

Teaching, learning, and research: Diffracting the interviews of Vice Chancellors and Deputy Vice Chancellors of Teaching and Learning at South African Higher Education Institutions (0238)

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Abstract

Traditionally, teaching and research have been conceptualized as binaries, which has had crucial consequences for professional academic development in the higher education sector. This chapter uses new feminist materialisms, particular the work of Karen Barad (2007) to trouble the dualisms of teaching and research. In order to do this, we draw on Barad's relational ontology. This ontological position holds that entities do not pre-exist relationships and agency does not reside uniquely within a human individual, but is a performance within a relationship.

Philosophically, Barad goes beyond scientific realism and social constructivism. Instead, she claims the inseparability of ontology, epistemology and ethics, calling her stance an ethico-onto-epistem-ology. In her refusal to separate epistemology from ontology and ethics, she challenges a metaphysical position that assumes fixed differences between human and non-human, mind and body, matter and discourse. She uses the term 'entanglements' to describe how these apparent differences are inseparably intertwined and considers how the intertwined nature of these differences comes to matter. This means that both our researcher selves and the methodologies we use are entangled in knowledge-making processes, and that these are also ethical engagements. In this entanglement and engagement, the researcher self is located within and as a part of the world.

Barad (2007) uses a diffractive methodology to ascertain 'patterns of difference that make a difference' (p. 72). A diffractive methodology is used in this chapter to examine the entanglements of ideas both within and between interviews which were conducted with eight deputy vice chancellors teaching and learning in South African higher education institutions. A diffractive methodology requires a close and attentive reading of the fine details of a text to ascertain 'patterns of difference that make a difference' (Barad, 2007, p. 72). Diffractive methodologies can be used to move beyond the dichotomies which have traditionally emerged between teaching and learning and research, to provide inventive and creative provocations. A diffractive approach also alerts one to the effect that the researcher, the participants, the selection of research methods and the interview guide intra-act as specific material-discursive practices which open up possibilities in the research process while excluding others. Thus the analysis of research findings is understood as an enactment amongst research-data-participants-theory (Mazzei, 2013).

The transcripts of the interviews with the deputy vice chancellors teaching and learning and vice chancellors at eight South African higher education institutions

constitute the data for this chapter. The vice chancellors and deputy vice chancellors were interviewed by directors of teaching and learning and other senior teaching and learning academics from sister universities using an open-ended interview guide. The key questions focused on the participants' vision for teaching and learning at the institution, the mechanisms to support the development of academics as teachers, and the response of academics to these opportunities.

In analyzing the interviews diffractively, our focus was not upon the human intentionality of individual participants in the study, but on 'a complex network of human and non-human agents, including historically specific sets of material conditions that exceed the traditional notion of the individual' (Barad 2007, p. 23). In the case of the interviews considered in this chapter, this complex network included the entanglements of the legacy of apartheid and global neoliberal discourses emphasising outputs, research and student throughput, which were read diffractively through various conceptions of the scholarship of teaching and learning.