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CAUGHT BETWEEN WORK AND STUDY: EXPLORING BOUNDARY ZONES AS AN EMPLOYED POSTGRADUATE STUDENT

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INTRODUCTION

Centuries of colonial and apartheid domination divided higher education institutions between world-class universities to institutions of little repute. Staff members have seen their professional identities change from expert practitioner to academic when specialist colleges and technikons were transformed or amalgamated into universities of technology. Since the publication of White Paper 3 (RSA 1997), technikons have become universities of technology and the variety of colleges, including nursing colleges, agricultural colleges and colleges of education have closed down and were incorporated into multi-campus universities. This post-apartheid higher education landscape was envisioned as a transformed space that would redress past inequalities, serve a new social order and, in doing so, meet pressing national needs that would respond to new realities and opportunities.

The processes of restructuring and institutional incorporation left a number of academic staff members unemployed. Those who were employed by the incorporating institutions faced qualification requirements for which they had not been prepared and lacked the skills universities require for employment, notably research skills. A variety of funding mechanisms and, in some cases, recognition of prior learning procedures provided assistance to newly incorporated staff. Differential workload models, social pressures and a lack of research readiness, however, often undermined synchronisation of individual transformation with the planned social and implemented institutional transformation.

My doctoral journey spans this fraught time of transition. My initial teacher education qualification, a Higher Diploma in Education majoring in business and economics, was followed by a Bachelor of Arts in which I was drawn to subjects with a Marxist

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framework. This was followed by a Bachelor of Education at another university which, at the time, bore vestiges of apartheid education, and finally a Master's degree in educational management. From the educational qualifications I learned about teaching and how to teach. From the Bachelor of Arts I learned about forms of social analysis that, by the turn of the century, no longer appeared relevant. My Master's degree, while in no way linked to my previous qualifications, provided inputs into a research discourse that disappeared soon after I graduated. When I embarked on my doctoral journey, I was wholly unprepared. I needed to face multiple, often conflicting demands and learned to play multiple roles, some required by communities of practice, others tolerated or endorsed as expected of a colleague involved in further studies. This chapter reflects on my journey as both a doctoral student and an employed academic in a newly established university of technology. Using Fairclough's notion of discursive power and boundary zones associated with Engeström's Activity Theory, the doctoral journey of a person employed in higher education is described as a process of, on the one hand, balancing demands of different activity systems and, on the other hand, using power and knowledge from one to influence the other. Understanding the extent of supervisor power relative to that of the power of a student who has an equitable external power base, at least for one doctoral student, provided a key to navigate between studies, work and community.

FRAMEWORKS FOR NAVIGATING DIFFERENT ROLES

The ideological notion of a graduate student being able to conduct a research project under the guidance of a mentoring supervisor may be one experienced by young full-time protégés. This was, however, not my experience. I found that people who, by chance or choice, embark on postgraduate study at a mature age face a number challenges created by the disjunction between their role as academic student and other social roles. While some social roles may assist the study, others obstruct efforts to study. Even where social roles contribute toward the study by, for example, providing a forum for data collection, the relation between postgraduate studies and social roles is seldom linear or simple. My own experience is one of constantly differentiating between roles, understanding the dynamics of each one and behaving accordingly. Two sets of frameworks in particular influenced my role interaction. The influence of one framework was conscious and formed part of my doctoral research framework. The other was subconscious and understood *post facto* when I was introduced to the framework as part of another research project.

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The framework consciously applied is an application of critical discourse analysis (CDA) developed by Norman Fairclough, particularly his work on language and power (Fairclough 1989:2001), as well as his work on political discourse analysis (Fairclough & Fairclough 2010). Like Fairclough, I was influenced by the work of Michael Foucault. Wodak and Meyer (2001:2) describes CDA as a theoretical perspective based on the analysis of language and semiosis, a perspective Henning, Van Rensburg and Smit (2004:45-46) term a discursive perspective. Meaning is constructed largely through individual and socially-constructed modes of symbolising reality (Henning *et al* 2004). Discourse is used to make sense of, or comprehend, a social process, as language associated with a particular field or practice, or as a way of “construing aspects of the world associated with a particular social perspective” (Fairclough 2010:230). Discourse analysis provides insight into discourses which she describes as functioning bodies of knowledge (Powers 2007:18). The identification and description of different bodies of knowledge and associated discursive practices was key to navigating, not only between the graduate research project and my other social roles, but, increasingly, between the mix of social roles that included my role as graduate student. Differing social roles imply different norms, practices and requirements for rules of behaviour. Some are determined by means of conscious projection but others are articulated through social symbols.

Navigating between discursive practices required navigation between discursive environments, each with its own structure, division of labour and social rules. Navigating between discursive structures provided opportunities to use information from one discursive environment in another. Navigating between discursive environments provided opportunities to behave as a member of one environment in another. I later discovered that the concept of a community with rules, tools and a division of labour, Engeström (1987:78) called an activity system¹, which I now understand played a role in my scholarly becoming on a subconscious level. Engeström’s model has been used to analyse social practice, particularly social transformation under circumstances of conflicting social practice (Uden, Valderas & Pastor 2008). Engeström’s (1987) model is commonly represented by a triangle of interacting elements. The key elements of interaction include the subject, the object and the community. The subject processes community demands into objects in the form of outcomes. Rules, tools or instruments and division of labour influence the three key elements. Engeström, Miettinen and Punamaki (1999:31) represent this model as follows:

¹ Engeström’s (1987) activity theory is also known as Engeström’s activity system model, Engeström’s triangle (Kaptelinin 2005) or the cultural historical activity theory (Soudien 2013:17).

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FIGURE 7.1. Engeström's (1987) Activity Theory model as presented by Engeström, Miettinen and Punamaki (1999:31)

Since the 1990s, Engeström's model has been widely used to analyse transformational dynamics of social activities in, amongst others, education and training (Bedney & Meister 1997; Tuomi-Gröhn & Engeström 2007; Bolton & Keivy 2011; Pather 2012; Soudien 2013).

The elements of Engeström's form of activity theory that appeared most relevant to my doctoral journey were roles and division of labour. As a professional academic and leader in a community structure, I was bound by certain rules of behaviour and had become accustomed to a position within them. My doctoral journey started by being subjected to the subordination of my views and position to a proposal format and its defence to a research committee that included experts with whom I was professionally acquainted. The proposal submission process clearly indicated that I was to be subjected to a new set of rules, specific tools and a division of labour that bore little resemblance to those with which I was acquainted.

In its initial form, Engeström's (1987) model focusses on the dynamics of one community, and does not account for interaction between communities, which was addressed in later publications by Tuomi-Gröhn and Engeström (2007), Olvitt (2010), Bolton and Keivy (2011) and others. Each activity system has its own division of labour, as well as sets of rules and tools that regulate both internal activities and systemic inputs and outputs. Rules within activity systems, Bolton and Keivy (2011), using Bernstein's term, suggest act like pedagogic devices with which members recontextualise knowledge, regulate relationships and assess criteria for transmitting knowledge. I, like other graduate students, used knowledge located in one activity

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system in others. Knowledge gained from work and community involvement was intertwined with my research topic. Some issues facilitated the research process while others did not. Identifying, recontextualising and transferring knowledge between different activity systems is, however, not linear or simple, hence my use of the term navigation. Recontextualising knowledge and situated writing conventions were particularly challenging.

I remember writing at the time, referring to the use of Engeström, adaptations of Engeström's initial model include the idea that more than one activity system can coexist and that the different activity systems interact with each other. Such models include those designed by Uden (2007), Bolton and Keevy (2011), Ludvigsen, Havnes and Lahn (in Tuomi-Gröhn & Engeström 2007:291-310) and Van der Bijl and Taylor (2016). The actions I was involved in were, what Tuomi-Gröhn and Engeström (2007:50) terms, boundary crossing, "a no-man's land", [relatively] free from prearranged routines or rigid patterns. Social objects within boundary zones were used and, at times, adapted to suit objectives; some random, others calculated. Diagrammatically I found myself within a structure of articulated activity systems as illustrated below:

FIGURE 7.2. Articulated multiple activity systems (adapted from Bolton & Keevy 2011:7)²

Graduate studies, for a person employed within higher education and heavily involved in community service, require balancing studies with other forms of information gathering and knowledge dissemination in different areas of activity. As

² I adapted Figure 7.2 from one I saw in an article by Bolton and Keevy (2011:7) on their article of the National Qualifications Framework as a relational relational principle. I was later told by Bolton that their diagramme is attributed to the work of Olvitt (2011).

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a working graduate student I was active in a number of social environments, each with its own social rules, tools for communication and discursive rules. The transfer of knowledge, Bernstein (in Bolton & Keevy 2011:7-8) noted, is governed by sets of rules involving recontextualisation, a process which involves taking knowledge from one discourse and re-creating it in another. The transfer of knowledge, Bolton and Keevy (2001:8) continued, is regulated by a variety of factors, including “power, social groups, forms of consciousness and practice”. Discourse and discursive practice could be added to this list.

At first, navigating within and between the activity systems was extremely difficult, largely because the rules and tools of the newly entered activity system was foreign, but also because my position within the other systems were being realigned. Learning to use the tools of a research activity system was an integral part of the research apprenticeship. Navigating between activity systems and my complying with expected rules behaviour within each system, while taking advantage of the freedom the situation provided, was something that was learned by trial and error. I found Fairclough and Fairclough’s (2010:17-18) adaptation of van Dijk’s definition of political discourse analysis a useful navigational tool in this regard.

Fairclough and Fairclough (2010) note that political discourse analysis focusses on the reproduction and contestation of power through discourse by actors engaged in processes and events within certain institutional contexts. The extent to which leeway was given to engage in graduate studies, at the expense of involvement in other social activities, depended largely on successful reasoning and argument with people in positions of power. In navigating activity systems, I worked on identifying forms, relations and dynamics of power, the key actors and discursive practices within each activity system. In some cases, I was successful in navigating boundary zones within systems. In others, however, I was less successful and in one community I failed to maintain my position. The key to both navigational success and failure lay in realising the impact of change on me and, in turn, its impact on my relations with others. Some social relations were impervious; others adapted, and a few moved towards incompatibility.

While the oscillation between activity systems had a largely positive influence on the project’s completion, at certain key points in the project it was necessary to retract into a single activity system. Key points included times when sections of the dissertation were being concluded, during the project’s fieldwork phase and when the final draft was being constructed and corrected. At such times the relevance of knowledge transferred from other activity systems as subordinated to project demands and discursive parameters. At first, subordinating other activity systems

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was difficult, as the current demands for knowledge that they required appeared to subordinate the project. However, as the project progressed and my own research skills matured, the relative importance of the other activity systems stabilised and serviced the project.

Retraction invariably had implications for honouring commitments in other communities. The success with which retraction from and re-entry into the other communities occurred depended on a number of factors of which the most significant appeared to be the relative importance of the project to the community and my ability to influence people in the community who had power over me.

POWER AND KNOWLEDGE

The role of my supervisors in my doctoral journey, as any other, cannot be underestimated. Bradbury-Jones, Irvine and Sambrook (2008) argue that postgraduate supervision is a complex pedagogy involving practices that are uncertain, misunderstood and problematic, to the extent of sometimes being impossible. Supervisors are powerful (Bradbury-Jones Irvine & Sambrook 2008). Not only do supervisors have power, they are perceived as being powerful and are expected to express their power by leading the research process and being the expert in the relationship. The form of power supervisors have, Bradbury-Jones *et al* (2008:83-84) argue, is disciplinary power. The concept of disciplinary power was developed by Michael Foucault (1995) to describe power to punish that flows out of the examination of judgments made from observation. Students, Bradbury-Jones *et al* (2008:86) continue, have expressive power, which they call “power to act”. As a result of the expressions of power, the relation between supervisor and student, they argue, is characterised by discourses of unity and detachment.

When reading the article by Bradbury-Jones *et al* (2008), my interest was raised less by their discussion of student/supervisor relations, and more by their use of Foucaultian discourse analysis as part of the conceptual framework of my dissertation. A point not lost at the time, however, was the need to collaborate (unity discourse) and the power to detach. I developed levels of detachment. The first level could be called cognitive detachment, which occurred in meetings when I disagreed with what I was told to do and subsequently ignored the input. The next level of detachment was intellectual detachment, which occurred when I disagreed with conceptualisation or a form of argument. Disagreement tended to require a counter strategy or further research, sometimes justifying my disagreement; other times not. The third level of detachment was physical detachment, which had levels of its own, ranging from putting doctoral work aside, to engrossing myself in professional or community

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work, using that as an excuse more than a reason to, in the words of my generation, “walk away”.

The power to detach is one that all graduate students possess. However, employed, graduate students have a greater level of power to detach when compared to their peers who have taken time off work or have not yet entered the labour market. “I can afford to quit”, “I do not really need this”, “I can repay the grant” were a few expressions of economic and social power commonly expressed by my employed graduate student peers. Apart from economic power to detach, working graduate students have other activity systems into which they can detach for reasons that are socially justifiable.

A student’s power to detach has erosive implications for the expression of a supervisor’s power, a power base which could be further eroded when a student brings, real or perceived, forms of social power into the relationship. For unprepared or immature supervisors, student expression of power could hamper or even destroy the project. In my experience, not only as a doctoral student, the supervisor of employed graduate students can therefore not rely on subject-based expert power alone employed by means of a directive discourse. Supervisors of employed graduate students, to a greater extent than their peers who work with younger or full-time students, need to manage and balance students’ exploration of the boundary zones within which they operate and from where their knowledge emanates. In my experience, which supports the dual discourse assertion of Bradbury-Jones *et al* (2008), the supervisor of mature working students’ needs to rely less on a directive style and adopt a more redirective one. In contrast to directing the use of information derived from rules, tools and the division of labour from an activity system that the supervisor and student share, the supervisor needs to create a boundary zone for, and within, the doctoral study. The boundary zone needs to provide scope for exploration of the student’s other activity systems and a space to test the applicability of information brought into the rules and tools required for graduation.

As with any graduate student’s journey, the expression of a supervisor’s disciplinary power is vital. However, when working with mature employed students, consistently seeking a balance of power is, in my experience, more important than expressing supervisory power. Willingness to balance power requires maturity on the part of both student and supervisor. My doctoral supervisor managed my desire to bring too many concepts into the dissertation by saying “keep it for another publication”. Her suggestion not only brought the dissertation into focus, but it provided me with opportunities to detach and explore boundaries in other activity systems. The

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exploration resulted in publications which informed, and contributed towards, the completion of my doctoral journey.

APPLICATION, TRANSFER AND USE OF KNOWLEDGE

As an employed graduate student in his forties, I felt that I brought a significant amount of knowledge into a project because I had significant knowledge about the project's context. The knowledge, however, tended to be in a format that was not necessarily compatible or aligned with the format required for inclusion in the study. Knowledge accepted without question in other communities and social environments needed to be clarified, sourced and classified before it could be incorporated into a study. Like other mature graduate students with whom I was acquainted, I regarded myself as a specialist in the area of my topic, with notable standing as a professional in the field within which the research would be conducted. Learning to adapt existing knowledge and fit it into the discourse required for graduate writing required a considerable amount of cognitive reconstruction.

The challenge of transferring knowledge between activity systems was aggravated by demands emanating from other systems and its effects on the research project. Some demands complemented the research project, but others were antagonistic. Complementary and antagonistic demands were not necessarily mutually exclusive. Some demands, initiated as complementary, became antagonistic, while some antagonistic demands became complementary. Some demands were both antagonistic and complementary. A notable complementary antagonism emanated from my employment environment. While my employer demanded increased staff qualifications, particularly graduate qualifications, and provided funding for graduate studies, work demands and the interpretation of policies even negated and at times contradicted employer intentions and incentives. In my case, while I was encouraged to study and funds were made available to pay for elements of my studies, my workload increased to an extent that studies was, at times, constrained.

Involvement in the doctoral project had a number of positive repercussions. The most notable is that it served as an account or justification for behavioural quirks, administrative misdemeanours and the transfer of knowledge. Colleagues, friends and family regarded the project as a reason for incongruent behaviour and administrative errors. In meetings, expressions of my opinion were commonly articulated as, or laced with, reference to what "recent research indicates". Operating within a number of activity systems clearly had implications, both for knowledge production and knowledge transfer, and behaviour within the activity systems. The extent to which the implications were positive or negative pedagogic devices depended to a

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large extent on the tolerance level within the different activity systems. Some social environments were tolerant towards the doctoral project while others were less so.

CONCLUSION: LOOKING BACK, LOOKING FORWARD

In writing this chapter, I have become aware of the lingering, albeit diffused, influence of Marx's writing on my study. Both Fairclough and Engeström's work, and that of Foucault, has its origins in Marx's work and, as a result, so has mine. There were clear patterns of exploitation and oppression within each of the activity systems involved in my study. My situation was unlike the situation facing a young, full-time graduate student in which the student-supervisor relation dominates and the dialectic between studies and social function is a broad one. My situation was one in which the supervisor-student role was but one of a number of competing relations, each with its own dynamic, and oscillating levels of comparative importance. The dialectic was not a broad social one, but a series of contesting, dialectic situations.

The conceptualisation of a mature graduate research study as a dialectic process, rather than the apprenticeship conceptualisation more commonly associated with graduate research, has implications for defining the roles of students and supervisors. Supervisors need to realise that mature students bring a level of expertise and perspective into the project that may not only be unexpected but may result in the revision of supervisor intentions for the student's role in the supervisor's broader research project. Mature students, conversely, need to alter their study intentions, particularly if a student has a specific career or socially oriented reason for doing the study. Subordination of broader intentions for studying is a key not only to study success; it is an important element of successful boundary crossing and survival in boundary zones.

Throughout the writing of this chapter, I have been reminded of the view of Field Marshall Sir William Slim in his autobiography about his involvement as British commander in the Burma campaign during the Second World War. He suggested (Slim 1955:vii) that a general should not write about the battles with which he is involved, but that it should be done by "someone less personally involved". Possibly the proximity of supervisors and graduates to a graduate research journey puts them in a similar position. However, providing an insider's view of the complex system(s) that constitute the postgraduate experience may provide students and supervisors alike with the tools to survive and succeed.

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