

# 13

## TWO MASTER'S STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON HIGHER EDUCATION STUDIES

IN PURSUIT OF SCHOLARSHIP

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter reviews how higher education studies can hold much promise for improving lecturers' professional development by exploring the journey of two master's students under the same supervision. The intention of this chapter is to provide a concise description of two journeys against the background of self-discovery, identity development and professional growth. First the authors argue that new expectations, knowledge, globalisation and demands engulf almost all aspects of academics' lives in the changing world of higher education in South Africa today. As a result academics, like other professionals, need to update themselves and be engaged in professional development, a lifelong engagement that allows them to expand, develop and deepen their understanding of teaching and learning. In the subsequent section the authors explain that in higher education studies the line between epistemological and ontological realities becomes blurred when a student acquires new knowledge and skills while joining the quest for new ways of being a teacher, researcher and scholar. In the final section the authors describe how higher education studies allowed them to enhance and transform their ways of being as higher education teachers and they highlight the way that higher education studies challenged them to embrace scholarship. They share with the reader the idea that as a result, engaging in higher education studies did not only influence and/or change some of their perceptions and conceptualisations, but they also acquired new skills and knowledge as they developed as teacher, researcher and scholar. They conclude that becoming scholars in teaching and learning is an ongoing process of professional development that requires integrity, persistence, enthusiasm, passion and courage.*

**PART FOUR • TESTIMONIES AND REFLECTIONS ON PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT****INTRODUCTION**

A number of chapters in this book highlight how higher education (HE) studies and research in South Africa have contributed to and promote the field in preparing students for academic and professional life. Worldwide, and for centuries, HE institutions have shown to be remarkably resilient and adaptable, continually developing their role as society evolves. However, new expectations, perspectives and demands have been mounting rapidly in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as knowledge and globalisation engulf almost all aspects of our daily lives. Few would dispute that HE is confronted with formidable challenges and changes in today's competitive environment. Furthermore, its central role in a knowledge-based society has become increasingly important in developing individuals, communities and nations. Given these realities the dual aim of public higher education, namely to promote public and private gain, seems a strategic priority of HE institutions the world over. In a way, the tension between academic and public concern was identified by Kant (1798) centuries ago when he recognised the conflict between knowledge creation and transmitting of knowledge (Nicholls 2001:1). HE professionals are now faced with the challenge to overcome this constraint in order to fulfil Kant's ideals in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (MacDonald Ross 2005:13).

Pekel (2008:1) notes that everyone who has been a lecturer or a student knows that 'magic' can happen when students meet committed lecturers with motivated ideas. This would imply the sort of 'eureka' experience students get when they learn something. However, discovering what can instigate this 'magic' for lecturers and how best to motivate them for sustained and improved performance, remains a complicated challenge. People are trained for all professions, but promotion of scholarship and academic skills in HE depends heavily on intrinsic rewards such as self-respect, responsibility and a sense of accomplishment. Seldin (1995:4) argues that lecturers, "like other professionals, should have a hungering need to update themselves, to engage in professional growth, to expand and deepen understanding". This idea would perhaps imply that even the best lecturers may compromise standards and performance if they do not take advantage of continuous professional development programmes, because even excellent lecturers need to learn continuously in order to "remain the best" (Seldin 1995:4). Therefore, it is plausible to investigate the way HE studies can strengthen the personal and professional development of academics, which would ultimately enhance the quality of teaching and learning at universities.

The aim of this chapter is to explain some of the authors' personal experiences, identity confusion and reflection on individual growth. We shall share with the reader the idea

**CHAPTER 13 • TWO MASTER'S STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON HIGHER EDUCATION STUDIES**

that during a academic journey the questions may arise: Who am I? How does the university value me? How do I value myself? We shall explain that self-discovery is part of such a journey during which one embarks, one travels and one sometimes gets off. Some academics, like us, may get back on and travel further. There are accidents and there are delays. At certain stops there are surprises. Some of these incidents will translate into great moments of joy, but some will result in profound sorrow (Slideshare 2009:1). In the vein of Slideshare we conclude by hinting at challenging questions to the reader, such as: Have you discovered your academic journey, yet? Are you sitting in the waiting room? Or perhaps: Have you decided to go home?

**CASE STUDY 1: IN PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS (MARIËTTE KOEN)**

The sub-title I have chosen is borrowed from a movie (2006) based on a true story about a man named Christopher Gardner. Gardner invested heavily in a device known as a Bone Density Scanner, but it did not sell very well and Gardner was desperate to find a steady job.

**Investment**

According to Dictionary.Com (2009) an investment refers to the choice (money, time or effort) by an individual with the hope of gaining from the effort. Although Gardner invested heavily in his dream, he lost his wife, money, house and credit cards. In the same way I invested in my dream of an academic career by obtaining professional qualifications in education, psychology and later by completing a PhD. However, these academic shares did not guarantee a permanent position in HE. It felt as if the narrator of this movie was talking to me when he said: "It turned out his best wasn't enough."

One of the hardest things in life is to deal with the feeling of disappointment. The second hardest thing is to find the drive and energy to handle your disappointment in a healthy and positive way in order to overcome the disappointment and persist with your undertaking. This feeling of darkness is captured in Sondheim's musical (Sondheim and Lapine 1996) "Into the Woods" where he uses a metaphor to explain this dark side of a dream:

Into the woods you have to grope,  
'Cause that's the way you learn to cope  
Into the woods to find there's hope,  
Of getting through the journey.

**PART FOUR • TESTIMONIES AND REFLECTIONS ON PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

A disappointment forces you to decide how to alter your investment in a smarter way. It is at this point where my journey with HE studies began. Gardner's motivational words to his son: "You got to dream and you got to protect it" made me realise that protecting a dream requires active participation. I needed to find a tool which would not only nurture, but also cultivate and realise my dream.

**Choices**

Fortunately there are many paths in defining personal meaning in life and often the choices you make may have unexpected outcomes. Centuries ago Socrates (470 BC-399 BC) believed that "the unexamined life is not worth living" (Thinkexist.com, 2009). Socrates uttered these words at his trial for heresy. He could have avoided a death sentence, but Socrates believed that if he revised his beliefs it could rob him of the only thing that made life useful, namely "to examine life" (Palachuk 2008:1). Like Socrates, Gardner and I decided to take the plunge and examine something new. My friends and colleagues were puzzled that a part-time lecturer would even consider embarking on another academic journey, especially if this implied registering for a second master's degree and travelling a thousand kilometres to attend the programme. Yet, I knew that this journey could be the tool to re-create new dreams, an opportunity where a psychologist can learn about teaching, learning and research in the HE context. I listened to Gardner: "Don't let anybody ever tell you you can't do something."

**Personal and professional development**

*"It seems as if scholarship is only something we can pursue, but never have."*  
(Adapted from the movie, 2006)

We live in a time where the higher education landscape is changing, a multiplicity of roles is emerging and more is expected from academics than ever before (Nicholls 2001:1-13). In addition, Fischer (2009:1) states that professional development has become necessary, because learning can no longer be divided into a place and time to acquire knowledge (tertiary institutions) and a place and time to apply this acquired knowledge (the workplace). Clearly the idea that learning primarily occurs during formal education is inadequate in today's 'knowledge age'. Nicholls (2001:48) emphasises that "learning from learning are keys to success". I therefore concur with Sutherland and Crowther's view (2006:4) that if I want my university education to be useful, it must be an ongoing process, a lifelong activity that engages and re-engages me continually in learning.

**"Riding the bus"**

Gardner named one part of his life "Riding a bus". I identified my 'riding the bus' as the time when I had to rethink my professional role and chose HE studies to answer the question: How can I improve what I am doing? Although this field of study has been growing at universities in the USA, the UK and Europe for over 30 years, it is regarded as a relatively new field in South Africa (University of the Western Cape Online 2009:1). HE studies aim to bring academics up to date with new trends in the HE context and to assist them in becoming reflective practitioners. According to Illeris (2006:15) professional development has been a key issue in international education policies during the last few years.

Publications advocate that universities should create an environment where academics teach, learn and enhance their exceptional abilities. This can be done by means of formal/informal professional development and lifelong learning. Since I believe the saying that "theory without practice is dead; practice without theory is blind" (Sims 1997:1), I chose a formally structured MPhil (HE) programme as my source for learning. One can argue that the content of a structured programme, for example an MPhil in HE studies, is grounded in an established and accepted theoretical framework. Perceptions and conceptualisations regarding HE studies require therefore a strong sense of ownership from the students. In HE studies the line between epistemological and ontological realities becomes blurred when a student acquires new knowledge and skills and at the same time joins the quest for new ways of being a teacher, researcher and scholar (Kincheloe 2003:3). From an ontological perspective, my HE studies helped me to conceptualise new ways of analysing teaching and learning in the HE context and to apply them to the reconstruction of my selfhood. It made me realise that the self was not pre-formed as I entered the HE environment, but that it emerged (and is still emerging) in its relationship to other selves and other things in the HE environment (Kincheloe 2003:48). As a result, engaging in HE studies did not only influence and/or change some of my perceptions and conceptualisations, but also helped me to acquire new skills and knowledge as I developed as teacher, researcher and scholar.

Professional development is essential to competitiveness and employability, social inclusion, active citizenship and personal development (Sorcinelli, Austin, Eddy and Beach 2006:157-176). As such, HE studies promoted the skills and competences I needed, both for personal development and career advancement. However, investigating issues in the HE context can be very time consuming. I believe that academics are

**PART FOUR • TESTIMONIES AND REFLECTIONS ON PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

not opposed to the need to develop and maintain the professional competence necessary to provide high-quality service to students, but I cannot help but raise the question: Where are academics to find the time for professional development in their already busy schedules? McCarthy and Higgs (2005:3) examined lecturers' favourite expression "There is no time" and concluded that "lecturers should make time". In fact, they argue that lunch times can be very productive meeting times, "if lunch were provided – a case, indeed, of providing food for thought".

From the above it appears that managing academic time effectively is more easily said than done. At one time Gardner exclaimed: "It seems as if happiness is only something we can pursue, but never have it." Faced with an array of departmental and administrative demands, readings and assignments, I often found myself drained of energy, stressed out and thinking that the effective use of time remains an ideal at best. Then there are those who argue that professional development and lifelong learning are more about an attitude, which involves a belief that one can manage one's time while being opened to new ideas, decisions, skills or behaviours. To prove this idea, Canfield (2009:1) notes: "If you're passionate about what it is you do, then you're going to be looking for everything you can to get better at it." This notion implies that it is critical for lecturers to come to terms with the concept professional development in order to cater for students. If this development does not happen, it is likely that there will always be a mismatch between what HE institutions are prepared to offer and what many students actually need to facilitate their learning. At times I wanted to rearrange the words in Gardner's exclamation and replace it with this idea: "It seems as if scholarship is only something we can pursue and never have."

### Scholarship

*"Man, do I want to learn that."*  
(Movie, 2006)

Following a survey by the Carnegie Foundation in the United States, Ernest Boyer documented how the notion of scholarship had become narrowly conceived in terms of basic research (Boyer 1990). Therefore he challenged academics to embrace the definition of scholarship beyond the emphasis of discovery and to include the scholarship of integration, application and teaching. He argued that each dimension offered different opportunities to be engaged in academic activities. Boyer's original concept has developed in a much contested debate as he portrayed scholarship as an ideal rather than an applied practice (Braxton, Luckey and Helland 2002:1).

**CHAPTER 13 • TWO MASTER'S STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON HIGHER EDUCATION STUDIES**

Consequently a number of models have emerged that feature activities ranging from keeping up with the literature on teaching and learning to publishing educational research as a quest for scholarship (Priest 2005:1).

Scholarship is embedded in the passion to pursue research, teaching, integration and application (Andresen 2000:138). Each dimension of scholarship offers different opportunities to engage staff members, and the proper balance between the four dimensions is a concern of the academic community. At one stage Gardner asked a happy man: "Man, do I have two questions for you. What do you do and how do you do it?" And this is what I as an MPhil student wanted to know from my supervisor during my higher education studies: "Professor, I have two questions for you: One: What does one do to improve teaching effectiveness, student learning outcomes and the continuous transformation of academic cultures and communities? And two: How does one become a scholar in doing that?" He warned me, however, that scholarship does not emerge overnight (Bitzer 2004:29) and emphasised that scholarship is an exhausting journey where only truly intrinsically motivated academics will succeed as scholars. It appears as if the key to scholarship is to be tirelessly inspired – an action that cannot be faked. In other words, scholarship in HE is not for the faint at heart (Hatch 2006:1).

Although the development of skills and competence has become one of the top teaching priorities in many universities, a missing link in this equation can be the absence of passion, commitment and motivation of lecturers. Without an understanding of the importance of HE studies, lecturers can be left without a vital tool for making decisions in their daily practice and ultimately neglect to improve the quality of their teaching and research. It is true that one of the major distinguishing characteristics of a scholarly department is lecturers who are deeply committed to and excited by the ideas which they bring with enthusiasm to their classroom. Academics that influence students are those who love their subject and desire to engage them in their enthusiasm and sense of excitement of discovery (Rowland 2005:92). In the same vein, Macfarlane (2005:177) claims that "if I was in it purely for the rewards I wouldn't be an academic in the first place". He argues that service is about a broader range of scholarly activities that form the surrounding infrastructure that supports the domains of scholarship. Naturally the focus of scholarship should be on the moral obligation to students and colleagues, and not on the indirect or direct career benefits. Equally important, Andresen (2000:138) declares that scholarship is "a term of recommendation, of challenge". Kreber (2002:160,161), who agrees with this point of view, explains that scholarship of teaching "is not the same as teaching excellence,

**PART FOUR • TESTIMONIES AND REFLECTIONS ON PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

is not the prerogative of the educationist, and is not limited to publishing research on teaching in peer-reviewed journals". In other words, scholarship of teaching actually refers to the "nature and depth of the work done by academics and professionals" and should therefore not be confused with the narrower term "scholarly work" which refers to work of a particular academic quality (Bitzer 2008). It can be argued that although scholarship of teaching is not equal to excellent teaching, it develops from scholarly teaching. Hutchings and Shulman (1999:11) emphasise that teaching is not merely a transmission of what is already known, but rather an integration between discovery, application and integration. Scholarship will allow a transparent symbiotic relationship where scholarly teachers can reflect, evaluate, document and communicate the results to others (Trigwell, Martin, Benjamin and Prosser 2000:164).

I had several excuses why I was not engaged in scholarship yet ... time, money and a part-time contract – all very legitimate reasons. My HE studies forced me, however, to re-investigate my passionate commitment to scholarship. I realised that scholarship requires daredevils, adventurers and champions. It was time to realise that scholarship in the HE context is no longer a luxury. It is a necessity. As Gardner stated: "I still remember that moment they all look so damn happy to me. Why couldn't I look like that?"

### Closing thoughts

*"If you want something, go get it, period."*

(Movie 2006)

My studies taught me that instead of academics being either teachers or researchers and who work in institutions that specialise in teaching or research, these two key aspects can be integrated. In my case it meant integration of psychology, education and research. Furthermore, my studies contributed to enhancing the quality of being a lecturer by various means, for example: to share and benefit from insights of academics from different disciplines, to challenge participants, to stretch my thinking, to design, facilitate and assess workshops, to investigate new sources and to encounter new ways of engaging with teaching and learning. My studies provided me with an opportunity to interview 10 academic leaders and to gain new perspectives on the importance of a "followership" approach in HE. HE studies did not only realise my dream by means of a permanent appointment, but made me feel like a new coin with two different but essential sides. On the one side there were opportunities for learning new skills and knowledge regarding teaching and learning and on the other side there was the



**CHAPTER 13 • TWO MASTER'S STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON HIGHER EDUCATION STUDIES**

opportunity to implement these ideas practically in the classroom. It made me feel that I do not just exist as a lecturer, but that I am actually getting to where I want to be, something Shulman (2004:1) explains as follows:

Scholarly teaching is what every one of us should be engaged in every day that we are in a classroom, in our office with students, tutoring, lecturing, conducting discussion, all the roles we play pedagogically. Our work as teachers should meet the highest scholarly standards of groundedness, of openness, of clarity and complexity. But it is only when we step back and reflect systematically on the teaching we have done, and that systematic analysis and reflection leads to a recounting of what we've done, in a form that can be publicly reviewed and built upon by our peers that we have moved from scholarly teaching to a scholarship of teaching.

A new question arises: Which route will my academic journey take now? I believe that HE studies did not only assist me thus far to grow as a scholar, but will probably continue to do so long after I have completed the formal programme. The structured and supported process enables me to reflect upon my own teaching, performance and achievement. I have become aware of different aspects in the HE context, namely scholarship, research, assessment, leadership, staff development, technology, teaching, learning and curriculum development. It has emphasised the importance of authentic assessment in the HE context and enticed me to explore educational and psychological aspects regarding assessment in HE in the near future. This brings me to the final point which my case study seeks to underline, namely that HE studies can be a powerful tool to develop passionate lecturers. And any passionate lecturer involved in teaching will invest his or her intellectual powers in becoming a scholar of teaching, learning and research. Dirks (1998:1) makes it clear that such passion could result in the greatest honour for most academics – namely to be labelled as a scholar.

Just as Gardner's life story inspired me, I would like to inspire the reader by highlighting a basic underlying value that might motivate him or her to embark on a journey of scholarship: "If you want something, go get it, period."

## **CASE STUDY 2: AN ONGOING JOURNEY OF SELF-DISCOVERY AND IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT (MARIANNE BESTER)**

### **Introduction**

My contribution to this chapter on students' perspectives of HE studies is framed against extensive literature on the concept of identity as well as on the association of one's

**PART FOUR • TESTIMONIES AND REFLECTIONS ON PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

identity with different roles, which in turn impact on an individual's professional identity development. My intention is to provide a concise description of my journey of self-discovery and identity development against the background of a changing world of HE worldwide, but particularly in South Africa over the past two decades, which prompted my decision to engage with HE studies as a postgraduate student.

For ages mankind has asked questions such as: Who am I? How do I see myself? How do others see me? These questions are at the root of our being and identity, with answers that shift as we move through contexts, come to embrace and relinquish particular goals, values and roles, and operate within and outside different communities of society. The concept of identity is defined in various ways. Erikson (1968, in Beijaard, Meijer and Verloop 2004:107) outlines a chronological and changing concept of identity, indicating that each stage has its own characteristics relating to the individual's interaction with his or her environment. The writings of the symbolic interactionist George Herbert Mead (1934) focus on the concept of identity in relationship with the concept of self. Mead indicates that the "self reflects society" (Stryker and Burke 2000:286), which implies that the self is multifaceted. In addition to the work of Erikson and Mead, the work of McCormick and Pressley (1997), as well as of Purkey (1970), indicates that "identity is not a fixed attribute of a person, but a relational phenomenon" (Beijaard *et al.* 2004:108).

Based on the work of Stone (1962), Vryan, Adler and Adler (2003, in Smit and Fritz 2008:93) developed the notion of identity using concepts such as situational, social and personal identity. Situational identity emerges from collective behaviour and meaning-making between oneself and the people around one. Social identity is shaped and forged with socially constructed categories of people (learners, colleagues, friends and family) or the position within a social structure (department, faculty and institution). This identity will last within the socially structured relationship for the duration of the position. Vryan *et al.* (2003:371, in Smit and Fritz 2008:93) indicate that "we define ourselves and others in the light of our social identities across many of the different kinds of contexts in which we find ourselves, thus providing continuity even as we step in and out of various situational identities". The remaining construct of personal identity involves the uniqueness of an individual, including personal history and personality traits. In my opinion, it also includes discourse as defined by Gee (1996:131) "as a socially accepted association among ways of using language, other symbolic expressions, and 'artifacts' of thinking, feeling and believing, valuing and acting" to identify oneself as a member of a 'social network' or to signal one's role within this network. I view identity as a "reflexive process" (Giddens 1991) whereby an

individual constructs and manages his or her identity as a self-narrative within a social context, which both enables and constrains the individual's choices.

### **Shaping professional identity – dominant frames of reference**

An individual's identity is often associated with a particular role, or a professional and social position. Colbeck (2008:10) indicates that role labels convey meaning and expectations of behaviours that have evolved over years through countless interactions among people within a social network. The role labels of 'student', 'lecturer' and 'researcher', to name only a few, would convey varying sets of expectations, mostly defined by others, and which could either be accepted or rejected by an individual in defining his or her own identity.

As a university academic I interact professionally with learners, colleagues, the broader university community and industry representatives as part of my ongoing process of identity development, of interpreting myself as a certain kind of person and being recognised in a given context or situation. In this ongoing process of self-discovery and shaping of my personal and professional identity, I have often asked myself these questions: Who am I at this moment within a particular context or situation? Am I an academic? Am I a lecturer or am I an HE teacher? Am I a reflective practitioner? Am I a student in HE studies? Am I a scholar in teaching and learning? Am I a technical expert in my field of study? Am I a researcher? Am I leader? Am I an agent for pedagogical change in my academic department? What is the relationship between these different 'identities' and what role do relationships within my social and situational contexts play in my professional identity development? Furthermore, how do these different 'identities' impact on my continuing professional development and journey of self-discovery? In my opinion, these 'identities' form part of a "trajectory of the self" as defined by Giddens (1991) to describe the sense of shaping one's self-identity, which in turn also indicates that identity construction and development can be viewed as a reflexive 'sense-making' socially constructed situational learning process.

An individual's sense of identity is influenced by dominant frames of reference as defined by Blenkinsopp and Stalker (2004:419). These dominant frames of reference serve to inform, both explicitly and tacitly, the different levels of consciousness creating a "cognitive framework for interpreting new experiences" (Colbeck 2008:10). According to Blenkinsopp and Stalker (2004) identity may also be shaped discursively by the individual's engagement in discourse communities. Harré (1998, in Blenkinsopp and

**PART FOUR • TESTIMONIES AND REFLECTIONS ON PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

Stalker 2004:420) suggests that identity is discursively created in interactions with others, but also in ‘conversation’ with oneself.

Over the years a number of dominant frames of reference and discourse communities have impacted and are still impacting on my levels of consciousness. They are therefore also shaping my cognitive frameworks. These include, amongst others, ontological and epistemological modes of voice, the impact of educational change taking place in South Africa, as well as the role, responsibilities and educational practices of modern-day South African HE institutions in addressing the development needs of society and in providing students who should contribute meaningfully in a knowledge-driven and knowledge-dependent society to the growth of the country.

Although I assume different identities and perform different roles as an academic, i.e. that of HE teacher, that of head of a department at a South African university of technology and that of a colleague, this paper will offer the reader a personal reflection on my own journey of self-discovery and professional identity development viewed from the perspective of a ‘student’ in HE studies.

### The changing world of Higher Education

The changing world of HE worldwide, but particularly in South Africa over the past two decades, provided impetus to my decision to engage in HE studies. Since the 1990s higher education worldwide has undergone profound changes which, according to Partington and Brown (1997:208), include the following:

- An increase in size and diversity of the student population
- Increased expectations of quality by stakeholders
- Greater accountability of academic functions such as research and teaching
- Increased emphasis on efficient and effective management.

I completed my undergraduate studies in education at a traditional South African university before the mid-1990s when outcomes-based education triggered “the single most important curriculum controversy in the history of South African education” (Jansen 1999:3). My conceptions of teaching and learning during my childhood and undergraduate study years were mostly influenced by the curricula of the apartheid state in South Africa. The apartheid state managed a centralised curriculum policy system which was described as “racist, Eurocentred, sexist, authoritarian, prescriptive, unchanging, context blind and discriminatory” (Jansen 1999:4). It is also important to remember that the traditional education practice during this time centred on content-

**CHAPTER 13 • TWO MASTER'S STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON HIGHER EDUCATION STUDIES**

driven, examination-oriented and teacher-centred curricula with pupils and students as passive participants in the learning process.

I experienced the early years of my teaching career at a historically black technikon in South Africa during the mid-1980s as particularly stressful and emotionally demanding. The pressures of role transition from student in education at a traditional, historically white university to an academic staff member at a historically black technikon as well as the impact of unprecedented political demands from the liberation movements such as the rhetoric of 'People's Education' characterised by access, curriculum reform, learned-centred teaching and community involvement (Kraak 1999) forced me to consider conflicting meanings and expectations in terms of my identity and role. The period that followed after 1990 witnessed a plethora of policies initiating and seeking educational change in South Africa by redressing past inequalities, transforming the HE system to serve a new social order, while also addressing the national economic needs and responding to new realities and opportunities created by globalisation.

The White Paper on the Transformation of Higher Education (SA 1997) argues for the restructuring of HE to meet the "needs of an increasingly technological economy with the capacity to participate in a rapidly changing global context". For the HE sector, especially universities of technology (former technikons) to meet these demands, learning programmes have to ensure that qualifying students have extensive knowledge and skills they can apply in a world of constant change. The learning process should not only prepare learners for a qualification, but should enable students to continue learning and adapting to the constantly changing world of work, which Gibbons (1998:12) interprets as the "dynamics of relevance" for higher education by drawing attention to the fact that relevance is not static, but rather a functional concept, "one that is intended to be adapted to a particular, but evolving, techno-economic environment". Linked to these epistemological changes reflected in Mode 1 and Mode 2 knowledge production promoted by Gibbons (1998), is the fact that in a knowledge-driven society, education has the task of preparing people to perform difficult jobs competently, with a realisation that in a constantly changing world, a world of "super-complexity" as described by Barnett (2000), they must be equipped to deal with change. Gibbons (1998:14) states: "The only skill that does not become obsolete is the skill of learning new skills."

Educational change, however, only becomes reality once it is implemented at classroom level by academic staff. Since the mission of outcomes-based education in South Africa after 1990 has been to focus on the needs of the learner, to acknowledge human

**PART FOUR • TESTIMONIES AND REFLECTIONS ON PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

diversity by allowing learners to develop to their full potential in a quality education system characterised by access, accountability, relevance, learner-centredness, social responsibility, integration and Ubuntu (Mohamed 1999:158), I became increasingly aware of the fact that my undergraduate studies in education during the late 1970s (based on notions of content-based, teacher-centred education for homogeneous student groups) had not prepared me adequately for these challenges. I had the choice of continuing with traditional ways of teaching, reproducing practices that I was accustomed to, thus ignoring the shortcomings of these practices, or to adopt new ways of teaching that could potentially improve the quality of students' learning experiences.

The various aspects of educational change in South Africa since 1994 became dominant frames of reference and formed part of prevailing discourses, explicitly and tacitly, influencing different levels of my consciousness, altering my cognitive frameworks and shaping my professional identity from 'lecturer' to higher education 'teacher' with less emphasis on delivery of lectures and greater emphasis on 'facilitator' of significant learning experiences while reflecting on teaching practice. As stated by Dall'Alba (2005:371), "teaching is not only what we know and do, but who we are".

### **Bringing about conceptual change in my teaching practice**

These educational changes in South Africa after 1990 suggested to me that I had to revisit, rethink and evaluate the beliefs or conceptions of teaching and learning, and reflect on how these conceptions of teaching and learning were influencing my teaching practice. Studies by Kember and Kwan (2000) and Trigwell and Prosser (1996) show that in higher education, it is reasonable to draw the conclusion that university teachers adopt conceptions or beliefs regarding teaching which are consistent with their beliefs about teaching. Richardson (2005:677) reports on an interview-based investigation on conceptions of teaching by Kember (1997) which converged into five different conceptions:

- Teaching as imparting information
- Teaching as transmitting structured knowledge
- Teaching as an interaction between the teacher and the student
- Teaching as facilitating understanding on the part of the student
- Teaching as bringing about conceptual change and intellectual development in the student.

**CHAPTER 13 • TWO MASTER'S STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON HIGHER EDUCATION STUDIES**

Richardson (2005:677) also indicates that many researchers assume that teachers' conceptions of teaching in higher education change with experience, but in fact very little evidence is available to substantiate such a claim. If one's teaching beliefs are deeply rooted in old ways of doing things, it becomes an obstacle, because in a way these beliefs strengthen resistance to conceptual change. It was evident to me that although my teaching conceptions earlier in my academic career were oriented towards imparting information and transmitting structured knowledge, various aspects of educational change in South Africa at the time urged me to change my teaching practice towards facilitation of students' understanding and to bring about conceptual change and intellectual development in students. This realisation forced me to consider questions such as: What is good teaching? How should I change my teaching practice to bring about improved student learning?

Trigwell (2001:65) indicates that firstly, good teaching is oriented towards and related to high quality student learning and that secondly, good teaching is scholarly. Good teaching, according to Trigwell (2001:65) is "more than what happens in a classroom or on-line: it includes planning, compatibility with the context, content knowledge, being a learner, and above all, reflection and a way of thinking about teaching and learning." Ramsden, Margetson, Martin and Clarke (1995:24, in Trigwell 2001:66) declare that good teachers are also good learners. Good teachers participate in a variety of professional development activities by listening to their students and by reflecting on classroom interactions and the achievements of their students as part of a dynamic, reflective and constantly evolving process. Good teachers demonstrate the ability to transform and extend knowledge by using the knowledge of their learners, as well as their own disciplinary and pedagogical knowledge, to transform concepts of the discipline, rather than merely through transmission of knowledge. Ho (2000:31) states that if a teacher wishes to adopt a student-centred approach to teaching and for students to adopt a meaningful approach to learning, teachers should engage in professional development programmes and reflective practice as a means of directing conceptual change.

When I was confronted with the reality of having to implement good student-centred teaching practice in class, I once again realised that I had to move beyond the level of routine responses to classroom situations and achieve a higher level of awareness of how to teach, of the kinds of decisions I should make when teaching and of the value and consequences of particular instructional decisions. I realised that observation and critical reflection could be a way of bringing about conceptual change as indicated by Bartlett (1990:267):

**PART FOUR • TESTIMONIES AND REFLECTIONS ON PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

Asking ‘what and why’ questions gives us a certain power over our teaching. We could claim that the degree of autonomy and responsibility we have in our work as teachers is determined by the level of control we can exercise over our actions. In reflecting on the above kind of questions, we begin to exercise control and open up the possibility of transforming our everyday classroom life.

A reflective approach to teaching allowed me to change the way I usually perceive teaching and my role in the teaching process. It also allowed me to develop changes in attitudes and awareness which I believe benefit my professional growth and development as a teacher. Despite my engagement with reflective teaching, I also realised that it is important to develop and equip myself with scholarly knowledge, skills and attitudes to function optimally as a professional curriculum designer, learning facilitator, assessor and scholar. It was at this point in my journey of self-discovery and professional identity that I became aware that being a reflective practitioner and becoming a student in higher education studies are inseparable.

**Being a student in HE studies**

According to Brew and Boud (1996:20) “development is a concept concerned with the process of change” and that “[c]hange, in turn, generates new development needs”. Worldwide, there is a demand for recognised, accredited programmes in professional development of academic staff in higher education. These programmes in higher education studies encourage academic staff to explore the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of their disciplines and to examine their conceptions of teaching and learning as well as their teaching practice. Although I had previously undergone training as a teacher, I was ill-equipped for the growing emphasis on quality assurance and accountability in higher education, and for the challenges brought about by the transformation of higher education institutions in South Africa.

Kasworm (2008:27) indicates that “learning is an act of hope” – a hope of entering learning experiences that will be life-changing. Adults, like myself, who enter HE studies do not view entering (or re-entering) HE as physical separation from past worlds as would typically be the case with younger adult learners who start their student life away from home. Being a student becomes an additional challenge and responsibility – it forms part of the complex life of work and home. I agree with Kasworm (2008:31) who indicates that the epistemological beliefs of adult learners are embedded in two worlds: the world of academic knowledge (of books and theory) and the world known by many adults as the real-world knowledge (of tacit understandings and everyday applications). According to Kasworm (2008:31) these “knowledge voices” also



**CHAPTER 13 • TWO MASTER'S STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON HIGHER EDUCATION STUDIES**

represent affective connections to self, life roles and life actions. In considering these “knowledge voices” Kasworm (2008:32) contends that when adult learners are able to integrate knowledge engagement across both life worlds, it demonstrates a unification of the cognitive and emotional worlds of the adult learner as well as the epistemological beliefs of different worlds of academic knowledge and real-world knowledge. I agree, once again, with Kasworm (2008:32) based on my own experience as adult learning in higher education studies that this unification of the worlds of academic and real-world knowledge leads to “actions of transformation of self through an ongoing active cycle of reflection and action integrating knowledge and life applications”.

For me, the pursuit of a postgraduate qualification in HE studies is a choice and a life-changing engagement that allows me to develop a greater understanding of my teaching as I feel less threatened about changing my practice, since it allows me to advance my practice from “a conception of teaching as transmission to one of teaching for changing conceptions (self-enlightenment)” (Smyth 2003:54). I agree with Smyth (2003:54) that “teachers can achieve transformation when they are supported to change conceptions in a managed change process where they are given time for discussion and reflection”. Yet, it is also important to remember that “knowledge and skills acquisition do not ensure skilful practice” and that, as argued by Dall’Alba (2005:363), by merely focusing on epistemology we fail to facilitate and support transformation of the self. It is important to direct attention to ontology, since “it means that knowing is not simply something we possess, but who we are”. Dall’Alba (2005:367) argues that “transforming the self is ontological, it involves integrating knowing, acting and being”.

The most significant result of my engagement in HE studies as a postgraduate student relates to my sense of self-discovery – of finding out about my inner strengths, about hidden abilities, and about unacknowledged passions for learning. It has been and still is a transforming experience that allows me to gain knowledge and skills directly related to my role as a higher education teacher, allowing me to apply the knowledge in a real-world classroom situation, encouraging me to reflect on my practice in a scholarly manner, which in turn stimulates me to ask questions about my very being as a higher education teacher.

**CONCLUSION**

We have shared in this chapter the ontological dimensions of our respective journeys of self-discovery and professional identity development as students in HE studies.

**PART FOUR • TESTIMONIES AND REFLECTIONS ON PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

We have indicated that educational change in HE worldwide – and this includes South Africa – over the past decades has shaped our identity, influenced our roles as university academics and forced us to interrogate and reflect on our teaching practices as HE teachers, which has provided the impetus for our search for meaning and knowledge. Since postgraduate HE study places emphasis on ontology while it also addresses epistemology, it allows us as students to enhance and transform our ways of being as higher education teachers. Finally, we realised that our engagement with HE studies challenges us to go beyond being good teachers and reflective practitioners by embracing the scholarship of teaching as part of our journey. We understand that becoming scholars in teaching and learning is an ongoing process of professional development that requires integrity, persistence, enthusiasm, passion and courage. We have embarked on a journey of lifelong learning with a sense of purpose for the future. We are working towards achieving our short-term goals of completing our studies in HE successfully as well as towards achieving future career goals. The long-term rewards of our engagement in HE studies that motivate us to remain self-directed learners, reflective practitioners and scholars in teaching and learning will continue to enrich our lives forever.

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