An imagined discussion about tackling doctoral supervision

Vernon Trafford

Is it true that The Man is retiring?

It seems so. He is 65.

Really? He can’t be that old! But he could be because he is older than my Dad! You know Dad was one of his students?

No. I thought you came from the north.

We do, but Dad registered for his doctorate when the family moved to Stellenbosch.

I didn’t know that. What was his topic?

I’ve forgotten the title but it was something to do with development and education.

I see. Did you read it?

Well it passed and Dad did not have to make any alterations. I understand that not many doctoral candidates achieve that so it must have been good. And, YES I did read it to see what it was all about. Mind you, The Man would not have let Dad submit his thesis until he considered that it was ready and would pass.

Isn’t that a bit arrogant? How did your Dad feel about it?

It was not a problem. You know The Man. Outwardly, he is gentle in manner and style but inside he really does understand what research is all about. He sets high and hard standards for himself as well as for his doctoral candidates. He doesn’t want any candidate to fail and so he enters into a psychological contract with each one.

Pardon? Psychological contracts – what are they?
Let’s call it an unwritten agreement entered into between The Man and a candidate covering what each would provide to the other. Think of it as an agreed way of operating that determines the relationship between supervisor and candidate. It would include establishing arrangements for submitting, reviewing and returning written work, frequency of tutorials, proof-reading and complying with the protocols. All that sort of stuff. Put simply it clarifies how they would collaborate during Dad’s doctoral registration.

**OK. But what about the submission?**

Well, it was Dad who submitted his doctoral thesis not me but . . .

*I know that!! What happened when your Dad submitted?*

Dad had finished his research and the second draft of his thesis had been approved by The Man. Dad was prevented from submitting early . . .

*What do you mean – early? What was the problem with submitting early?*

At that time, the prevailing regulations stated that part-time doctoral candidates had to be registered for at least two years before their thesis could be submitted. He was unhappy with the rule because he believed he had met the scholarly requirements of producing a doctoral thesis at the expected standard to pass.

*How did he know that?*

Because The Man said that he was satisfied with the quality of Dad’s thesis. He was careful not to tell Dad that he would pass. Just saying that it was ready to be submitted was what Dad hoped to hear. He was so reassured by those words. Really he was – even at his age! Now for the clever part. Dad’s argument was simple: if the university-appointed supervisor judged that his thesis was at the ‘pass level’ why should he be prevented from submitting it for another academic year?

*What a fascinating non-issue! What happened next?*

The issue went to a meeting that considered such matters. The Man spoke for almost five minutes calmly pointing out the merits of natural justice over man-made bureaucratic procedures. It was a fine example of philosophy being applied in practice as he challenged the assumption that compliance with rules and
regulations should take priority over contributing to knowledge in a research-rich university.

Oh I like that.

By pointing that out he stepped onto very thin ice in that meeting. Quite recently someone told me that The Man was listened to in utter silence. When he sat down there was momentary silence until most members applauded and banged the table. The Man smiled as permission was granted for Dad to submit his thesis.

So it all turned out OK?

Yes. Dad respected The Man because he chose to formally question a procedure in public. It could easily have been rejected but he believed Dad was being unfairly treated and he chose to support his candidate. Other academics might well have acted similarly, but The Man’s actions are typical of his deep-held beliefs and strong personal values. He was not opposing the university but pointing out that university management and administration exist primarily to serve the best interests of its staff and learners. Right?

Absolutely! But tell me, what is your Dad’s profession?

After two degrees in psychology and gaining his professional membership he became an organizational psychologist. We moved to Stellenbosch when he was appointed human relations director for an import and export company of – guess what – a wine!

I don’t quite see how your Dad’s career path fits onto The Man’s academic interest in higher education or curriculum management. Why did he want to supervise your Dad’s doctoral research that surely was concerned with the import and export of wines? Please don’t think my questions are criticising your Dad, they are not. But I am curious about The Man’s reasons for agreeing to supervise a doctoral topic clearly outside his areas of academic expertise. Can you explain?

I’ll try. Did you know that The Man’s undergraduate studies included mathematics and education? I thought not. This gave him an appreciation of science and, no doubt, the foundation theories of social sciences also when he studied how
institutions operated in the public and private sectors. This introduced him to management and policy-making in entrepreneurial contexts which, as we know, he draws on occasionally. It was after his involvement with health education programmes and developing those related degrees that higher education and curriculum became his main academic interests.

That’s OK but how did it prepare him to supervise your Dad’s doctorate?

Let me ask you two fundamental research questions before I answer your question.

Go on. I’m ready.

Good. Here is my first question. What is the significance of episteme for doctoral supervisors? My second question will follow later.

Not knowing what episteme means I would guess it concerns knowledge. Therefore, your question is about knowledge. Maybe it is knowledge of a candidate’s topic area that makes someone interested in supervising that particular piece of research. How about this as an answer – it is the essential knowledge of a field and its related discipline that is required by a supervisor in order to supervise a specific research topic to successful completion?

Not bad – especially if you don’t know what episteme means. But you have fallen into the conventional way of viewing supervision – that doctoral supervisors have to be expert in their candidate’s areas of research. The Man accepts that familiarity with the field is always useful. But he goes beyond that rather restrictive perspective. He argues quite firmly that he cannot be an expert in each of his candidates’ topics nor is he willing to be a trainer in the complexities of either their respective disciplines or research methodologies. Also, every candidate is told that excellent books exist on these areas and they can be easily accessed. Maybe he then says quietly that he understands the research process. OK?

Wonderful.

Good. The Man expects his candidates to spend time reading followed by thinking and usually some further reading. I understand that if candidates are still unclear on an issue they can seek advice from The Man who is always willing to explain anything and help them. Based on his considerable supervisory experience The
Man believes his primary role as a doctoral supervisor is ‘helping candidates to think like researchers’.

I like that. Very neat! Is that what episteme means?

It is. But episteme is more than just thinking. It is a particular way of thinking. Displaying episteme allows us to establish and create knowledge that others can instantly recognize and accept. This is absolutely essential in doctoral research where candidates are expected to make a contribution to knowledge. To do that though candidates have to understand what others expect from their research and then ensure that what they submit in their theses meet those expectations.

Didn’t you touch on that earlier when you mentioned psychological contracts and mutual expectations?

I did. But let me add something else about episteme. Supervisors have to help candidates develop confidence in explicitly explaining their choices as to how they undertake their research. Some candidates either cannot explain why they made those choices or they believe that their readers – examiners usually – will somehow instantly understand why they made their methodological choices without them needing to provide any explanatory text in their theses. It happens. Whoops!

Whoops indeed!

You can see exactly how these concepts are linked if supervisors really understand the importance of their candidates having the capability to think like a researcher. It focuses their attention on the process of doing research and what is involved in undertaking high quality research rather than constantly focusing on details of the topic or mechanics of particular research methods. The Man understands that. This is why he sees his supervisory role as helping candidates – such as my Dad.

Yes. Did he recognize that at the time?

Probably. When Dad talked about doing his doctorate he always said The Man asked so many questions and recommended so few books or articles to read. He was surprised by that approach to supervising.

Can you remember if he said how those questions were expressed? Did most of them start with the word ‘WHY?’
Now that you mention it - YES! That’s right. He also said something about feeling as though he was in the presence of Socrates.

*Why did he feel like that?*

It was The Man’s constant questioning, the low level of directed action plus being encouraged to work things out for himself. He realized that The Man was gradually developing his capacity to think deeply about research as a researcher.

*It seems that . . .*

Hold on . . . he was helping Dad to understand episteme. What he was really saying, but without actually saying it, was that it was up to Dad to think about, plan and write in order to demonstrate and then, of course, to justify his scholarship with The Man at tutorial meetings. That’s right isn’t it?

*It is. Everything that the examiners hoped to see must have been in your Dad's thesis there for them to see. And so he passed. The Man had obviously done his job in helping your Dad to think like a researcher!*

I'm sure now that Dad felt like that too.

*That's nice. Before we move on there are some things that seem to be missing from our discussion of how The Man tackles doctoral supervision.*

Oh, what are they?

*Well, after you asked me about episteme we discussed how it important it had been for your Dad. That was interesting and could be called ‘high theory’. I don’t have a problem with that even though it seemed to be the central concern for The Man. Surely, there are other things of importance that make him a good doctoral supervisor?*

Such as?

*Well, deciding whether or not to accept someone to supervise depends on how many have applied, their qualifications, suitable topics, how many candidates he was already supervising and all of that. Why did The Man decide to supervise your Dad since his topic had little to do with Higher Education?*
University regulations normally limit the number of candidates a supervisor may have which varies between universities and often between Faculties. I am sure that The Man saw them as guidelines rather than absolutes when he accepted my Dad.

\[ I\ see.\ Go\ on\ . . . \]

Let’s not forget that we all learn differently and at various rates. Age comes into it too. Also, some candidates gain doctorates with virtually no supervision, others depend on their supervisors from registration to completion expecting almost constant supervision, whilst a few just consume time before being judged unlikely to complete successfully and depart. Inevitably, supervisors have to use their personal experience in deciding who to accept or not accept.

\[ That’s\ not\ a\ very\ clear\ situation,\ is\ it? \]

It certainly isn’t. There are no absolutes either in the selection process or what happens to doctoral candidates after registration. We know the majority will strive to pass and they do. A few never finish their research. It’s a complicated situation.

\[ So\ why\ did\ The\ Man\ accept\ your\ Dad? \]

Maybe he saw parallels between generic developmental issues in my father’s company and education settings: both involve identifying some form of professional need, both plan for change, both have to be creative in various ways and both analyze policy. Also, managing resources is there as are staffing concerns and all have parallels in educational settings. If development is educational, and education is developmental then there are similarities. The Man might simply have wanted a change from more of the same.

\[ Sorry,\ what\ do\ you\ mean\ more\ of\ the\ same? \]

The Man has supervised numerous theses and masters dissertations. He may have wanted the challenge of supervising a topic that would make him think. Alternatively, he may have been attracted by your Dad’s proposed methodology. Why not?

\[ So\ you\ are\ suggesting\ that\ constantly\ supervising\ in\ the\ same\ narrowish\ academic\ area\ hardly\ increases\ one’s\ knowledge? \]
Yes I am. It may increase a supervisor’s list of references, but how can anyone be excited at the prospect of yet-another identical . . . Sorry, let me explain. My problem is when someone claims ten years of supervisory experience but has actually supervised the same topic or methodological approach annually for ten years. This is purely repetition.

*I follow your argument, but isn’t that experience?*


*I’ll do that.*

Now for my second question. Are you ready for something you may not immediately associate with doing a doctorate?

*Yes. Go ahead.*

Four years ago a colleague told The Man about a book that changed his view of research and, by implication, how doctoral research might be supervised. It was about ignorance. The Man was so intrigued by the title that he ordered the book for his Kindle and read it from cover to cover in 24 hours. When he finished he admitted that it had influenced his thinking about supervision and ‘doing research’ too. Why was that?

*Have you read this book?*

Yes, and it had the same effect on me.

*I have not read the book so let me think through what it might contain.* The title suggests that it isn’t explicitly about knowledge. Thus, it is possibly about a recognized absence of knowledge and it could be about the need to start there to create or discover something that is knowledge. How is that so far?

Quite good. However, although knowledge is a big subject, ignorance is a bigger one and so it is ignorance rather than knowledge that drives science. Science is not a guaranteed method of finding out things and getting results. In fact, science could be likened to looking for a black cat in a dark room when there is no cat
in the room! Science may be a hit-and-miss process especially if hypotheses are merely formalized assumptions that can be proven to be wrong.

That is a terribly pessimistic view of the world, isn’t it?

It could be. But we must start somewhere and hypotheses are useful even if they are unproven because that outcome adds to knowledge about the assumption doesn’t it?

Yes.

Now think about this. Although ignorance may be wilful stupidity or plain indifference to facts and logic, another type of ignorance follows from the absence of fact, insight, understanding or clarity about something. This form of ignorance is knowledgeable, perceptive and insightful and is – ideally – what doctoral candidates display as they formulate gaps in knowledge and research questions, design research and advance conceptual conclusions.

Are you implying that The Man does this in supervisions? Instead of emphasizing knowledge that may have been created or tested he encourages candidates to extend their conclusions by acknowledging what remains unknown about their topic? If so, this would be a more powerful piece of text than something called ‘Issues for Further Research’.

Got it! Thoroughly conscious ignorance is a prelude to knowledge. It can determine research intentions as well as research questions. Thus, answering those research questions . . .

. . . raises thinking to a higher level!

Absolutely. You got it again!

This means doctoral supervisors should challenge candidates to tell examiners not what they are seeking to investigate but what they are seeking to discover. This emphasis is important because then doctoral candidates can reveal knowledge that has been created plus identify the extent of ignorance that remains.

Exactly. I’ve enjoyed our chat and The Man would have enjoyed it too.
I agree. Thanks for explaining some intricacies of doctoral supervision and how you believe The Man supervises his doctoral candidates. Having a psychological contract, seeking to achieve episteme and questing after ignorance with candidates makes sense. It is The Man’s strategic starting point for tackling doctoral supervision. He couldn’t achieve good supervisory outcomes if his candidates’ starting points and thinking processes were unclear, woolly or just wrong, could he?

Influential sources

Curriculum Vitae

Professor E.M. Bitzer

1 Personal Details
Elias Matthys (Eli) Bitzer
Professor of Higher Education and Director: Centre for Higher and Adult Education
Department of Curriculum Studies, Faculty of Education, Stellenbosch University

2 Academic Qualifications
B.A.(UFS) Majors: English and Mathematics
HED (UFS) Higher Education Diploma
B.Ed.(UFS)
M.Ed.(UFS) Research topic: An educational structure for an extramural education system: a grounded perspective
D.Ed.(UFS) Research topic: The development of leadership and management of heads of departments at the University of the Free State: an educational leadership and management perspective.

3 Professional Career
1975-1978 Teacher at JBM Hertzog Secondary School, Bloemfontein
1979-1980 Professional officer: Education research and educational development
1981-1982 Lecturer-researcher, University of the Free State
1983-1986 Head of Organisational Development and Research at the Bureau for University Education, University of the Free State
1987-1990 Deputy Director, Bureau for University Education
1991-1996 Director: Academic Staff Development, University of the Free State
1996-1997 Director: Academic Development Bureau, University of the Free State
1998-2016 Professor of Higher Education, Stellenbosch University
2003-2005 Chair of the Department of Curriculum Studies, Stellenbosch University
2007-2016 Director of the Centre for Higher and Adult Education, Stellenbosch University
4 **Contributions to Professional Organisations**

- Honorary member and Fellow: SAARDHE (since October 1992)
- Honoured by SAARDHE with the Johann Pauw Memorial Award and presenting the Johann Pauw Memorial Lecture at the 10th Annual conference, Rand Afrikaans University, 18 March 1997
- Member of the SA Association for Academic Development (SAAAD), Chairperson of the Programme and Paper Committee of the 1995 SAAAD National Conference at the Technikon Free State, Bloemfontein
- Member of the Executive Committee of the South African Institute for Management (SAIM), 1991, Chairperson of the Free State Branch of SAIM, 1992.
- Secretary, local branch of UDUSA (Union of Democratic University Staff Associations), 1993-1995
- Convenor: Interest group on the Theory and Practice of Teaching, Education Association of South Africa (EASA), 2000/2001

5 **Awards**

- Rated by the NRF as C3 researcher for three consecutive terms of 5 years (2002-2006, 2007-2011 and 2012-2016)
- Recipient of the Rector’s Award for excellence in research, Stellenbosch University, 2008
- Recipient of an award by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Research for one of the 50 most productive authors of academic publications at Stellenbosch University in 2011, 2013
- Recipient of the Chancellor’s Award, Stellenbosch University, 2016

6 **Publications**

- Author or co-author of 73 articles in accredited journals
- Author or co-author of 13 book chapters
- Chief editor of 3 scholarly books
- Co-editor of 2 scholarly books

6.1 **Articles (accredited)**


Curriculum Vitae

Strydom AH, Bitzer EM and Venter JA. 1990. Astin se konsep van potensiaalontwikkeling as benadering tot voortreflikheid in tersiëre onderwys. SA Tydskrif vir Hoër Onderwys, 4(2).


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Lategan LOK and Bitzer EM. 1994. Die vestiging van 'n leergemeenskap aan 'n teologiese fakulteit: 'n Perspektief vanuit die hoër onderwys. Tydskrif vir Christelike Wetenskap, 30 (First quarter).

Fourie M and Bitzer EM. 1994. Constant and changing emphases on values in South African higher education. Tydskrif vir Christelike Wetenskap, 30 (First quarter).


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Curriculum Vitae


### 6.2 Articles (non-accredited)


### 6.3 Books, monographs and book chapters


— 1990. Enkele invalshoeke vir opvoedkundige navorsing, toegespits op navorsing oor universiteitsonderwys. (Monografie).


Bitzer EM and Kapp CA (eds). 1998. A manual for academic staff developers in further and higher education. Published as part of the Free State Links Project in the Australian-South African Links Programme.


Bitzer EM and Albertyn RM. 2010. Late entrants into the academic profession: conceptual constructions of hope in a faculty of Education. Chapter submitted for a special edition of a Faculty of Education publication on the Pedagogy of Hope. Stellenbosch University.


6.4 Conference contributions

(i) Papers (local)


— 1996. Student access to curriculum development – A case study in nursing education. Pre-conference proceedings. The SA Association for Academic Development, University of Fort Hare, Alice, 27 November-29 November.

— 1997. From teaching to learning: Are we willing, able and ready to shift the paradigm? The Johann Pauw Memorial Lecture delivered at the conference of the SA Association for Research and Development in Higher Education, Rand Afrikaans University, Johannesburg, 18-20 March.


Bitzer EM and Troskie-De Bruin C. 2003. Prior schooling characteristics and the performance of first-year students at the University of Stellenbosch. Congress of the Education Association of South Africa, Stellenbosch University, Stellenbosch, 14-16 January.


Bitzer EM. 2006. The scholarship of teaching and learning. Keynote address at the Fall Teaching Academy for academic staff, University of Stellenbosch, 30-31 May.


Bitzer EM. 2006. Stakeholders in quality: a response to Loyiso Jita’s paper. Response paper delivered at a colloquium on the question: “Does quality assurance contribute to broadening or narrowing democracy?” Stellenbosch University, 10 August.

— 2006. Testing the boundaries of academic workload distribution in a Faculty of Education. Congress of the Education Association of South Africa, Wilderness, 28-30 November.


Bitzer EM and Menkveld H. 2010. An evaluation of the Fund for Innovation and Research in Learning and Teaching (FIRLT) scheme at Stellenbosch University. Conference on the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, Stellenbosch Lodge, Stellenbosch, 11-12 May.


Bitzer EM. 2015. The role of institutional research in research on doctoral education. Forum of the Southern African Association for institutional research, Cape Peninsula University of Technology, Cape Town, 29 September-1 October.

Costandius E and Bitzer EM. 2015. Engaging critical citizenship curricula: a case in the visual communication design course at Stellenbosch University. Conference of the Higher Education Learning and Teaching Association of Southern Africa, North-West University, Potchefstroom, November.


(ii) Papers Abroad/International conferences in South Africa


— 1990. Reaching out to developing communities: evaluating and planning for non-traditional university education. 25th Annual Conference of the Society for College and University Planning (SCUP), Atlanta, Georgia, 29 July-1 August.


Curriculum Vitae

— 1992. Participant in discussion on research planning at the Center for the Study of Higher Education, Penn State University, USA; Panel member at the annual conference of the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE). Minneapolis, USA, 26 October-7 November.

Grobler JJ and Bitzer EM. 1994. Meeting the needs and expectations of learner diversity in one classroom. 19th conference on Improving University Teaching, College Park, Maryland, USA, 4-7 July.

Van Rensburg LD and Bitzer EM. 1995. Enhancement of student centred learning in basic chemistry. 20th conference on Improving University Teaching, City University, Hong Kong, 10-13 July 1995.


— 2009. Rethinking trans-disciplinarity and curriculum spaces in a Health Sciences Education coursework master’s programme. 3rd Triennial Conference of the International Association for the Advancement of Curriculum Studies, Somerset West, South Africa, 7-10 September.


Bitzer EM, Trafford V and Leshem S. 2013. Promoting doctorateness: Crossing disciplinary and systemic boundaries by international supervisor cooperation and support. 4th Biennial Postgraduate Supervision Conference, Spier Estate, Stellenbosch, 24-26 April.


Bitzer EM, Trafford V and Leshem S. 2014. Crossing borders in preparing doctoral candidates and supervisors for global research contexts. Annual conference of the Higher Education Research and Development in Australasia, Hong Kong Baptist University, Hong Kong, 7-10 July.


Bitzer EM. 2015. Digitally empowered or at a deficit? The plight of part-time distance doctoral candidates. 26th International Conference of the International Council on Distance Education, Sun City, 13-16 October.


(iii) Posters abroad


7. Supervisor for PhD and Master’s Studies

7.1 Supervisor for PhD studies (completed)


Engelbrecht FDJ. 2007. A framework for the design and implementation of competency-based teacher education programmes at the University of Namibia. Co-supervisor: Prof A E Carl.

Van Schalkwyk SC. 2007. The role of academic literacy in first-year students’ learning in the Faculty of Arts. Co-supervisor: Prof C van der Walt.


Costandius E. 2012. Engaging the curriculum in a visual communication design programme: a case study at Stellenbosch University. Co-supervisor: Dr C Troskie-de Bruin.


Herman N. 2015. The role of context in decision making about professional learning by lecturers at a research-intensive university. Co-supervisor: Prof B Leibowitz, University of Johannesburg.


7.2 Co-supervisor for PhD studies (completed)

Frick BLF. 2007. Continuing professional development (CPD) in the Faculty of Science, Stellenbosch University: in search of a holistic conceptualization. Supervisor: Prof CA Kapp.


Mkhabela Z. 2014. The role of education and training in service delivery in local government in Mpumalanga Province. Supervisor: Dr BL Frick.


7.3 Study leader for MPhil (Higher Education) (completed)


Herman N. 2001. The application of international benchmarks to an internet-based distance education programme at the University of Stellenbosch.

Phasha EST. 2001. The support needs of students at Sekhukhune College of Education.


Joubert L-M. 2002. Enhancing the quality of first-year biology teaching at the University of Stellenbosch.


Essa I. 2010. Exploring students’ reasons for non-completion in a postgraduate non-clinical nursing programme presented via interactive telematic education at Stellenbosch University.


Coetze K. 2012. The value of facilitation and mentoring in a management and leadership fundamentals programme for registered nurses.


Bester M. 2013. Embedding graduate attributes in higher education curricula: an investigation into staff conceptions and orientations.


Vandenbergh S. 2013. Determining factors that contribute to doctoral success at Stellenbosch University.

Co-study leader: Dr BL Frick.

Swart C. 2013. An analysis of the tourism curriculum at Boland College: what the tourism industry in Stellenbosch requires from entry level employees.

Theron E. 2014. Student engagement as a way of enhancing student success at a private higher education institution.


Co-study leader: Prof D Wessels.


Ross K. 2016. Factors influencing the academic success of first-year students in chemistry at an agricultural training institution.

Van der Merwe, C. 2016. Experiences of feedback on medical students’ clinical skills performance in a clinical skills centre. (cum laude).

8. Workshops Facilitated

Workshops/short courses facilitated or co-facilitated in the past 15 years that benefitted participants from higher education institutions.

Workshop topics include:

Assessment in higher education; Curriculum and programme design in higher education; Departmental leadership; Postgraduate supervision; Quality promotion in higher education; Staff development in higher education; Supervising research design; The challenge of doctorateness; Transformative learning; Using co-operative learning in university teaching; Writing retreats to promote the writing of articles and other academic publications.