind of doctoral work and we will explain this insight in detail later on.

We each developed different ways of meta-narrating our earlier research papers.

Callie describes her approach as follows: "The most challenging conceptual manoeuvre in my PhD revolved around its retrospective design. How was I to bring together, into a single coherent thesis, eight published independent papers? As I re-examined my papers, I found myself 'working backwards' to develop a 'logic of connectivity'. In this context 'logic' denotes reasoned thought while 'connectivity' implies a form of linking, joining or relating. This complex process worked at a range of levels but the retrospective development of three doctoral research questions assisted in the clustering of the papers to guide the synthesis process. At a methodological level, the papers were connected through the design of the doctorate as a 'mixed research synthesis study' (Sandelowski, Voils and Barroso 2006). The papers were also connected at a theoretical level (distributed leadership theory) as well as through a common literature review. Finally, connectivity was established through the PhD insights which evolved out of a secondary analysis of the findings across the papers.

However, this sense-making was a complex, iterative process which at times appeared illogical and downright impossible. Sometimes I felt I was "forcing a fit between the chronicles<sup>2</sup> and the research questions in the 'unnatural circumstances' of the synthesis process" (Grant in press). I lived through times of incredible self-belief and times of complete bewilderment. There were moments when I confidently claimed the scholarship to design the thesis as I deemed best and other moments when I felt completely disempowered by the daunting task ahead of me (Grant 2010). I was acutely aware that for the logic of connectivity to work, multiple drafts of the thesis would be required which would involve multiple layers of re-thinking, re-reading, re-writing and re-tensing before the construction of the meta-inference and the construction of the chapters were complete. It was only at the end of the process that I could confidently argue that the insights that emerged from the study "are greater than the sum of the individual findings from the chronicles and offer an original contribution to knowledge in the sub-field of teacher leadership" (Grant 2010, p. 338).

Penny adopted a new meta-theoretical standpoint on her earlier research: "I began to read in Critical and Social Realism (Bhaskar, 1979/1998 and Archer 2000a; 2000b). In Realist philosophy, reality is understood as layered and complex. There is a layer of subjective experience (the 'empirical' domain), another of potential events (the 'actual' layer), and finally a layer of unseen generative mechanisms, causal powers and tendencies (the 'real' layer). The 'real' underlies the empirical and actual, and accounts for the way in which reality appears in the form of particular kinds of events or experiences. I conceptualised my former research papers as located in the domain of the 'actual' and my doctoral study in the domain of the 'real' in the sense that it seeks to uncover the ideologies, cultural values, structural/material conditions or personal concerns and projects that gave my earlier research its particular 'shape'. My meta-narrative explores the interface between structure and agency in the conduct of Educational Development research in South African universities. I asked what institutional and cultural conditioning was I drawing on (or rejecting) as a 'researcher-agent' and how this was being played out in my papers. The adoption of this fresh meta-

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<sup>2</sup> In her thesis Callie represented her papers as 'chronicles' which were 'stranded' and woven into new patterns.

theoretical perspective is allowing me to develop an independent stance in relation to earlier research work. Critical and Social Realism have shown up what is 'there' in the papers, but also what is 'not there', or absent. They refocus aspects in the Education Development field that are un-researched or under-researched – not because former researchers were blind or ill-intentioned but because they explored issues with theoretical lenses that failed to draw attention to ways in which the field might be explored or conceptualised. I see my papers as a body of data, a starting point. The doctorate is only indirectly concerned with the content of the papers (which conveniently avoids the potential for repetition in the PhD study itself). Rather, it concerns the form the papers took and expounds the formative processes involved in researcher emergence".

These accounts suggest that Callie's PhD is a 'stronger' version of the model and Penny's is a 'weaker' version, but in both cases the papers represented bodies of data on the basis of which new, yet related theses were developed. In neither case was 'integrative material' simply added on to an extant set of papers.

Perhaps the most important claim that we can make about PhDs with publications is that they are epistemologically and ontologically different from classic PhDs. We discovered this in the processes of enacting or 'embodying' this kind of doctoral research. We found that re-contextualising papers within the setting of a doctoral study meant that they began to shift focus or to carry meanings and significances that were not there when they were discrete, stand-alone articles. They seem to take on a life of their own and to interrelate in unexpected ways. They needed re-ordering, re-formulation, re-interpretation or even re-theorisation. The whole needed to exceed the sum of the parts yet the parts stubbornly resisted synthesis. It was then that we began to recognise that our PhDs were operating within an alternative kind of onto-epistemological frame. A 'modernist' research journey is linear and incremental: typically, it has a clear beginning and proceeds in logical stages, usually with 'truth' or knowledge claims being made at some end-point. The modes of inferencing are by means of the formal logic of induction or deduction. But we found ourselves using *abduction* as we recontextualised our data within larger conceptual frameworks. Or *retroduction* seemed a more appropriate inferencing tool as we 'worked backwards' from the starting points represented by our papers<sup>3</sup>.

The adoption of a 'PhD with publications' model had located us in ways of knowing and knowledge building that were more 'postmodern' than 'modernist'. A reflexive re-examination of past research involves processes of deconstruction and fragmentation. The meta-narrative is an attempt at reconfiguration – of finding another 'pattern'. Former papers are 'excavated' or understood as historical artefacts of some earlier time. As we strove to make sense of the complex interplay of 'then' and 'now' we were no longer able to sustain our original interpretations of data which now seemed partial, naïve or out-of-date. There was a disconcerting emergence of a multiplicity of perspectives, a disruption and instability of the 'researcher-self'. Our experiences of writing were circular, recursive and iterative, more akin to *weaving* than *building*. We

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<sup>3</sup> Retroduction involves creativity and imagination – "thought operations" – in which the researcher abstracts what must have been the case for phenomena to be as they are (Danemark, Ekstom, Jacobsen and Karlsson 2002, pp. 80-81).

became involved in our own action research processes as we shifted to and fro, back and forth, in and out of earlier examples of our work as the new thesis gradually started to emerge. We recalled Denzin and Lincoln's reference to certain kinds of qualitative research as "bricolage" and researchers as "bricoleurs" who, with whatever tools come to hand, inventively repair and "recycle used fabric into beautiful quilts" (1994, p. 548). They suggest that our research endeavours might be understood as "cobbled stories ... which help us and others to understand how and why we did what we did, and how it went very wrong ..." (ibid). We suggest, therefore, that there is a sense in which PhDs with publications are almost inevitably times of 'taking stock', periods of subjective reflexivity, in which we consider the direction that our ways of knowing have taken us and "try and imagine a new future" (ibid). Although none of the processes described here are exclusive to postmodern research, we would nevertheless argue that our embodied participation in the structures of a revised kind of PhD shifted our understandings of knowledge and its generation and took us beyond the idea of the classical conceptions of the PhD as 'stewardship' or as the steady, incremental advancement of disciplinary knowledge (Green 2009).

We have discovered that PhDs with publications are not an 'easy way out' to the qualification. Although Callie's PhD took her two years, from registration to completion – and Penny seems set fair to graduate in a similar time frame – there is nothing in our experience that suggests this mode is 'easier' than traditional doctoral studies. The fact that one sets out with an already existent body of data certainly reduces the time to completion and this is an affordance. But our sense is that in a Humanities and Education context, PhDs 'by' publications will never be a comfortable epistemological fit. We argue that it is unrealistic to assume that this kind of study can ever be a victory narrative or 'journeyman's certificate' (Lee 2010) in which a candidate lays down past research achievements as evidence of worthiness to be granted a doctoral qualification. On the other hand, PhDs 'with' or 'alongside' publications could be very useful to some Humanities and Education candidates. Differently conceptualised, this kind of study lends itself to a self-reflexive account of journeying in a given field. It privileges the creative enactment of the generative processes of coming to 'know' in that field. Such doctoral work could challenge the discourses of PhDs as 'knowledge products' in a 'knowledge economy' for the purposes of 'knowledge consumption' in a globalised academy. On the contrary, we would rather celebrate the model as enabling accounts of researcher emergence in which the researcher as a 'self-organising agent' (Lee and Boud 2009) can be observed to be developing 'doctoral capabilities' (Lee 2010). What was most creative and rewarding for us was the model's potential to recognise "the importance of the person of the researcher", to focus on "the doctoral experience ... as a 'journey'" and to track "the internal process of increased understanding" (Leonard and Becker 2009, p 71).

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## APPENDIX H

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR ACADEMIC DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONALS (FROM 1990 – 2010)

OCTOBER, 2011

1. Can you give the broad outlines of your career in Academic Development (in South Africa)? (ie., *where* were you, *when*, and in *what* capacity?)
2. In terms of their significance in the development of this field, *who* were your colleagues at particular stages? Were any of these research partners at particular stages?
3. Could you very briefly describe the kinds of research you have been contributing to this field over the past 20+ years?
4. How has your research changed over the years? What have been the main shifts in emphasis or theory?
5. Did you attend the SAAAD conferences in the years up until 1998? What are your memories of this research community?
6. Who would you say were the important 'transformative intellectuals' in the movement/community during the 1990's and into the 2000's?
7. Who were the international researchers that influence your own research practice in AD? Bodies of international research that were influencing others?
8. What would you say have the most *influential texts* that have had an impact on AD in SA?
9. What have been your frustrations/ disappointments with AD research and/or practice in SA over the years?