



## Reflections on professional learning: Choices, context and culture



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### ABSTRACT

Understanding factors that enable and constrain the professional learning of academics for their teaching role provides insight into the complex space within which this teaching resides. The work of social realist Margaret Archer informed an analysis of multiple data sources as part of an exercise towards critical reflection and introspection about professional learning at the university. The data confirms previous work, but also takes the conversation forward. The university teacher – seen to be making choices, within a particular context and informed by her perceptions of the prevailing culture and her personal priorities – is central to this discussion. Academic development practitioners should consider how they might influence dominant discourses, and enhance the dispositions of teaching academics to support quality teaching.

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The provision of high quality teaching and learning has been recognised as a key responsibility of university teachers. It can therefore be accepted that the university has an equal responsibility to support its teachers to provide this high quality teaching, creating opportunities for their professional development. Quality teaching and professional development are inextricably linked with effective professional development for university teachers being described as ‘... the single most important’ activity that can lead to student success (The Carnegie Foundation, 2008:26).

The professional development of university teachers should be understood historically in the light of the environment and changing contexts in which universities find themselves: increased student numbers (Scott, 1995); diversity among student populations worldwide (McNay, 2005); the changing nature and function of higher education institutions (Barnett, 2005); the greater variety of roles played by higher education practitioners (Harris, 2005; Henkel, 2000; Trowler, 2001), and greater demand for accountability and professional accreditation (Nixon, Marks, Rowland, & Walker, 2001). Of concern is the manner in which higher education institutions have become ‘greedy’, calling for more attention to be paid to teaching, research and administration, such that academics feel torn in different directions (Toews & Yazedjian, 2007; Wright et al., 2004). In South African universities, two decades after

democracy, these realities are particularly stark. There has been an increase in the enrolment of students, many of whom – as a direct consequence of the policies of the past – are under-prepared for higher education studies (Scott, Yeld, & Hendry, 2007; Soudien, Kallaway, & Breier, 2006). There have been mergers and incorporations, changes to governance structures, new funding formulae, new policies and new legislation for higher education institutions – all of which have put particular pressure on universities to develop more relevant curricula and to develop more learning-centred forms of teaching and assessment (Badat, 2009; Scott, 2007). Furthermore, South African universities are challenged by inequalities in terms of funding and resourcing (CHE, 2006), as well as by varying institutional cultures and historical legacies. These structural features further add to the complex space already alluded to above.

Numerous studies acknowledge the increasing complexity of the academic environment and argue that this requires greater levels of training and support than previously provided (e.g. Bamber, 2002; Malcolm & Zukas, 2001). Opfer and Pedder (2011), writing from a teacher education perspective, argue that care must be taken not to offer simplistic responses to this inherent complexity. Rather, they call for a move beyond process to review the myriad of variables that influence the professional development of academics in their teaching role, while being cognisant of the other, often competing roles (research, service, administration) that they are required to fulfil. As part of an exercise towards critical reflection and introspection about the expectations being placed on academics to enhance their teaching, and the support

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that is provided for this at our university, we sought to understand this complex space. This understanding was informed by reviewing the factors that university teachers describe as being either enabling or constraining of their professional development in the teaching role.

### Professional learning

Professional development is a catchall phrase. 'Development' often has a negative connotation implying work of a remedial nature, or a deficit model (Elvidge, Fraser, Land, Mason, & Matthew, 2004; McAlpine, 2006; Webster-Wright, 2009) suggesting that academics are not competent as teachers and need to be 'developed' in order to improve. Synonyms abound: 'academic development', 'educational development', 'faculty development', and 'instructional development' (Stes, Min-Leliveld, Gijbels, & Van Petegem, 2010:25–26). Professional *learning* is defined as 'the need for professionals to continue learning as they practice and advance in their careers' (Johnston, 1998:1) and includes notions of 'context and situatedness' (Opfer & Pedder, 2011:397). The importance of context in the professional learning of academics as teachers has been explored previously (Leibowitz, Bozalek, Van Schalkwyk, & Winberg, 2014). In this article we focus on this *learning*, whether it occurs formally or informally, and the nature of the conditions that might support it.

The focus of professional learning lies mainly with the enhancement or change of teaching and assessment practices of lecturers in order for quality student learning to take place (Badley, 1998; Boud & Brew, 2013; Cilliers & Herman, 2010; Elvidge et al., 2004; Opfer & Pedder, 2011). The focus of the work of academic development practitioners is to facilitate academic staff in their 'being' (Dall'Alba, 2005:362) and 'becoming' (Dall'Alba, 2005; Leibowitz, Van Schalkwyk, Van der Merwe, Herman, & Young, 2009) 'good' university teachers and their development of effective educational practice in order to enhance student learning.

Professional learning has many faces. It can occur informally through day to day interactions with colleagues and peers in the department (Trowler & Knight, 1999; Webster-Wright, 2009), or it can be formally organised through workshops and programmes, lunch hour seminars, teaching conferences, short courses and qualifications (Cilliers & Herman, 2010). It can also be argued that teachers learn by doing, continued practice and experimentation (Berliner, 2001). In this case their learning would be influenced by their own motivation and by encouragement from other academics and students. Teachers cannot be understood as isolated entities but always as linked through a network of resources and practices that help to define individuals within their contexts. For many academics it is at departmental level – the 'workgroup' – that much of this networking can occur and where the culture – the ways of doing, the norms and values – are established (Trowler, Fanghanel, & Wareham, 2005).

While many studies focus on the description of different approaches to professional learning and the processes that underpin these approaches, others call for the need to investigate the impact of such approaches particularly with regard to student learning, and to conduct studies that have a more 'sophisticated' design (Stes et al., 2010:26). However, we would argue that this presupposes that people actually attend professional learning events and/or embrace opportunities for professional learning as they arise. Our interest lay in the factors that might enable or constrain the professional learning of academics in their teaching role and exploring the way that context – at institutional, departmental and individual levels – influences this learning. Crawford (2010:189) explored the perceptions of academics regarding their own professional learning, and highlighted issues relating to 'professional status; misaligned initiatives and

priorities; the influence of supportive networks; and emergent personal, . . . concerns'. She made use of critical realism as the theoretical basis for her analysis of a series of narrative interviews and our study further develops her findings.

### Research design

This article offers a critical reflection on a case study drawn from a multi-institutional and multi-level study conducted across eight South African higher education institutions to examine the contextual influences on the professional learning of academics as teachers. This case study was undertaken by four academic development practitioners at one institution, who are all part of the multi-institutional study team. Adopting a reflective stance, we aimed to advance our understanding of the work that we do in support of teachers at the university.

The university at which this case study was conducted, Stellenbosch University (SU), is a medium sized, Afrikaans, research intensive, public university and one of the four top research universities in South Africa with approximately 900 fulltime academic staff and close to 28,000 students and a student to staff ratio of 1:23. The institution has an extensive policy framework with regard to teaching (e.g. a Strategy for Teaching and Learning; an Assessment Policy), but no formal strategy for professional learning, or official system for the recognition of good teaching. The university has a centre for teaching and learning mandated to provide support for professional learning. Such support typically includes both formal and informal interactions similar to those described above (see also Van Schalkwyk, Cilliers, Adendorff, Cattell, & Herman, 2013).

The data for the case study was generated from three sources as we sought to determine the 'perspectives of the academics themselves' (Akerlind, 2005:6) with regard to their professional learning. Firstly, an anonymous electronic survey (adapted from Slowey & Kozina, 2013) with closed and open questions was distributed to all permanently employed teaching academics at the institution. The aim of the questionnaire was threefold, namely to locate patterns of belief about the needs for professional learning for teaching; to explore what the actual uptake of professional learning for teaching was, and to ascertain perceptions of enabling and constraining factors within the institution the uptake of professional learning opportunities for teaching. A 25% response rate was achieved ( $n = 238$ ).

The questionnaire highlighted areas that we wished to probe more deeply and thus a series of semi-structured interviews were conducted. Firstly, five members of the senior management were interviewed by team members from other universities in the multi-institutional study. Then 15 teaching academics were interviewed by the authors after being selected according to a predetermined matrix of criteria, including gender, level of seniority, faculty, race, and so forth. Interview protocols (see Appendices A and B for examples) were developed by the multi-institutional study team through an iterative, consultative process that was conducted both online and during a face to face meeting. All the interviews, which were approximately one hour in duration, were audio-recorded, transcribed and made available for member-checking before analysis commenced.

In this article we focus on the findings that emerged from our analysis of the open-ended responses to the questionnaire and the interview transcripts. The work of social realist Margaret Archer (1995, 1996, 2000, 2003, 2007) and the distinctions between structure, culture and agency provided a lens through which we could analyse our data. Structure refers to the social arrangements, power relations and resources available in any context. In Archerian terms, culture refers to the norms, values and ideas that reside within that context. Culture in higher education

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