

## CHAPTER 10

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### **Developing higher education curriculum in the health sciences context**

*Alwyn Louw & Elize Archer*

#### **Introduction**

How did it happen that Professor Eli Bitzer – the educationist – ended up being involved in health professions education? Was it a matter of a trans-disciplinary approach followed by two faculties, or was it because of specific expertise needed at a specific time of development at one faculty? The answer is most probably – both. In this chapter we will attempt to demonstrate how expertise in one field of science can very successfully be transferred to another field. We will also explore the links between the field of Education where Eli Bitzer comes from, and the field of Health Sciences from which perspective this chapter is written.

We do not intend to report on each and every intervention Eli Bitzer had with students, neither do we claim to be the experts in writing about someone as respected as he is. We have only focused on writing about the period between 2006 and 2016, when both of us had the privilege of working closely with him as a colleague. While the main purpose of this chapter is to describe the role Eli Bitzer played in health professions education, the second part of our chapter will pay tribute to him as a teacher, supervisor and colleague. This chapter further highlights his personal characteristics, as perceived by the health sciences community, his involvement in the establishment of an educational centre, his role in the development of a curriculum for the MPhil in Health Sciences and his contribution to postgraduate students as lecturer, mentor and supervisor.

The invitation to contribute a chapter to a *Festschrift* for Eli Bitzer from a health sciences perspective, is not only a privilege, but also a humbling experience. A document of this nature is normally written about a scholar who is well respected

by his colleagues, and rightly so, since the word ‘respected’ immediately comes to mind when the name of Eli Bitzer is mentioned in any conversation.

## **Background**

Health Professions Education (HPE) is often referred to as a very specialised field in education, and this is mainly because of the clinical component attached to it. Although the roots of HPE are fundamentally based in the core principles of education, this field focuses specifically on the training of students in the various disciplines that comprise the health profession. It could be argued that HPE has a weakly framed curriculum with weak boundaries between the different knowledge domains (Bitzer 2011). The disciplines in health professions include medicine, physiotherapy, human nutrition, occupational therapy, nursing and midwifery, dentistry, as well as veterinary science. These fields could be regarded as strong disciplinary-based fields in their own right, but could also be seen as being weakly disciplinary-based because of the educational fundamentals of these curricula upon which they are built. Health Professions Education has sought over the past decade to build a strong interdisciplinary ethos in the curriculum (Snyman, Von Presentin and Clarke 2015) and no doubt this will continue in the future.

In the previous century teaching was often seen as something that comes naturally and goes hand in hand with expert knowledge in a specific field, discipline or domain (Davis, Karunathilake and Harden 2005). With the information explosion, especially in the field of medicine, and the international need all over the world to train more doctors, universities have recognised the need for professionalism and scholarship in education. Education departments in medical schools originated in, and continued from, the mid twenty-first century, firstly in the United States and then in European countries (Davis et al. 2005). In the last two decades there have been rapid increases in health professions education departments worldwide which have added to the ‘professionalisation’ of the programmes in those departments and therefore of their students too.

## **The Centre for Health Professions Education**

The quest for high quality medical education led to the development of many medical education departments across the world (Kiguli-Malwadde et al. 2015).

In Sub-Saharan Africa, four medical schools have medical education departments or centres of which two also host a postgraduate programme in HPE. Stellenbosch University is one of these universities with a Centre for Health Professions Education offering MPhil and PhD programmes in HPE. The Centre for Health Professions Education (CHPE) was established in 2006 with the aim of optimising the effectiveness, efficiency and feasibility of student learning and to promote health professions education as a scientific field of study. In doing that, its aim was also to provide expertise in health professions education at the institutional, national and international level. The key foci of the centre are faculty development, support for teaching and learning at different levels, research, mainly in health professions education and the provision of academic programmes in this field. It was, therefore, inevitable to develop and implement postgraduate programmes specifically aimed at this field of study.

Eli Bitzer played a pivotal role in guiding the process of establishing the Centre. He was able to draw from his experience of establishing similar centres, as well as his role in the Faculty of Education at Stellenbosch University. He was part of several committees planning the implementation and functioning of the CHPE where his insight and expertise from the inception stage of the CHPE made him a valued member of the Advisory Board of the CHPE, on which he served for eight years.

He also has been part of the team responsible for teaching the MPhil students and he served as the chair of the module on Curriculum Analysis from its implementation in 2008 until 2012. By invitation he has continued to teach in this very dynamic module.

Eli's unique attributes as a leader in education have indeed been noted and appreciated by the broad health professions community at the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences (FMHS). Throughout the years, as the students in the MPhil programme became more aware of Eli's expertise and the relevance of his publications, increasingly more of them approached him to supervise them in their respective studies. Soon he became a sought after supervisor in the MPhil programme.

Various colleagues worked together with Eli on research projects. Both staff and students testify to the respect they have for his knowledge and insight, especially in matters related to education. The academic legacy Eli Bitzer leaves in the MPhil in HPE is one of deep knowledge about curriculum frameworks and analyses, quality assurance of programmes, academic leadership, the development of academic staff, and especially the development of postgraduate students.

### **Being postgraduate supervisor in the field of Health Professions Education**

In the next section Eli Bitzer's role as a supervisor for various postgraduate students will be described.

Eli has always been a believer in a trans-disciplinary approach and his involvement in the MPhil in Health Professions Education is an example of how disciplines can be integrated at curriculum level. This approach, established between postgraduate programmes in faculties, where education and health sciences worked together as a team, was one of his career highlights and he described it as very encouraging for higher education as a whole (Bitzer and Botha, 2011). This view was expanded and illustrates how relating theory and practice in developmental planning was central to his thinking. "Curriculum inquiry in higher education in South Africa is a field within educational studies that addresses distinct and important issues, challenges and methodologies related to higher education curricula. These elements tend to transcend the various areas of educational inquiry as they impact on the design, implementation and evaluation of educational programmes – especially in universities" (Bitzer and Botha, 2011: 27).

Eli always had a wise insight in the lives of adult learners, and knew that the students in the MPhil programme were often clinicians, who had to complete their studies in Health Profession Education amidst their professional and teaching responsibilities. The curriculum, according to him, should therefore be made highly relevant to educational practices in health sciences. This strong belief, that students should conduct their research projects in areas where they have an interest, and at the same time can inform their daily practice, is evident by the relevant topics being researched under his supervision.

Some students who completed either their MPhil research projects, or their PhD theses with him as their supervisor, contributed to the next section by sharing their personal experiences of working with him during that research. Without focusing on the specific background information of any of these students, we will give an overview of some experiences of students being supervised by Eli. The topics which students chose to study varied immensely and spanned across professions such as nursing, physiotherapy, medicine and dentistry:

- Students and clinical teachers' views on effective clinical education in Physiotherapy at Stellenbosch University.
- Fresh simulation options in Critical Care Nursing education.
- Experiences of feedback on medical students' clinical skills performance in a Clinical Skills Centre.
- Aligning the clinical assessment practices with the assessment practices.
- An evaluation of the internal validity of specific learning outcomes in phase II of a revised undergraduate medical curriculum.
- Developing a framework for an undergraduate haematology curriculum in a faculty of health sciences.
- Patient-centredness in the undergraduate medical curriculum at Stellenbosch University: A case study of the final year.

The qualities that a good supervisor should possess are well-documented in the relevant literature. Students doing research in Health Professions Education who were supervised by Eli contributed to this list. They considered that the two most important factors that influence whether students complete their research projects successfully or not were feedback given by supervisors that is timely and relevant. He meets with the students regularly and encourages them to work consistently. It was clearly a privilege being supervised by such an academic leader and a believer in adult education. Below are further comments from students who were supervised by Eli Bitzer:

'He is approachable and sees you as a research partner and not an immature student.'

‘He constantly challenges your opinion and assists in your development and learning how to defend your ideas and grow intellectually.’

‘He gives you clear guidance (goal posts) in your work and has realistic expectations.’

‘He knows how to motivate and give you reassurance when you need it.’

Below are further comments from students who were supervised by Eli Bitzer:

‘What was fascinating for me was to see how well he could understand my study, despite the fact that he does not have a medical background. Even though he does not have an in-depth understanding of the discipline content he has the ability to use his knowledge of research principles in (it would seem) any context.’

‘Professor Eli, your firm and steady guidance and feedback helped me to achieve what I had to. Thank you for all your time, effort and the challenges you put to me. I have learned much more than only academic knowledge from you. You have inspired me with your positive attitude and passion for teaching and learning. I am greatly privileged to have learned these lessons from you.’

‘Professor Eli personifies the elements of a great teacher; humble person; loyal friend; innovative thinker and academic. While my opening sentence is quite a mouthful this is the legacy which Professor Eli left; and what I will remember about him. I met him in 2004, during my first year as a student in MPhil (Higher Education). Professor Eli was well liked by the student group because of his organised manner, respectful ways and great sense of humour. He managed to plant many seeds of knowledge and innovation and from these seeds, many lovely flowers have blossomed. I guess now, in his retirement, he will be able to start a different kind of garden! Thank you for the way in which you teach, the way you give feedback, the way you handle anxious students, and of course the warm greetings whenever we meet!’

‘I want to thank you for all the hours of revision and advice on my thesis. I appreciate your willingness to work to a tight schedule and help me to

graduate. Because Professor Eli is experienced and confident in his own abilities he can allow his students greater freedom in their work.’

‘My research study focussed on students’ experiences of feedback during the learning of clinical skills. Except for his guidance on content and my writing, he was an exceptional example of how feedback should be provided: specific, very soon after the activity, with suggestions for further reading to help me bridge my knowledge gap. I hope to be as patient with my students as he was with me. He really inspired me to continue on my scholarly journey as I hope to pursue a PhD soon! ‘

‘My background is in medical sciences therefore the transition into education was challenging and Prof Bitzer navigated this process with so much patience, calmness, wisdom and care. He has the ability to relate concepts effortlessly on an appropriate level to his students. Personally he inspired me to reflect on my teaching approach and to remain passionate about teaching.’

One of his students tells this story. At one stage during her MPhil, when she was not working on her research and therefore, not progressing with her studies, she requested Eli to be more firm and set her some deadlines. His comment to her was, “Remember, the best discipline a student can have is self-discipline.” This answer, in fact, motivated her to develop self-discipline and she finished later that year!

### **Closing thoughts**

We think it is appropriate to congratulate Eli Bitzer on his achievements in his professional career and specifically his contribution to Health Professions Education. The lecturers who have worked with him have learned a great deal; while the students who have had the privilege to be taught and supervised by this legendary educationist are all part of a group who have verbalized that he makes them feel like ‘world class students’. In our respective ways we have all learnt how to think academically.

We have had the privilege, not only to work as colleagues, but also to be postgraduate students of Eli Bitzer. This experience has provided us with a blueprint for supervising postgraduate students in our own fields of expertise in the Centre for Health Professions Education.

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