The Interplay between Structure, Culture and Agency on Student Learning and Academic Development Activities – a Trajectory of the University of Namibia

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Abstract

Higher Education Institutions have reached the end of their lifespans, unless we reinvent them to fit the constantly changing context. This paper is a reflective piece interrogating the impact of the context (internationally, regionally, nationally and institutionally) on student learning and academic development and its implications for the Higher Education Institutions (HEI) in Namibia. It is part of a reflective practice required in the Postgraduate Diploma of Higher Education for Academic Developers at Rhodes University. The diploma requires that practitioners should develop a greater self-awareness of the nature and the impact of their performance, an awareness that creates opportunities for professional growth and development. The maximum benefits from reflection are said to occur when participants value their personal and intellectual growth and they have time to engage in meaning-making processes using systematic, rigorous and disciplined ways of thinking rooted in scientific inquiries. The course prescribed contextual anchors to make this learning episode meaningful. Consequently, a sociology theoretical framework that explains the interrelations of social structure, culture, and human agency, has been utilized as a lens for this reflective analysis. For that reason, data is based on empirical experiences and observations (culture), the actual legislations and policies of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) (structure), and documents analysis by an academic developer (human agent). In the light of analysing the context, the constraining and enabling factors for academic development and student learning are exposed. The discussion ends with a proposal of a new agenda to enhance student learning and academic development at HEIs in Namibia.

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INTRODUCTION

Historically, Namibia's education system was fragmented along racial and ethnic lines, with vast disparities in both the allocation of resources and the quality of the education (Amukugo 1993; Cohen 1994). There were no higher education institutions before the political independence of Namibia in 1991, except the teacher training colleges. The pre-independence type of education and training was well-summarized by a statement made by a missionary by the name of Hoeflin in a very explicit note stating that:

"For its development…the country does not need 'educated Negros', but competent, intelligent workers. The main emphasis will therefore be on education for obedience, order, punctuality, society, honesty, diligence, and moderation, rather than academic learning (Melber, 1979, p. 20, in Ellis, 1984.)

As of today, education still remains 'a critical arena for political struggle; control over education gives control over political and social values, over access to information and status, and over a shape and composition of the labour force' (Ellis, 1984: 1).

Evidently, the socio-economic situation inherited at political independence was highly stratified. Namibia holds an infamous record of being the country with the highest levels of inequality in the world (UNDP, 2009 in Jauch et al., 2009). The massive levels of inequality are along lines of race, gender and class. This situation was expected to change through the overhaul, transformation and reconstruction of the education system. In order to redress this apartheid legacy, a massive education and training system was required, i.e. changes in structures. Thus, in response to the need to improve capacity, the University of Namibia was established by the University of Namibia Act, (No. 18 of 1992). However, this proved to be a difficult task hindered by historical, political and economic factors. The pre-existing structures could not be turned around in one night in order to effect the transformation. More so, the processes of reconstruction were typically slowed down by the pre- and post-independence cultures; ideologies, ideas, beliefs, theories, values and concepts of the actors (agency) who are gatekeepers to the new propositions. Limited financial, human, and infrastructural resources (structures) caused other delays. The transformation movement was easy to proclaim but

complex and difficult to implement.

An example of how interplay between structure, culture and agency can arise, is put in a very clear elaboration by Zuber-Skerritt (1992):

"When speculating on the reactions of many academics that are hostile and critical about academic development one might wonder whether they feel threatened, they are resisting change, or they don't know how to change, or they are just ignorant of the latest developments in higher education. However, we know that there are academics who have changed their approaches and who want to improve their teaching" (Zuber-Skerritt, 1992: 5).

Notwithstanding the abovementioned context, this paper is a position paper contributing to the discourse on why higher education institutions need continuous transformation to enhance student learning and teaching effectiveness through professional development of educators for higher education. This is in support of the fact that HEIs need to be continuously reinvented to remain responsive to ever-changing context.

METHODOLOGY

The method used was that of a reflective practitioner using the sociological framework of Critical Realism of Bhaskar (1978, 1979) and Archer's Social Realism (1995, 1996, 1998) in Archer, (2003), to interrogate the interactions of structure, culture and agency in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Namibia. The framework for analysis used the concepts of Bhaskar's (1) Empirical (experiences and observation), (2) Actual (events) and (3) Real (unchanging structures and mechanisms) and Archer's concepts of (1) Structure, (2) Culture and (3) Agency. Bringing these two sets of concepts together as a theoretical framework is presented in a table as set out in the figure below:

Empirical (Experiences & Observations)	Experiences and Observations of a reflective author, as an academic developer.		
Actual (Events)	The historical trends of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Namibia and the requirements and expectations of the society.		
Real (Unchanging Structures & Mechanisms)	Legislations, Acts, Policies and Official Documents	Beliefs, values and practices	Academic Leaders, Students, Lecturers and Academic Developers
	Structure	**Culture**	**Agency**

Figure 1: A Sociological Framework of Analysis Bhaskar (1978; 1979) & Archer (1995; 1996)

Bhaskar's Critical Realism

Fundamentals to critical realism (Bhaskar, 1978, 1979, in Collier, 1994) is the advocacy that objective reality is external to humankind. Contrasting other perspectives, critical realists assert that this reality must not be conflated with our *experience* of it. That is, the conflation of *what is* with *what can be known* is termed by Bhaskar (1978, p. 16) the 'epistemic fallacy'. This separation of ontology (what is) from epistemology (what can be known) encouraged Bhaskar (1978, 1979) to suggest a world consisting of three ontological layers: (1) the empirical, (2) the actual and (3) the real (Boughey, 2012).

The empirical layer is that of experience and observation and is the layer from which all our explorations of reality must begin. Since human beings experience and observe the world in different ways, this layer is considered to be ever changing, constructed and relative. The second layer in Bhaskar's ontology, is the actual that consists of events which take place in the world. The actual and the empirical co-exist since we experience events as they happen. The final layer is the real, that consists of structures and mechanisms, both natural and social and which have an objective existence, and from which emerge events at the level of the actual and observations and experiences at the level of the empirical. This layer co-exists with the other two layers – in other words, the layers surround us constantly (Boughey, 2012).

Bhaskar further advocates that structures and mechanisms at the level of the real are not casual but they are tangential. He affirms that position in a rejection of determinism. He further asserted that though the structure and mechanism may be dormant or active, they can produce unexpected effects at any time.

The focus of critical realism is on social justice and equality and as such the world is viewed as an 'open' system meaning that the outcomes cannot be predicted.

In the context of this paper, social justice would involve improved student learning and improved teaching through academic support programmes for lecturers who come from the background of historical inequities.

Archer's Social Realism

For Archer (1995, 1996, 1998), the study of structure, culture and agency is key to understanding the social world. Archer defines structure as relating to material resources, to recurring patterns of social behaviour and the interrelationship between different elements of society around the distribution of these material resources. Structure would thus relate to concepts such as social class, gender, race, marriage, education and so on. Culture, on the other hand, is understood to concern ideas, beliefs, values and ideologies. Both structure and culture are important aspects of social life. Agency refers to the personal and psychological make-up of individuals in relation to their social roles and relates to the capacity people have to act in a voluntary way (Boughey, 2012).

Archer critiques the conflation of structure and agency and culture and agency and argues instead for structure, culture and agency to be viewed as separate domains of reality, each with distinct properties and powers. Importantly, she also argues that each should be analysed separately although, in this analysis, the interplay of each with the other is explored.

In the above framework, the experiences of students, academics and other stakeholders and the academic developer as they engage with teaching and learning in higher education would be placed at the

level of the empirical. Since each individual would experience higher education in different ways, these experiences would be understood to be relative and constructed as a result of personal and social histories.

The paper attempts to use the lenses of this sociological framework (empirical [experiences and observations] actual [events], real [unchanging structures and mechanisms]) of Bhaskar's (1978) Critical Realism and structure, and culture and agency of Archer's Social Realism (1979) to lay out the enabling and constraining factors from the context of HEIs in Namibia. Thereafter the paper proceeds to use the same lenses to explain the role of an academic developer (an agent) in such a context and finally concludes with a proposal of a new agenda for academic development in Namibia.

EMPIRICAL EXPERIENCES AND OBSERVATIONS IN THE CONTEXT OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN NAMIBIA

The International Context

Traditionally, the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are believed to have purposes and roles to transform and reconstruct a society. These roles include the following aspects:

- To provide equal opportunities, access to people who were previously denied it and to practise justice and citizenship (Barnett, 2000, p. 50)
- To promote social equity and redress quality simultaneously (Badat, 2009)
- To meet learning needs and aspirations of individuals through the development of intellectual abilities and aptitudes to best use their talents for opportunities for self-fulfilment
- To be responsive to the economic needs and world of work
- To produce graduates who will actively improve the labour force with competence and skills needed
- To teach students to engage in constant 'critical self-reflection' to pave their way for freedom and liberation
- To inform the public and promote public discourses that matters for democracy – countervailing forces in society, if necessary, in opposition with the dominant voices of the day
- To teach, research and publish to share with the public (Vale, 2014)

To sum up the above points, the purpose of HEIs is to create opportunities for human development to make a deeper understanding of the transformation and the reconstruction of their context and to achieve self-actualization. Regrettably, many HEIs are not able to achieve these main reasons for their establishment. They have ideas that they are research institutions that contribute to the local economic growth but also happen to be teaching students (Vale 2014). They identify themselves as researchers first and teachers second. Consequently, they have large classes where they simply process the students through the system, many fail and those that pass might get degrees, but they are not educated. However, Calhourn, a professor at the University of Stanford, in an interview with Vale (2014), asserted that even if we are not employed to teach only, teaching should ideally be the central pillar of HEIs. The poor quality of students that we receive from our school education systems necessitates effective teaching. Africa in particular, should rethink their priority on this aspect (Vale, 2014). The HEIs in Namibia are not exempted from these assertions. The records of performance for both lecturers and students do produce evidence that an overhaul of academic development is a necessity (Shalyefu, 2013).

Internationally, there are constraining factors that are making the HEIs rethink and reinvent their roles. This was acknowledged by Calhourn's conversation with Vale (2014) that states that HEIs have reached the end of their lives. That assertion is affirmed by ideas in the anthology titled: 'the end of knowledge in Higher Education' (Barnett & Griffin, 1997). Calhourn further advanced his argument that 'though the core academics are committed to defend their academic identity and their conservative ideas of HEIs, they are risking to be paralysed by nostalgia rather than then guiding the educational transformation.' However, HEIs have been reinvented many times before. Therefore, he supported the retention of the traditional roles of the HEIs, bearing in mind the constant changing of their context (Vale, 2014).

Additional factors that have led HEIs to the need of reinvention are listed in the literature as: massification – expanding access to those who previously were excluded from higher education couples with tuition charges

Information and Communication Technologies; for example, the Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) – that may compete with

public HEIs by proving access and quality education

Marketisation – job oriented studies and the required cooperation with the industry and other stakeholders

Managerialism – accountability for public funds, and its relation to academic freedom and autonomy

Competition – internal and external competition of HEIs for prestige and impact

Global ranking structures – reflecting an extremely large field of HEIs and the creation of new hierarchies helpful to funders and the media

Internationalisation – global movement of staff, students and globalisation of quality assurance systems

Quality assurances – ensuring quality through institutional audits and qualification framework for articulation and student mobility

Funding – cutting of fund and competing for funds resulting in tuition charges

Global capitalism – increasing and intensifying wealth divides in most places across the world

Academic identity – the protection of academic identities and tribal disciplines

from trans-, multi-, and interdisciplinary discourses

Accountability - HEIs are required to account for expenditures: input-throughput-output and to accommodate the voice of various actors from the communities (Green, 1997).

The Interplay between the Actual, the Real Structures and Culture in the National Context of Namibia

Higher Education in Namibia is defined as any education and training offered at level five (5) or above as per the legislative National Qualification Framework. Any offering type of programme (general,

professional vocational or postgraduate) post-school system is grouped as Higher Education (Higher Education Act, 2003).

Higher Education in Namibia is governed by the following legislations:

- • Higher Education Act (2003)

- • Namibia Quality Authority Act (1996)

The national statutory bodies, processes and policy documents that are of relevance to Higher Education activities are:

- • The National Council of Higher Education (body)
- • The professional bodies as stakeholders (body)
- • Public and Private Higher Education Institutions (institutions)
- • Programme Accreditation (process)
- • Institutional Audits (process)
- • Quality Assurance System for Higher Education in Namibia (2009) (document)
- • Education and Training Sector Improvement Programme (ETSIP) (document)
- • Vision 2030 (document)
- • National Development Plans (NDP1, NDP2, NDP3, NDP4)
- • Investing in People, Developing a Country, Higher Education for Development in Namibia (1999)
- • Planning for a Learning Nation Programme Document Phase 1 (2006 -11) of 2007

These policy documents contribute to the national imperatives that are characterized by an increasing demand on effectiveness, quality, efficiency, relevance and development activities in higher education.

In particular, the Higher Education Legislations and Policies in Namibia require the following:

According to the Namibia Higher Education Act:

- • the higher education system should be coordinated
- • the access to higher education should be expanded
- • the quality of higher education should be enhanced

- the allocation of public funds should be accounted for
- the courses and programmes should be accredited
- the Higher Education Institution (HEIs) should be monitored

(Higher Education Act 2003, (Act No. 26 of 2003) Subsection 5 (a) - (b) and (6) (e) (ii).

Furthermore, the Higher Education Act 2003 states that the registrar, in this case the Permanent Secretary, can only register or accredit an institution if:

- the teaching staff to be employed by the institution are sufficiently qualified *(implications for Academic Development)*

- the higher education programmes to be provided by the institution are of such quality, that it will enable the institution to provide a standard of education that is not inferior to the standard of education provided by comparable public higher education institutions, which is funded by the state *(implications for Academic Development)*

(Higher Education Act 2003, (Act No. 26 of 2003) Subsection 25 (2) (a) and 25 (2) (c) (i) - (ii))

In addition, the National Qualification Authority Act makes provision for any person, institution or organization providing instruction or training to apply to NQA for accreditation that they have the capacity or potential capacity to:

- provide a course or courses of instruction and training
- assess the performance of persons partaking in any such course
(National Qualification Authority Act, 1996 (Act No 29 of 1996) Subsection 13 (1) (a))

Also, Research, Science and Technology Act, 2004 (Act No. 23 of 2004) support innovation and research in the objectives as outlined in section 2 of the Act. These are:

- to ensure the co-ordination, monitoring and supervision of research, science and technology in Namibia;
- to promote and develop research, science and technology in Namibia;
- to promote common ground in research, scientific and technological thinking across all disciplines, including the

physical, mathematical and life sciences, as well as human, social and economic sciences;

- to encourage and promote innovative and independent thinking and the optimum development of intellectual capacity of people in research, science and technology;
- to ensure dedicated, prioritised and systematic funding for research, science and technology application and development in Namibia;
- to promote linkages between Namibia and international institutions and bodies on the development of research, science and technology.
  (*These objectives have implications for continuous professional development.*)

Further, Education and Training Sector Improvement Programme (ETSIP) aims at the improvement of the quality of higher education as graduates are expected to impact the knowledge driven economy, improvement levels of productivity that will contribute to the rapid economic growth. This programme has many objectives that are meant to contribute to the attainment of Namibia's Vision 2030.

Key objectives of the quality, range and threshold of skilled labour needed for Namibia's needs and priorities are illustrated by a document titled the Planning for a Learning Nation Programme Document Phase 1 (2006-11) of 2007 as is in the context of Vision 2030.

All these legislations, norms and standards have to be conformed to as documented in the Teachers' Education Colleges Act 2003, (No. 25 of 2003). According to the Teachers' Act, the Higher Education Institutions' role is to educate and train the students for their potentials to be fully actualized. For the full potential of students to be realized in higher education, teaching and learning activities need to be done effectively and efficiently. In that, the HE educators need to have more knowledge and skills in addition to their subject knowledge specialization. This has implications for the need of student support programmes and professional development programmes for HE educators.

The discourses and ideas discussed above have implications to my institution in the sense that the programmes offered by the

Higher Education Institutions will have to be registered on the National Qualification Framework and also be accredited by the National Council of Higher Education.

These processes have norms and standards to be followed by each HEI. This includes institutional audits and lecturers' accreditation. For the courses to be registered on the NQF and to be accredited by the National Council of Higher Education it is required that the curricula are well-designed and the lecturers have the capacity to teach. The capacity required does not end with subject specialization or research and publications as it is required in the current recruitment processes of HEIs in Namibia. Capacity includes knowledge and skills to design sound curricula, to effectively teach and efficiently assess student learning, as well as evaluate courses and programmes for improvement.

THE ROLE OF AN ACADEMIC DEVELOPER AS AN AGENT OF CHANGE IN THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN STRUCTURE AND CULTURE; THE ACTUAL AND THE REAL.

As an academic developer, I have a big role to play in the above context by doing the following activities:

- auditing the pedagogical skills of lecturers,
- assessing the needs of students and lecturers and prioritize them to be able to respond appropriately,
- interact with both students and lecturers to collaborate and corporate in designing cumulative modules for student support and academic development programmes that can also lead to formal qualifications
- Read, Talk, and Write!- meaning that I need to indulge myself into the higher education academic literacy, publish for my voice to be heard in the Namibian community by presenting and publishing papers on the discourses of higher education at national level and beyond. More importantly, I need to write position papers, like this one, in order to present at the institutional forums (structures) to argue for academic development to be able to reiterate the need for academic collaboration to those who are struggling with their academic

identities and egos. I need to cordially ask the academics to allow me to arrange support that may disrupt their spaces (Quinn and Vorster, 2012) as needed and also to reach out to the new generation of lecturers that are voluntarily looking for capacitation.

In reflection to my role as an academic developer, I realize that the vision of my institution state that we are a beacon of excellence (structure). This excellence must be realized in teaching, learning, researching and community service (real world). My institution's management structures, legislations and policies seem to provide the support needed to overhaul the system gradually. Although there seems to be conducive environments within the structures, empirical experiences and observations are not actually supporting the course. The beliefs, values and ideas (culture) of some of the academics are resistant to any change. Most troubling is the gatekeepers (agents) that need to sign off all new developments pertaining to the enhancement of effective teaching and student learning activities aiming at attaining social justice.

There remain problems with suspicion, mistrust and purposeful delays (culture and structural mechanisms). As an academic developer (an agent of change), my remedy from the constraining factors must be grievances (agential factors) that insist on a collaborative and cooperative environment. That I must do through insisting that the actors respect the demands of the legislation and policies (structure). Understandably, HE is a transitional system that is evolving and therefore there is a need to work as a team with a common goal, attending to the needs of all the stakeholders (agents).

Drawing on this account, I will conceptualise a model for academic development as part of the conclusion in this paper. I present it as work in progress while I am on my academic development learning journey. The initiation into the academic development readings steered me to reflect on a model with the following elements:

1. The HEIs recruitment requirements need to be adjusted to fit the demands of the current contextual imperatives. Lecturers need to be re-trained and unlearn their academic identity in order to reconstruct new academic identities. That can

easily be negotiated at the time of the job search and during induction processes. The existing beliefs, values and ideas with their practices (culture) are making the life difficult for the academic developers who are agents of change.

2. The expansion of access (structure) to those previously denied is mandatory, yet this comes with a package of committing to differentiated programmes in order to bridge the gap between the poor, the underprepared school-system graduates and the higher learning levels.

3. In addition to the preparatory or bridging programmes, there is also a need for the student support programmes that should be hosted within the communities of disciplines. Either at faculty level or departmental level to maintain the relevant and appropriate discipline vocabulary.

4. The new lecturers that will be appointed post-2015 should have as part of their conditions of service to go through a compulsory induction programme that will expose them to the contemporary university context as well as academic support programmes that will cover the main elements of effective teaching and learning, good principles of assessing of student learning, best practices in curriculum development, reflective practice, course evaluation and quality assurance.

5. The academic's promotion criteria should cover three lines of career paths: Senior Researcher, Senior Lecturer and Senior Publisher and Community Servers. In that case, there shall be minimum marginalization of those who really teach well but are not able to be promoted because of the numbers of publications or perhaps the publications should then be emphasized at the professorial level. Debatable though, because the conversations with one of the 'gurus' in high education emphasize that HEIs must put teaching at the centre. Why would there be no professors who are really good in teaching and are known to have good performance from the students' perspective?

6. Academic Meritorious Awards: Students should be the ones making the major input in this selection of lecturers while the lecturers will make the leading input in selecting the best performers in learning. The criteria for this selection should include ICTs and innovative ventures, not only the best

marks in the subject matter which could simply be cognitively oriented and neglecting the other domains.

7. Using records for Achievement in Higher Education, I borrowed this term from Assister, (1997) but I mean to use it differently. Students should create a profile for their achievement while at the university. This would be in addition to curriculum vitae as this may include samples of productions, artefacts and writings. It would serve a better purpose for employers not only to read the curriculum vitae, but also to see the products of innovations from the candidates.

8. Electronic Portfolio for Teaching, Research and Publications, and Community Engagement Initiatives. All academics could keep digital portfolios. This may actually assist the global ranking processes in higher education. More importantly, it would increase the presence of academics on the World Wide Web (WWW) which is advantageous to the world of academia in terms of sharing, growth and innovations.

9. Last but not least, this paper suggests the adoption and adaptation of the CRASP model of action research used in professional development by Zuber-Skitt (1992) whereby)

    -   **C**ritical Reflection (and self-critical) collaborative enquiry
    -   **R**eflective practitioners being
    -   **A**ccountable and making results of their enquiry public,
    -   **S**elf-evaluating their practice and engaged in
    -   **P**articipation problem-solving and continuing professional development

It needs to be understood that academic development is not about following prescriptions of good practice, or getting recipes for good teaching, but is about collaborative reflexive learning. This requires students improving their learning and academics improving their teaching, in addition to the training or professional development through action research. There is evidence of cases where such models have been employed and teams of academics – in collaboration with their academic developers have:

-   assisted students to improve their learning at undergraduate and post-graduate levels

- improved their practice of learning, teaching and professional development
- advanced knowledge in higher education by generating 'grounded theory', research reports and publications and,
- documented excellent teaching
  (Zuber-Skerritt, 1992)

In conclusion, the independence of Namibia and many African countries brought hope that higher education could provide a key to economic development and better standards of living. The economic disparities, poverty and inequalities can only be bridged with quality higher education including long term commitment to Higher Education Institutions in terms of public funds and a new focus on students, educators, researchers and community engagement initiatives. The external demands from the international context, the internal demands from the national context (historical, economic, political, and social factors) and the expectations can be achieved if resources are availed or alternative sources of income are sought. The focus on transformation and reconstructions, collaboration and cooperation and greater focus on what one can do instead of who one is (Hayward, 1997) will contribute to rich and productive academic lives. Rethinking and reinventing the role of the HEIs should be a continuous process of relational analysis. If so, then academic development is a lifelong learning venture.

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