Creating Effective Postgraduate Learning Environments: An Analysis of an Intervention from Realist Social Theory

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Abstract

This paper analyses two illustrative reports of the external examiners on some of the manuscripts of the twenty postgraduate students who graduated at the University of the Free State between 2013 and 2014. The students were part of the twenty-eight PhD and twenty-two MEd students as well as fifteen supervisors working in a cohort approach within the Sustainable Postgraduate Learning Environments research project. The two reports are analysed in order to document, understand and illustrate how the Sustainable Postgraduate Learning Environments facilitate good academic performance. The focus is mainly on the working together of the actors' emotional and cognitive aspects. The argument is that the two reports refer to two different sides of the same process, implying that improvements in the students' academic performance are influenced by the extent to which they are validated through a caring learning environment. However, it should be noted that even poor academic performance seems to be a reflection of the problems in this interaction. Both students and supervisors are affected in the same way. The paper uses Margaret Archer's theory of social realism to generate an understanding of how the interaction between the students and the supervisors on the one hand, and between cognition and emotion on the other hand, produce particular academic performances that are central in the creation of sustainable postgraduate learning environments. The argument put forth is that agency and structure can and should not be collapsed into each other, even though the two co-constitute each other. Tolerance of their separation enables individual agents to take charge

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of their own lives despite the constraints of their situations to construct particular meanings; hence, their good academic performance beyond the dictates of their contexts.

Résumé

Comme indiqué dans la littérature des sciences de l'éducation, le développement professionnel des enseignants est la pierre angulaire de l'offre d'un enseignement/apprentissage de qualité dans le système éducatif de chaque pays, avec notamment des programmes adaptés aux propositions visant à améliorer la qualité de l'enseignement et à réformer l'éducation. Selon certaines études, les compétences des enseignants en Afrique du Sud ne se sont pas améliorées comme escompté, étant donné que de nombreux programmes de développement professionnel ne sont pas encore mis en œuvre ou ne tiennent pas compte des points de vue des enseignants. En vue de relever ce défi, le présent article se fixe comme objectif de déterminer les composantes d'une stratégie qui pourrait être utilisée pour mettre en œuvre des programmes de développement professionnel, en s'appuyant sur un projet mené dans deux écoles secondaires rurales de la province de Free State. Les données ont été générées par les participants de la communauté scolaire et des fonctionnaires basés dans les districts, en utilisant une approche participative.de recherche-action. Les résultats ont révélé six éléments distincts d'une stratégie, à savoir la mise en place d'une équipe comprenant toutes les parties prenantes; la création d'une vision commune pour tous basée sur une analyse approfondie des forces, faiblesses, opportunités et menaces (SWOT); la priorisation des items; l'élaboration d'un plan stratégique; les procédures de suivi pour déterminer les progrès réalisés; et la suggestion des moyens d'améliorer les faiblesses.

Introduction

This article uses Margaret Archer's (1995; 1996) realist social theory, which is grounded in Roy Bhaskar's (Buch-Hansen 2005; Corson 1991; Mutch 2005) critical realist philosophy, to describe and generate an understanding of how a team of fifteen academics at the University of the Free State approaches the supervision of a cohort of twenty-eight PhD and twenty-two MEd students (Mahlomaholo 2012a; 2012b; 2013). This paper reflects on the reasons, factors, ideas, processes and activities that enabled some of those students to complete their studies. In order to systematize this discussion, the article firstly presents its theoretical exposition to provide a basis for understanding the approach

adopted in the Sustainable Postgraduate Learning Environments research project. Next, a detailed description of the sustainable project design, aim, focus and processes of implementation is provided, followed by the discussion and conclusion.

The Theoretical Exposition

To initiate this analysis, the paper notes that Archer's approach operationalizes Bhaskar's philosophy of critical realism (Popora 2013; Pratschke 2003; Wheelahan 2007). In fact, many approaches to date including Anthony Giddens' structuration theory (Maton and Muller 2006; Mutch 2005; Quinn 2007; Zeuner 1999), describing and generating theoretical understandings of postgraduate learning, have been reductionist, collapsing separate entities into one another and focusing almost exclusively on one or other aspect of the students' mental faculties, like their perceptions or cognitive abilities.

Realist Social Theory as the Lens

Archer's (1995; 1996) approach enables a discussion of postgraduate learning in terms of the total student; that is, his/her identity, personhood or agency, or better still, all his/her being at the same time (Buch-Hansen 2005; Corson 1991; Mutch 2005; Popora 2013; Pratschke 2003; Wheelahan 2007). Archer enables this paper to do so through the notion of the body and the mind's analytical dualism (Akram 2013; Archer 1995; 1996; Kahn 2009), which is also understood in relation to other analytical dualisms of the individual and society (Buch-Hansen 2005; Corson 1991; Mutch 2005; Popora 2013; Pratschke 2003; Quinn 2007; Wheelahan 2007) as well as that of agency versus structure and culture, and of the knower versus knowledge (Buch-Hansen 2005; Corson 1991; Mutch 2005; Popra 2013; Pratschke 2003; Quinn 2007; Wheelahan 2007). In all these instances, Archer argues that these dualities, although related, are independent from one another, as they do not rely on one another for their respective existences. They are pre-given, even before they come into any interaction with one another. The interaction that occurs between the respective dualities is a process that will either maintain or elaborate (enable) them further. Their interaction with one another in their respective dyads of dualities is important for their emergence from their natural state of being through their practical operation and ultimately functioning in the social order of reality (Buch-Hansen 2005; Corson 1991; Mutch 2005; Popora 2013; Pratschke 2003; Quinn 2007; Wheelahan 2007). This process of emergence is what Archer calls *morphogenesis* (Akram 2013; Archer 1995; 1996; Kahn 2009), indicating, assuming and giving shape to a pre-existing entity. This is the opposite of *morphostasis* (Akram 2013; Archer 1995; 1996; Kahn 2009;

Buch-Hansen 2005; Corson 1991; Mutch 2005; Popora 2013; Pratschke 2003), which implies protection and maintenance of the status quo.

Archer strongly argues that these dualisms should never be collapsed onto, nor subsumed under, one another as Giddens does, since their separation refers to a very distinct ontology that acknowledges the existence of an independent reality. The properties of the dualisms do not depend on our knowledge of them for them to exist, as the poststructuralists would allege (Akram 2013; Archer 1995; 1996; Kahn 2009). For example, the human body does not depend on the human mind for its being, and vice versa. They are both pre-given, although they need each other for their respective maintenance, elaboration and development (Kahn 2009; Buch-Hansen 2005; Corson 1991). For this article, informed by Archer's approach, emergence, which denotes reflection and reflexivity, is one of the most crucial aspects of learning through which one is able to describe the transcendence of postgraduate students from their initial to their highest forms of being, namely from being naturally given persons through being purposeful agents and ultimately becoming social actors in higher education and beyond (Akram 2013; Archer 1995; 1996; Kahn 2009; Buch-Hansen 2005; Corson 1991; Mutch 2005; Popora 2013; Pratschke 2003).

South African Qualification Authority's Level Descriptors as Bases for Describing Morphogenesis

The notion of emergence has enabled an understanding of the level descriptors in the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) formulated by the South African Qualifications Authority, which describe competencies to be cultivated through learning at all levels of formal education in South Africa. For example, at NQF level 9, where the MEd qualification is pitched, the students, among other things, have to

- demonstrate specialist knowledge to enable engagement with and critique of current research practices, as well as advanced scholarship in a particular field
- demonstrate the ability to evaluate current practices of knowledge production and choose an appropriate process of enquiry for the area of study or practice
- demonstrate a command of and the ability to design, select and apply creative methods, techniques and processes to complex, practical and theoretical problems
- demonstrate the ability to use a wide range of specialist skills in identifying, conceptualizing, designing and implementing a method of enquiry to address complex and challenging problems within a field, discipline or practice

- demonstrate the ability to make autonomous ethical decisions which affect knowledge production, or complex organizational or professional issues (South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) 2012: 11–12).

Five out of the ten level descriptors have been selected arbitrarily to use as an illustration of the argument that for students to operate at this level of sophistication, they need to learn by means of all their faculties (and not just one or two) as total reflective and reflexive persons changing into purposeful agents. This will ultimately enable them to become committed and focused social actors through potentially transformative actions on the structures and the cultures that predate and position them (Akram 2013; Archer 1995; 1996; Kahn 2009; Buch-Hansen 2005; Corson 1991; Wilson 2010). Based on Archer's theorization, this paper argues that this *morphogenetic cycle* where persons interact with the pre-existing, but separate structures and cultures is the vehicle for their own, the structures' and the culture's transformation and transcendence to higher and more sophisticated levels of being (Archer 1995; 1996; Wilson 2010). This interaction, for example by the first 'generation' of agents, recreates the social structure, which will coach the next generation of agents who will inhabit it as pre-given, but will have the choice to change it (morphogenesis) or maintain it (morphostasis) (Kahn 2009; Buch-Hansen 2005; Corson 1991; Mutch 2005; Popora 2013). However, changing the structures and the cultures, as is the case with changing human agents, is not an easy process. It requires sustained, multi-pronged, multi-layered and multi-perspectival, collaborative and focused actions, because structures and cultures have focalized into enduring positionings, dispositions and relation-ships (Buch-Hansen 2005; Mutch 2005; Popora 2013). Most of the time they constitute the taken-for-granted 'truths' and ideologies that are not always interrogated, contested or challenged.

Postgraduate Learning: From Natural Order Towards Social Order of Reality

Research in South Africa shows that far fewer than 40 per cent of students who enrol for their Master's degrees, let alone PhDs, manage to graduate (see detailed references in Mahlomaholo 2012a; 2013). The assumption here is that this is due to the quality of postgraduate learning and the supervision thereof, which focus mainly on one or two of the modalities of being a student, namely cognition and, to a lesser extent, emotion/affect. To illustrate the point, Dooyeweerd (Basen 2002) identifies at least fifteen modalities of being human, namely the physical, kinematic, physiological, biotic, psychological, emotional, cultural, historical, social, aesthetic, economic, juridical, analyti-

cal, ethical and pistical. The first four of these make up what Archer refers to as a person's natural order of reality (Basen 2002; Kahn 2009; Buch-Hansen 2005; Corson 1991; Mutch 2005)**.** They constitute what concerns all human beings; hence, all the students. Students, through their corporeal bodies, for example, occupy space, and they can be counted (physical modality) so that they are not crammed or uncomfortable in their given settings. Some of these settings locating the students are urban, while others are rural, each with their respective challenges. The physical mode of being, which is naturalistic, is pre-given and forms the basis for higher forms of existence, like becoming a social actor and an activist. Through their bodies, the students are capable of movement (kinematics). They have blood circulation and their temperatures are at particular levels (physiological), while their bodies grow in size due to nutrients eaten (biotic). These four modalities also constitute the bodily dimension of an agent (Basen 2002), whereas the rest refer to the mind. Within the category of the mind-modalities are those that depend on action and practice for them to actualize, like the psychological and emotional. These are Archer's practical order of reality (Archer 1995; 1996; Kahn 2009; Buch-Hansen 2005; Corson 1991; Mutch 2005). The remaining modalities, namely the cultural, historical, social, aesthetic, economic, juridical, analytical, ethical and pistical, constitute the *social order of reality* (Basen 2002; Kahn 2009; Buch-Hansen 2005; Corson 1991; Mutch 2005). They are the ones defining human beings as different from other objects/beings/aspects of reality, as they are about functioning in social interactions. They are totally depended on us being able to stand outside ourselves to reflect and regulate our actions as humans. These three orders of reality are what an effective postgraduate learning involves and must capitalize on.

The point being made, couched in Archer's realist social theory, is that for postgraduate learning to be meaningful and effective, it would seem that recognizing the value of, and building on, all these modalities together should be the starting point of supervision. The reason for this assumption is that the modalities are not a gift of society or of the social structure, although they need them to flourish. People are born with them. However, they come to their fullness in the *relationship* between a human being (the agent) and the social structure. Problems can take place in any of them, which may hinder the student to complete his/her studies successfully, because in themselves they are enablers or hindrances. In the same way, problems in the social structure may hinder the student's academic success. However, Archer cautions that to some extent these occur with the student's complicity because she/he always interprets the nature of the relationship with the social structure (Basen 2002; Kahn 2009; Buch-Hansen 2005; Corson 1991; Mutch 2005). He/she is not

a passive recipient of everything that comes his or her way. In fact, this acknowledges the Marxist maxim that humans create reality, although not under conditions of their own making (Popora 2013; Quinn 2007; Wheelahan 2007).

The Sustainable Postgraduate Learning Environments Project

Informed by Archer's realist social theory as an approach to supervising postgraduate students' learning and as a way of generating research data and making sense of them, fifteen academics came together in 2011 sharing the same concern of improving MEd and PhD students' success rates (Mahlomaholo 2012a; 2012b; 2013). All academics had PhD qualifications in education, but their specializations were varied, ranging, for example, from mathematics, physical and natural sciences, economic and management sciences, psychology and sociology to history and languages, to name but a few. A kind of academic network was constituted where different fields of expertise were brought together. Various academic and professional collaborators nationally and internationally from other universities, different governments departments (including those of education and social development), as well as many instances of civil society (including non-governmental and faith-based organizations) participated in this network. The aim of this networked project was to have all stakeholders participating and supporting the efforts to improve on the postgraduate students' success rate with whatever contribution they could make. The project was not entirely successful in getting the buy-in and support of all participants, although it was satisfied with a few who continued to participate through emails, Skype, telephone communication and occasional physical meetings.

The networked project (the team) was privileged and honoured when a good number of postgraduate students who knew the academics during their undergraduate studies had so much confidence and trust in them that they approached them individually and sometimes collectively with the request to be supervised by them in their studies. Almost all students who ultimately enrolled in the project were practising teachers, heads of departments and principals at schools and officials in the government departments (Mahlomaholo 2012a; 2012b; 2013). On the appointed dates, a three-day workshop was convened and strategic planning meetings were held where the aim of the project and how it was to be implemented was discussed.

Prior to the meeting, the academics prepared research documents on what postgraduate learning in a cohort entailed. Other documents described the research process from its conceptualization; the formulation of the research problem; how to do a literature review guided by the objectives of the study and informed by varying theoretical frameworks; and how to design the methodology section, generate, collect and analyse the data in a meaningful way

guided by the objectives of the study and the literature. The above included documents describing how to draw conclusions and make recommendations based on the research findings. These were circulated to all in good time in advance.

What is interesting is that different responsibilities were assigned to various groups of five individuals to lead the discussions. They each had to find ways of meeting before the three-day workshops to share ideas and formulate some position on their respective topics. All had a role and a contribution to make at the planned three-day workshop and strategic planning meetings. On the appointed date, time was allocated to all groups to present their ideas to the rest of the team in the language and media they felt comfortable with, ranging from personal stories and pictures to oral PowerPoint presentations.

The first workshop started by discussing, debating and ultimately agreeing on the purpose of the project (the team), which was to *create sustainable postgraduate learning environments* where all could learn successfully in a safe environment with the support and facilitation of the supervisory team and peers. Learning successfully entailed students being able to draft research proposals that could lead to successful theses and dissertations. The team then reflected on what strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats it experienced individually and collectively in pursuance of this overarching goal. Out of the long list of issues generated, the five most important priorities were selected. The team agreed to implement those within given time frames. For each priority, meaningful activities, organized to enable all to operationalize the respective priorities, were identified. For example, for up to six months, progress on proposal writing was to be checked and reported by students and supervisors on a monthly basis. Next, each of the chapters in the theses and the dissertations were checked monitored and improved upon on a monthly basis until some of the studies were completed in three to four years.

Individuals and sometimes groups of individuals were assigned roles to ensure that each of those activities per priority did take place. The team even planned the resources that would be needed per activity and per priority. They collectively formulated mechanisms of monitoring the progress made per activity towards the realization of the identified priority. Among many things that the team agreed on were the roles of each of the supervisors and students (Mahlomaholo 2012; 2013a). For example, it was agreed that the team would meet at least once every month to share readings on the respective aspects of the evolving research. Members also agreed to share ideas on how empirical research evolved at these monthly meetings. Each participant also agreed to do a formal presentation, and then, guided by the acceptable procedures for doing formal research, peers would critique the work in a respectful and constructive manner.

Between the monthly meetings, the students would read and learn together in their groups of five or so in their respective localities almost on a daily basis. They were at liberty to approach any member of the supervisory team in case of need to provide clarification and support of whatever kind. The supervisory team also took turns to visit the students at their homes and schools where their research was conducted to provide support and, in general, to indicate that the team was available and that it cared about their success and what they were doing. The team did not provide any material support because of ethical reasons around creating dependency. However, students were given information on how and where to source funding for their ongoing research work. The supervisory team enquired about their well-being as persons, their families, their job situations and, where necessary, even provided advice and support on personal challenges. Sometimes it was even necessary to call them on their phones to reassure them of the continual availability of the supervisory team in cases where they went through hard times in their personal and/or academic lives. They were also encouraged to be there for one another as peers and it was emphasised that the success of all depended on the success of other team members. Students, academics and participants, as mentioned earlier, formed a caring team that moved in unison towards the achievement of its common goal. Individual supervisors also received support from the students and other supervising colleagues in times of need; they were there for one another in a trusting, reciprocal and genuine sense (Mahlomaholo 2012a; 2012b; 2013).

The supervisory team encouraged all students and one another as supervisors to do research in their respective workplaces with the intention of making a difference and effecting improvements on their theories and practices of education (Mahlomaholo 2012a; 2012b; 2013). The whole team's research was guided by design research approaches, which emphasised an understanding of the challenges, then exploring the solutions and the contextual conditions that enable success or hinder it, with the ultimate intention of formulating indicators of the success of the solutions tried out in theory and practice. The importance of doing respectful research that elevated the research participants to the status of co-researchers and fully fledged human beings, equal to researchers in status and stature, was emphasised. The theoretical frameworks informing this approach, ranging from Jürgen Habermas's Critical Emancipatory Research to Joel Kinchloe's Bricolage, were thoroughly discussed and deliberately operationalized. The team lived and interacted along the lines described in these theories.

The students investigated real-life issues in a respectful manner. They did not impose themselves on their research participants, but they were always informed by the discussions in the staff rooms and elsewhere about issues

concerning people in their contexts. Their role was to facilitate the discussions around such problems and to enable participants to help them formulate those into researchable topics. They recruited and formulated teams of stakeholders going beyond the classrooms and schools to assist in investigating issues of curriculum, teaching and learning, and educational governance from a multiplicity of perspectives at multi-layered levels and theoretical positions.

They thus deconstructed the notion of the 'expert' and recreated it as a space and place which all participants could enter and exit in collaboration with the other members in search of lasting and sustainable solution(s) to the problem. It was always recognized that people who experienced the problem being investigated were the same people who were best suited to find the solution to it (Ladson-Billings 1995). The role of the student researchers was therefore, in the same manner as at university, to enable participants to discover the power they had in themselves to resolve their problems. They assisted the participants in taking their rightful places as co-researchers and not merely as research subjects or research objects. These participants, as co-researchers, co-determined the agenda for the research being conducted. They took ownership, recruited resources and co-opted requisite expertise. They were there from the beginning of the conceptualization of research, through its operationalization up to ultimately the report writing. They remained there beyond the study period, because the project was meaningful and it helped them to improve their real-life practices.

At the end of each year, the students, together with members of their respective teams and their supervisors, continue to host an annual colloquium to which peers from the extended networks of the team are invited. These would be colleagues from other institutions locally and internationally as well as all other instances of civil society and government departments. This is usually a three-day event, where all participants present papers and share their research work in general. To capture all these activities and data meaningfully for posterity, conference proceedings are included in a dedicated, accredited journal that is usually guest-edited as well as peer reviewed. It is the wish of every student and researcher to see their names in print and this motivates all to perform even better in terms of producing quality and publishable research. In 2013 alone, the team had forty-eight papers out of 111 presented at such a colloquium, which were also published in three accredited, guest-edited journals. The project started in 2011, but to date, six MEd and fourteen PhD students graduated between 2013 and 2014. The success rates of students in other projects is 3.2 per annum, which is 50 per cent less that those going through in the Sustainable Postgraduate Learning Environments' project. Some of the schools in the country that perform better are those where students who

do research are employed full-time while doing their research. The project has grown in stature, as supervisors locally and internationally are invited to share their experiences of creating sustainable postgraduate learning environments (Mahlomaholo 2012a; 2012b; 2013).

Discussions

Structure and Academic Performance

With the new structure of the Sustainable Postgraduate Learning Environments' academic network and team that were created, it was possible for the students to find new and positive ways of relating to their peers, their supervisors, the participants in their individual projects and the learning content (as aspects of culture). This enabled them to explore and discover the power they had in themselves (see the discussion above). Their identities changed from being mere persons operating only at the level of the natural order of reality (see the data from the external examiners below), to those of being primary agents first. Next they progressed to the level of cooperate agents operating at the practical level of the order of reality, and ultimately as actors at the level of social order of reality (Archer 1996; Basen 2002; Kahn 2009; Buch-Hansen 2005; Corson 1991; Mutch 2005).

They became agents of change with a purpose to transform their otherwise contingent situation. This change was due to them being part of the team at the university, where they had the latitude and responsibility to act and contribute to their own successful learning and that of their peers (Mahlomaholo 2012a; 2013). They gradually took responsibility to organize and to lead small groups, but in the meantime became major actors who led whole teams of teachers, learners and parents at their respective schools. Because of those new roles, they had to read extensively, be knowledgeable in their subject discipline and thus 'demonstrate specialist knowledge to enable engagement with, and critique of current research practices, as well as advanced scholarship in a particular field' to negotiate successfully with diverse groups of stakeholders (SAQA 2012: 11). It therefore came as no surprise when one of the external examiners noted the following with regard to one of our MEd students' dissertation:

> [ext] This is a good study indeed. The student has been able to use the contents of literature successfully to support her argument. While the study was driven by critical emancipatory theory, which emphasises the value of justice in the people's relationships, in which people are empowered to operate on the same level of power, the student managed to juxtapose it with Transformative Learning Theory and Social

Constructivism. This is to highlight the importance of people's thinking within their own particular contexts, in which they can define the type of learning required by them. The effective implementation of the emerging strategy is seen as a possibility if the teacher understands, from his/her own position of power as a facilitator, that learners have knowledge as well, and, therefore, encourages and introduces knowledge in the context of learners' position. [ends]

Total Persons

Another examiner commented as follows on the manuscript of another MEd student's dissertation:

> [ext] The major contribution of this study is the awareness that inclusiveness of all members of the school community, inside or outside the school premises, and handling one another with dignity, are good for the effective implementation of the strategy for sustainable learning. The researcher asserts that participants were beginning to understand the importance of equal power relations. This means the transformation of the participants as well… The student gives the exposition of some challenges that stood in the way of the framework development, which she managed to put right to enable the framework to be there. [ends]

Seemingly, the emergence of this new and powerful academic identity was made possible because the students participated in a real-life project as total human beings who related and learned from a multiplicity of sources and positions. There were many disjunctures in their lives and experiences as students, which enabled them to rethink who they were, what they were capable of and what they wanted to become. Their bodies and minds were involved in support of one another without one being collapsed or subsumed under each other. All fifteen modalities as theorized by Dooyeweerd came to play a role in their learning. They had to become teachers, leaders, strategist, lobbyists, comforters, researchers, and all as they sought lasting solutions as part of the teams at the university and in their local school communities. They were social actors who had a mission to change the relationships that produced poor performance at their schools. They were able to identify, name and address what they found to be problematic in the structures and cultures within which they find themselves. They were continuously able to stand outside themselves to critique, reimagine and readjust them from an informed position. One examiner had the following to say about another PhD student's work:

[ext] Throughout the extensive literature review, the candidate demonstrates an appropriate awareness of sensitivity towards issues central to content, social and cultural conditions relating to the complex matter of learning mathematics. [ends]

Knower Versus Knowledge

Another analytical duality between the knower and knowledge became apparent, namely that the students were able to stand outside of themselves and reflect intensively on how they created knowledge, thereby being able to self-regulate their own understanding through constructive self-critique as noted by the external examiner above. The students were thus able to take the position of the other in looking at themselves and their work. They managed successfully to change how they regard themselves and how others look at them. The knower remained distinct from knowledge. The former remained continuous. The process of an emerging identity was repeated continuously in different analytical dualities of body and mind, structure and agency, and ultimately of knower and knowledge. The ever-continuing morphogenetic cycle made possible by the independent reality whose properties do not depend on our knowledge grounded new ways of learning and of being. For example, the human body does not depend on the human mind, and vice versa, for its being. Reflection and reflexivity continue to fuel the process of transformation from the state of not knowing to those of knowing, but also knowing that there are others forms of knowledge not known by the candidate as researcher as well. We witnessed great transcendence by the postgraduate students beyond levels of performance they never imagined themselves to be capable of achieving.

Conclusion

In the above discussion, we assume that Margaret Archer's realist social theory is an operational version of Roy Bhaskar's critical realism. With this assumption, we highlight a few of the many ideas of realist social theory that enabled us to talk meaningfully about the learning of postgraduate students supervised at a university in South Africa. Very central to the whole argument are the concepts of agency versus structure and agency versus culture, which are separate and different from one another, but emerge from interacting with one another. We have shown how the persons of the students who, under normal circumstances, would have been marginalized, became powerful agents and social actors with a purpose to rebuild the education system. Some of these students were ultimately capable of the highest levels of conceptual

sophistication demanded at postgraduate level as described in South Africa's policy documents, SAQA and the NQF.

Archer's theory is not without limitations in developing the understanding we were looking for, but under the circumstances it was the most useful compared to others such as Anthony Giddens's structuration, Jacques Lacan's post-structuralism, and others. Even the performance of our postgraduate students was not perfect. The fact that twenty out of fifty have graduated implies that a lot of work still has to be done to enable even more students to achieve academically beyond the levels they imagined possible. At least a start has been made towards enabling the mature students who are parents and leaders in their other spheres of life, but were rendered powerless when it came to their academic aspirations. In short, Archer has provided us with a transcendental theorization that enables us to imagine a future of postgraduate learning much improved than is the case currently. Seemingly, we cannot blame the situation or the context or history anymore, because we are capable of interpretation and acting according to our own understanding of the situation. We can still create history even if this is not under conditions of our own choosing.

Acknowledgements

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