

Context, Agency and Responsibility in Professional Learning: A South African Study (0261)

Brenda Leibowitz

University of Johannesburg, South Africa

A study undertaken in South Africa, entitled *Interplay of Structure, Culture and Agency: A study on professional development in higher education*, aimed to investigate the influence of mainly institutional context on the participation of academics in professional development activities with regard to the teaching role. The series of embedded case studies was undertaken by colleagues responsible for professional academic development at each of the eight participating institutions. Based on the work of social realist Margaret Archer, it sought to investigate what the conditions that would lead to the kind of engagement in professional development that is evident at each of the eight universities. The following forms of data were collected, focusing on the macro, meso and micro levels:

The South African policy landscape and national level trends with regard to higher education;

And at each institution:

- Data from teaching and learning policies and self-presentation, for example on the web, demonstrating how the university signals its views on teaching and the importance thereof
- Interviews with a minimum of four members of senior management
- Interviews with a minimum of ten teaching academics
- Reflective report by a team member responsible for professional development
- An electronic survey comprising open and closed questions to all academic staff.

The study was collaborative to the extent that it involved professional developers from each of the participating institutions. The research design and the formulation of the research instruments occurred at research team events where all team members were present. Codes for the analysis of the data were also established at these meetings. In addition to cross institutional analyses according to themes, each institutional team prepared a case study report as a contribution to an overarching report and for dissemination and debate at their own institutions.

By June 2015, 15 scholarly publications and upwards of 25 conference presentations based on a variety of themes associated with the research project were generated. More information about the project and publications is available at:

<http://interplayofstructure.blogspot.com/>.

This SRHE Conference presentation focuses directly on the relationship of context, agency and responsibility as these emerge from the interviews with the 90 mostly mid career academics at each of the participating universities. The paper is based on the following assumptions about good teaching and professional learning, which have been refined during the course of the project:

1. The professional learning of academics occurs in three broad categories: participation in formal professional development opportunities such as workshops,

short courses or diploma and degree programmes; attempts individuals make to foster their own learning, for example engaging in critical reflection on own teaching, seeking out colleagues to engage in dialogue or reading on-line and print texts on teaching; and continuous practice and refinement of practice over time. This is broadly in line with the literature that suggests that professional development of academics occurs in both formal as well as informal, especially faculty and workgroup settings (Knight 2006; Trowler and Cooper 2002; Trowler and Knight 1999).

2. Professional learning and quality teaching are interrelated. Part of *becoming* a good teacher involves *being* a good teacher.

The theme of agency is shown to be highly significant in how the academics in the study accounted for their own involvement in and responsibility for their professional development and the quality of their teaching. Agency is shown to have links with the notion of 'personal emergent properties', as discussed by Archer (1996; 2000), and to the notion of personal projects, commitments and concerns (Archer, 2000). Agency is also linked to the sense of a settled sense of self and biography, where academics' own educational influences are shown to have a strong impact on how they see themselves and their responsibilities as teachers. Although a social realist account of agency is theorised as relational, and as an element within the interplay of structure, culture (and agency), it foregrounds the role of the individual and their inner commitments.

The theme of responsibility as distributed amongst networks of people, the material, the embodied, time and space (as signalled by Fenwick and Nerland, 2014) is also shown to make a valuable contribution to the investigation of the role of context in academics' professional learning. This line of investigation allows a deeper understanding of how the material and the everyday behaviour of academics in close proximity to each other influences quality teaching, to the extent that it becomes clear that 'responsibility' for enhancing teaching cannot only be discussed in relation to the individual. There is a substantial body of literature on practice (Schatzki, 2012; Gherardi, 2012; Billett, 2012) aligned to a socio-material approach, that enables a more direct exploration of how the interactions between people and their environments influence quality teaching.

A possible conclusion derived from this study, is that agency and personal emergent properties are more useful concepts to use when discussing how individuals *shape their own learning trajectories* and how they ensure that they do learn in formal and informal settings. However the *quality* of teaching and learning is more convincingly explored by social and material considerations that might include for example tea room conversations, classroom conditions and IT infrastructure, which are more mutually constitutive with human behaviour, than a social realist such as Archer might agree.

Thus far it would appear that one could then happily bring the social realist and socio-material theoretical frameworks together in order to understand academics' engagement with professional learning and with quality teaching. However the frameworks, whilst not in disagreement in all areas (both acknowledge the importance of one form of practice or another, emotion and values), have differing philosophical influences that render this dual theoretical framing problematic. These pertain most importantly to ideas about the subject and object division, stability of sense of self and identity, agency and intentionality, and causality. The significance accorded to the individual or human versus the material, is a further point of disagreement between these approaches.

The implications of the study for enhancement of teaching and learning are discussed. Suggestions for further research are the final contribution of this paper.

References

- Archer, M. 1996. *Culture and Agency: The Place of Culture in social theory*. Revised edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Archer, M. 2000. *Being Human: The Problem of Agency*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Billett, S. 2012. Practice based learning and professional education: Pursuing quality outcomes and educational sustainability. In: J. Higgs, R. Barnett, S. Billett, M. Hutchings and F. Trede (eds) *Practice-based education: Perspectives and strategies*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers. 101 – 112.
- Fenwick, T. and Nerland, M. (eds) 2014. Editors' introduction to: *Reconceptualising Professional Learning: Sociomaterial knowledges, practices and responsibilities*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Gherardi, S. 2012. *How to Conduct a Practice-based Study: Problems and Methods*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- Knight, P., Tait, J. and Yorke, M. 2006. 'The professional learning of teachers in higher education'. *Studies in Higher Education*, 31, 3: 319–339.
- Schatzki, T. 2012. A primer on practices: Theory and research. In: J. Higgs, R. Barnett, S. Billett, M. Hutchings and F. Trede (eds) *Practice-based education: Perspectives and strategies*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers. 13 – 26.
- Trowler, P. and Cooper, A. 2002. 'Teaching and learning regimes: Implicit theories and recurrent practices in the enhancement of teaching and learning through educational development programmes'. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 21, 3: 221–230.
- Trowler, P. and Knight, P. 1999. Organizational socialization and induction in universities: Reconceptualizing theory and practice. *Higher Education*, 37: 159–177.