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JO-ANNE VORSTER AND LYNN QUINN

8. RE-FRAMING ACADEMIC STAFF DEVELOPMENT

INTRODUCTION: PEDAGOGIC FRAILITY IN A SHIFTING HIGHER EDUCATION CONTEXT

Globally higher education is situated in a supercomplex world (Barnett, 2000) that is constantly in a state of flux and subject to multiple pressures. This situation has been exacerbated in South African higher education that has been characterised by student protests in the last two years (2015–2016). One of the major causes for the recent protests, particularly in our institutional context, has been students' anger that despite the official demise of apartheid and the end of colonial rule, some universities in South Africa are still attempting to be copies of Oxford and Harvard. We are now in a context where

... educators are called upon to play a central role in constructing the conditions for a different kind of encounter, an encounter that both opposes ongoing colonization and that seeks to heal the social, cultural, and spiritual ravages of colonial history. (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2012: 42)

This call on academics has caused seismic shifts in the academic landscape and has, we would argue, resulted in some academics experiencing an acute sense of pedagogic frailty. Understanding what decolonisation means is difficult and the multiple meanings and motives for advancing it are varied, contested, and at times, contradictory (De Oliveira Andreotti et al., 2014: 22). There is thus a great deal of uncertainty about what it means to 'decolonise' institutions and curricula (including pedagogy). Academics are feeling that many of their long-held and hard-earned disciplinary foundations and pedagogic strategies are being questioned or may no longer be appropriate or adequate to meet the needs of the evolving higher education context.

As academic staff developers our role is to work with academics to assist them to navigate this 'decolonial turn' which for most is uncharted terrain; to assist them to better understand the unknown territory and to challenge them to face the dragons they may encounter (Chapter 1).

The institution in which we work is a historically white and advantaged research-intensive university. As academic developers we work with academic staff in formal programmes and informally to prepare them for their teaching role. For close to two decades we have both been centrally involved in designing and offering a postgraduate diploma in higher education (PGDip (HE)) for academics both in our

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institution and from across South Africa. Throughout this time we have researched our own practices so that we could explain to our participants why our curricula and our pedagogy were structured in specific ways, but also to find ways to improve our practice (Vorster & Quinn, 2012; Vorster & Quinn, 2012a). Now, with the changes in the South African higher education landscape we, along with the academics with whom we work, are ourselves experiencing a sense of pedagogic frailty.

We used Kinchin's four dimensions of frailty as a heuristic to help us to better understand how we can work with academics to mitigate the frailty they are experiencing in the face of the calls to decolonise their curricula and pedagogy. It is important for us to note, however, that even though the framework is a very useful one for examining contexts which result in academics experiencing challenges in executing their pedagogic roles, the notion of "frailty" is a potentially problematic concept to use in a context such as South Africa. This is because the term frailty carries connotations of weakness. The historical inequalities that have existed in the country for the last two to three centuries have had pernicious implications for access to education and opportunities for the majority of the black population and has resulted in continued racially skewed patterns of success and failure in favour of whites. As such, labelling the challenges that academics experience in the current higher education context as a condition of frailty is potentially problematic. A focus on developing resilience and robust solutions to the multiple challenges faced by academics and institutions at the current juncture is more appropriate. Examining how our practices as academic staff development practitioners have shifted as a result of the significant national and institutional changes using Kinchin's heuristic has been a beneficial exercise for us.

We followed a similar methodology as that suggested by Kinchin. We undertook an auto-ethnographic concept mapping exercise as a stimulus for dialogue about our practices. Reflecting on our practice through this mapping exercise has brought to light the ways in which our ideas and practices have shifted since the student protests, to consider the implications of working in a context where there is a need to interrogate what decolonising curricula and pedagogy means. In mapping the terrain we have also remained open to unknown features of the terrain that may emerge. As such we have identified new links between our ideas and are able to better understand existing links between the ideas that shape our practice. "*The maps provide a vehicle for dialogue and/or personal reflection that can be used to frame an autoethnographic approach to academic development*" (Kinchin, this volume: 3). Engaging in this exercise has contributed towards us, as academic developers, feeling less frail and more able to support the academics with whom we work.

ACADEMIC STAFF DEVELOPMENT

Regulative and Instructional Discourse

In this section we examine why and how the recent calls for the decolonisation of higher education institutions, curricula and pedagogies have resulted in our own

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sense of pedagogic frailty as academic developers. In part this is because these calls are influencing the relative certainties that have underpinned institutional and academic development practices.

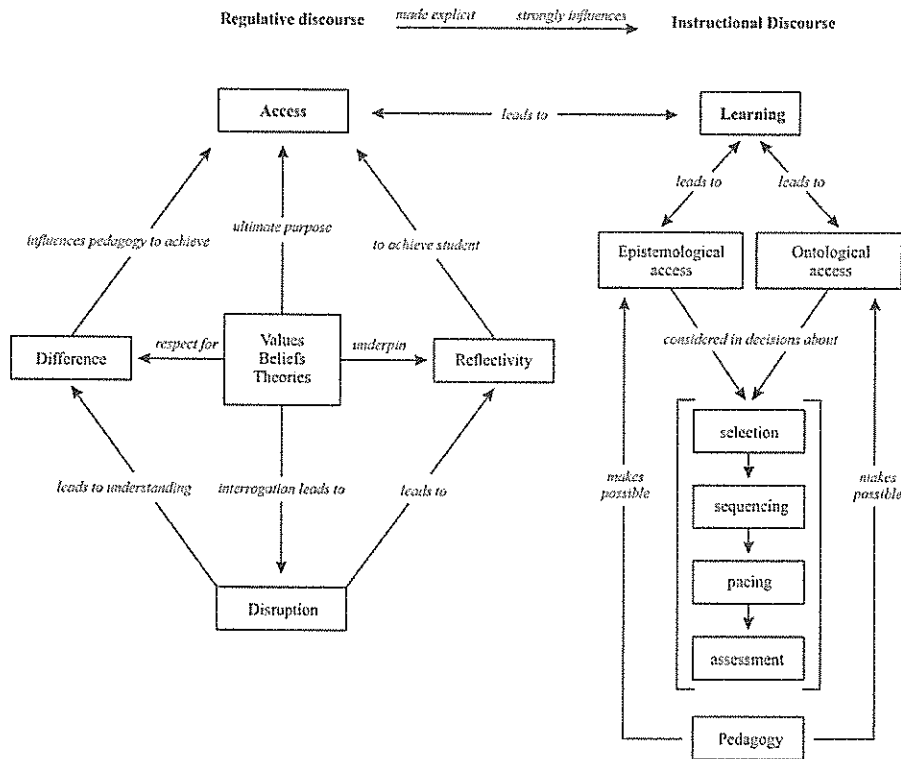


Figure 1. Regulative and Instructional discourse

As a way of excavating and explaining the conditions leading to our own pedagogic frailty and that of the academics we work with in our formal course on teaching, we discuss the regulative discourse (RD) that informs our work and examine how we have had to expand the meanings of the ideas that make up our RD. Our instructional discourse (ID) is strongly influenced by our very explicit RD.

Our RD comprises four major principles that strongly frame the way we construct the course and how we as course facilitators relate to course participants. The four principles are: access, critically reflective practice, difference and disruption (see Figure 1). Below we elaborate on why we subscribe to these axiological principles as well as how and why we have begun to expand what we understand by each

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of the principles as well as how our expanded understanding is influencing our instructional discourse.

(i) *Access*

For us teaching is about enabling *epistemological access* for the majority of students (Morrow, 1994). Enabling students to access knowledge and knowledge practices is important in the South African context where participation as well as success and throughput rates remain low and racially skewed in favour of white students. In order to ensure that more historically disadvantaged black students achieve academic success, it is important that university teachers understand how to facilitate pedagogy for epistemological access. Our formal course is thus an important vehicle for academics to develop the capacity to design curricula and pedagogic and assessment processes to enable more students to achieve academic success.

Although we have always been aware that cognition is influenced by a range of ontological factors, as well as by students' abilities to engage with the world at a practical level, we have come to recognise that we have not paid adequate attention to how black students experience learning at a historically white university. It is therefore imperative that the conditions are created for students to also gain *ontological access* to the university and to disciplinary knowledge. Black students have reported experiencing intense alienation in the university environment, including from the language of teaching and learning.

One of the outcomes of student estrangement is the struggle to 'connect' to disciplinary knowledge and to the ways in which many academics engage with them as learners. In an institution where the majority of students is now black and the majority of academics is white, this situation is likely to lead to what Grosfoguel (2007: 214) calls "a hierarchy of superior and inferior knowledge and, thus, of superior and inferior people", thus affecting at a deep level students' sense of themselves as people and inevitably also as learners. Gaining epistemological access to the goods of the university requires that attention is paid in the teaching and learning context to how ontology influences learning. We would therefore argue that an essential step towards epistemological access is ontological access.

Some ways of enabling ontological access include constructing pedagogic spaces where students' experiences of the academic context are recognised. Furthermore this entails paying more explicit attention to building students' understanding of the kinds of practices that are necessary to become successful learners in the university context. Barnett and Coate (2005) and others have argued that student ontologies necessitate more explicit attention as a result of the changing social, economic and professional contexts. Through the mind mapping process we have come to recognise that the ways in which we conceptualise the relationship between student ontology and their engagement with knowledge is complex and needs to be explicitly focused on in the teaching of our formal course.

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(ii) *Reflectivity*

The second component of our RD is the notion of *reflectivity*. Stierer's (2008) conceptualisation of reflective practice as requiring criticality, reflectivity and praxis has been a useful tool in enabling us to make explicit important aspects of the kind of learning and in particular the kind of writing that is required on the course. It also forms the basis for developing cumulative knowledge about teaching and learning. Cumulative knowledge is built on prior knowledge, develops systematically over time in terms of depth and breadth and can be applied in novel contexts (Maton, 2013). We believe that it is necessary for academics to engage in powerful *theoretical knowledge* about teaching and learning and not only to learn a set of strategies or tips for teaching. If they understand the principles that shape how they structure students' engagement with their discipline, they will be able to devise ways to apply the principles in various contexts taking into account the needs of students and of the discipline. This capacity is a necessary condition to counteract pedagogic frailty.

We ensure that academics consider the influence of the shifting higher education context on teaching and learning and in particular the extent to which the student protests have influenced how we understand the various contextual, epistemic, socio-cultural and personal influences on student engagement in and alienation from learning. It is important for course participants to critically reflect on the extent to which their pedagogic practices build ethical relationships (Belluigi, 2012) or engagement with students and offer students "solidarity, hospitality (and) safety" and the extent to which they are able to redistribute power so that students feel more engaged in their studies (Mann, 2001: 18).

In a traditional, research-intensive university such as ours many *academics' identities* are strongly tied up with their disciplines (Henkel, 2002) and/or their professions (Jawitz, 2009). Teaching for them is thus about inducting their students into the traditional disciplinary canon and/or into a specific profession. However, given the decolonial turn, critical questions need to be posed to academics about the degree to which curricula reflect the life-worlds of students and the communities they come from, so that more meaningful ways can be devised to facilitate student engagement with a broader range of disciplinary knowledges. In making this argument we are not advocating that disciplinary canons be disregarded, but rather than they should be expanded to take account of powerful knowledges that have emerged from the global South (Mbembe, 2015).

A major focus of our course has been the role of language and literacies in teaching and learning. South Africa has eleven official languages, but African languages (the home languages of the majority of students) have not been harnessed to promote student learning of disciplinary concepts and theories. We now need to model and argue strongly for the need to create spaces in the classroom for students to use their home languages to build their understanding of concepts and theories in informal exploratory talk (Barnes, 1975) while scaffolding their use of English

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in formal presentational talk (ibid) and in writing. We continue to model and offer theoretically sound arguments for pedagogic and assessment practices that make it possible for students to develop the requisite language and academic literacies to study and articulate their learning in the various disciplines.

(iii) Disruption

The third idea in our RD is that of *disruption*. In our engagements with academics we aim to disrupt common-sense notions of teaching and learning. We approach teaching as a scholarly activity underpinned by powerful theoretical ideas about how students learn and what that means for curriculum, pedagogy and assessment (Quinn, 2012). In our course we promote a view of learning as a social process and aim to develop academics' understanding of how students' prior experiences in other social contexts (including school and home) impact on their conceptualisations of what it means to be a student (Boughey & McKenna, 2015). We therefore argue that teaching and learning are processes through which students are socialised into new understandings of the world and new academic practices.

The student protests have sensitised us to the need to expand disciplinary canons. As such we believe it is important to disrupt academics' notions of what constitutes or could constitute disciplinary canons or archives. The process of having to rethink the disciplinary canon and what that means for the selection of course content has the potential to contribute to pedagogic frailty. However, the recognition that doing so is likely to have profound effects on students' conceptions of themselves as learners and concomitantly on the quality of their engagement with the discipline, may contribute to minimising such frailty.

(iv) Difference

The final idea in our RD that we have now expanded is the notion of *difference*. This notion has several dimensions. On the one hand we appreciate disciplinary differences, including different disciplinary knowledge and knower structures (Maton, 2013; Vorster & Quinn, 2012). We continue to respect academics as disciplinary experts; however, we have recognised that it is necessary to ask searching questions about what knowledge is included in the curriculum, where the knowledge comes from, whether it is possible to expand the canon to include knowledge from the global South, whether the examples that are used to explore disciplinary theories and concepts are drawn from local as well as international contexts, and so on. As part of modelling good practice, we also interrogate where we draw the theories from that we use in our course. In addition, we have begun to think about differences between students in terms that extend beyond the safe notions of diversity and that recognises the effects of the intersections between race, class and gender on student identities.

In this section we explored expanded ideas and concepts that make up the RD of the postgraduate diploma in higher education. We have over the years realised the

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need to make explicit the values that we as course designers and facilitators share and why we embrace the particular RD that we do. We continue to believe that it is important to be explicit about the regulative discourse that informs our instructional discourse. Through modelling and discussion we encourage academics to be explicit about the regulative discourse that underpins their curricula and pedagogic practices.

PEDAGOGY AND DISCIPLINE

In this section we examine how calls for decolonisation might be contributing to academics experiencing "... a disconnection between the practices of the discipline with the pedagogy that underpins the teaching in the discipline ...” (Kinchin, this volume: 6). In our deliberations we came to the conclusion that this *disconnection* has resulted in many academics feeling that their *disciplinary and/or professional identities* are under threat by the calls for them to pay far more attention to how they teach their disciplinary knowledge (see Figure 2).

As alluded to earlier, research has shown that many academics identify more strongly with their disciplines or professions (Becher & Trowler, 2001; Henkel, 2002) than with being ‘teachers’. According to Henkel (2002: 138), disciplinary

[c]ommunities provide the history, the myths, the very language, concepts and values through which identities are shaped and reinforced (MacIntyre, 1981). At the same time, they provide the ‘normative space’ (Bleiklie, 1998) within which individuals make choices, enter into ongoing dialogue with community members and construct their identities.

What has now emerged as part of the decolonial turn, are new voices, not necessarily from within the disciplines, which are demanding that academics interrogate not only the *knowledge* they introduce to students but also the theories and beliefs which inform their *teaching practices*. Academics are being required to not only think about current *contextual realities*, but also to consider the effects of the historical legacies of apartheid and colonialism on teaching. They are being asked to think much more about exactly what they are teaching, who they are teaching and about whether how they are teaching is appropriate for the students in front of them.

For academics whose identities are strongly enmeshed in the traditions of their disciplines, being challenged to take on an additional ‘teacherly’ identity is very difficult and contributes to feelings of uncertainty. Particularly in a research-intensive university, teaching practices in some disciplines have not shifted much beyond traditional teaching methods where student groups are treated as largely homogenous (Scott, Yeld, & Hendry, 2007).

Academics are being challenged to develop teaching practices and ways of interacting with students that take account not only of the diversity of groups but also the lived realities of students they teach. They need to see their students as more than consumers of knowledge and to understand that the differences between students are not harmless or unimportant; positionality and subjectivity¹ need to be

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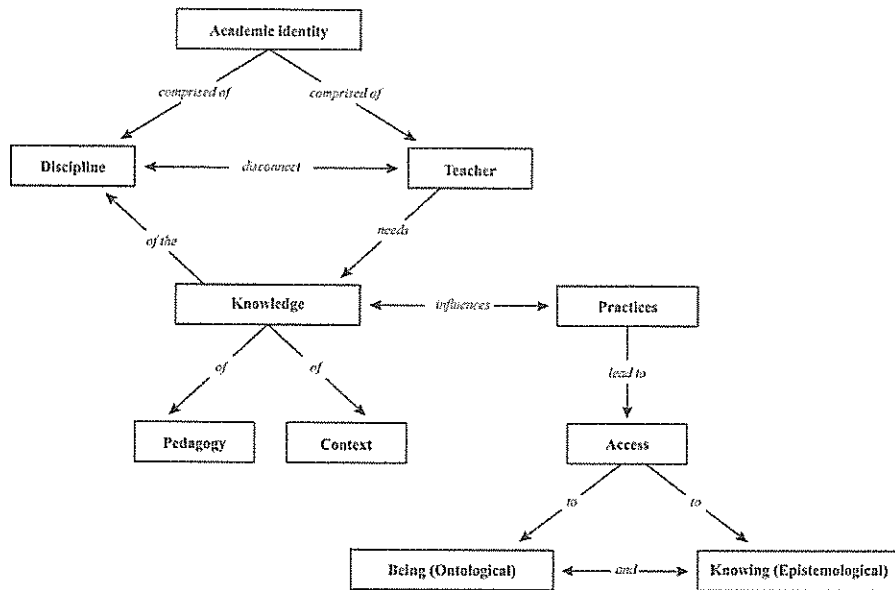


Figure 2. Pedagogy and discipline

considered when pedagogic decisions are being made (Bilge, 2013). By keeping these considerations in mind, academics can also challenge the perpetuation of inequalities in society.

In our teaching we need to find ways of encouraging academics to explore how they can integrate disciplinary and teacherly identities in ways which enable them to recognise that teaching and learning is not only an *epistemological* project, but also an *ontological* one. In their work on the ‘ontological turn’ in higher education Dall’Alba and Barnacle (2007) and Barnett (2009) argue that epistemology shapes ontology. Knowledge is learned in order for a student to be(come) a particular kind of person in the world. As suggested above, in our courses we insert these sorts of ideas so that academics can make explicit to themselves the RD that underpins their teaching; we then introduce them to a range of teaching and learning theories and practices that can be used to inform their ID. We thus offer them theoretical and practical ‘tools’ for building their teacherly identities and to become more resilient in the face of the multiple demands that threaten to overwhelm them.

RESEARCH-TEACHING NEXUS

Being an academic in higher education has become progressively more complex and demanding particularly in relation to the tension between the roles of teacher and

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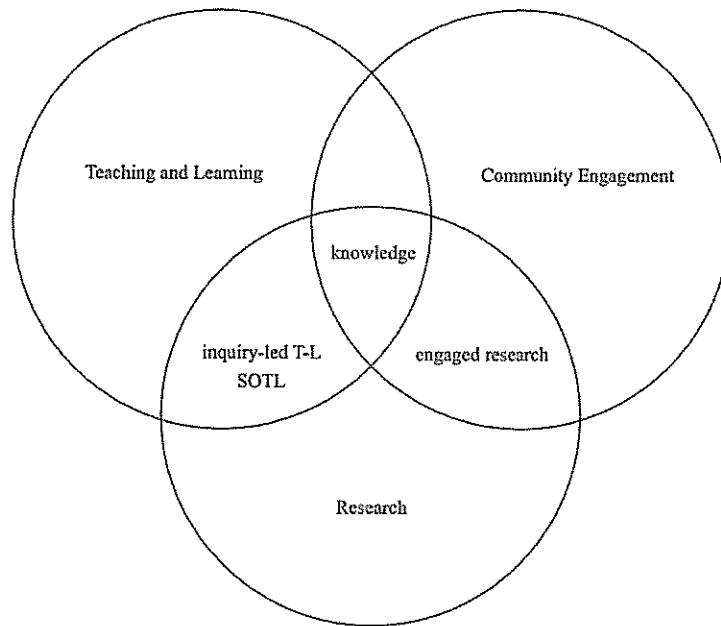


Figure 3. Research-teaching nexus

researcher (see Figure 3). In addition, over the last few years *community engagement* has become a central feature of academic practice. If academics are not able to find a successful way of negotiating their various complex roles and continue to experience these demands as competing, pedagogic frailty is likely to ensue.

In our work with academics we conceptualise the teaching-research nexus as a generative space in which engaging with communities through the pedagogic strategy of service-learning can contribute to both students' engagement with knowledge as well as to the production of new knowledge through what can be understood as *engaged research*.

Service-learning is traditionally seen as situated in the intersection between teaching and community engagement. As a pedagogic strategy it creates opportunities for students and communities to engage in mutually beneficial ways. The nature of the service that students are able to offer and that is needed by the community is negotiated between the respective parties. Students offer their academic knowledge to provide a community service, while at the same time learning from the community. In the process both groups learn and share knowledge and it is possible that new knowledge is produced in the process. Through engaging in service-learning, students experience the community outside the academy as a source of legitimate knowledge and they get to understand the power of disciplinary knowledge to address social issues or contribute to real-world problem solving (Bringle & Hatcher, 2009).

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Service-learning is a form of *inquiry-based or inquiry-led learning* and as such can contribute to knowledge production, as part of the scholarship of discovery through generating or discovering new knowledge; as part of the scholarship of application when students apply their knowledge in novel contexts, or through the scholarship of integration where student knowledge from across disciplines and contexts is integrated into new understandings. Furthermore, service-learning is potentially the object of the scholarship of teaching and learning as lecturers undertake research on various ways in which they apply this pedagogic strategy in different disciplinary and community contexts (see Boyer, 1990). Academics can therefore harness the complexity of their academic roles to produce research and publications in their discipline and on their pedagogic practice. Community engagement and engaged research are now included in the criteria for promotion and our university *recognises and rewards* excellence in these areas in the same way as it does excellence in research and teaching.

If academics are able to resolve tensions inherent in the multiple roles of teacher, researcher and contributor to communities outside of the academy through service learning, pedagogic frailty that could potentially result from an over-complex role could be overcome.

LOCUS OF CONTROL

The final dimension of pedagogic frailty which we used in our reflections was locus of control which is ‘... the connection between the practicing academic and the decision-making bodies that regulate teaching ...’ (Kinchin, this volume: 6) (see Figure 4).

For decades now academics have felt that the autonomy and academic freedom that used to characterise academia is under threat (McKenna, 2012; Shore & Wright, 1999). In the teaching domain, there are now a number of policies and decision-making bodies (both from national governments and professional bodies) that regulate what should be taught and how it should be taught. Academics feel the locus of control in relation to curriculum and pedagogy is shifting from them as disciplinary experts.

In contemporary South Africa, some academics experience the decolonial turn as external pressure being exerted on them and as an imposition on their *academic freedom and autonomy*. For those who view the purpose of higher education as essentially being a private good for the transformation of individuals, broader forms of *responsiveness* are not regarded as core to their business. The pressure is to move beyond only disciplinary concerns to teaching in ways that are responsive (Moll, 2004) to the economy, the socio-cultural and political *contexts*, and most importantly to the legitimate learning needs of students (Scott et al., 2007). Furthermore, students are no longer content for institutions and lecturers to control the pedagogic device (Bernstein, 2000); they are demanding curricular content that reflects a commitment to *decolonising* the academy.

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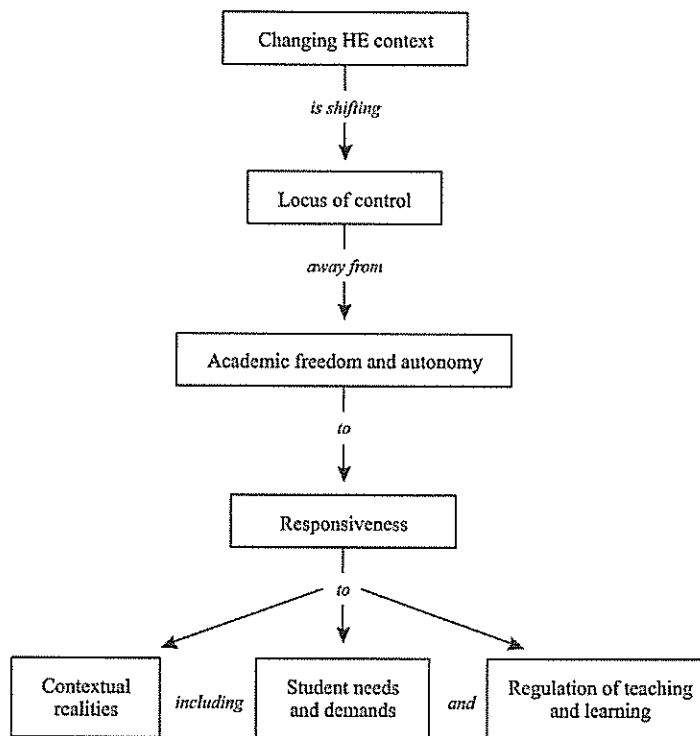


Figure 4. Locus of control

In order to understand what the decolonial turn means for academic practice, in our formal staff development courses we explore with lecturers the impact of contextual factors at all levels (global, national, institutional, disciplinary) on their teaching and their students' learning. We argue strongly for, and model, teaching methodologies that move away from traditional lecturing to methodologies underpinned by socio-cultural and critical theories of learning. We continue to believe in the imperative for teaching and learning processes that enable students to gain epistemological access (Morrow, 1994), that is, access to powerful disciplinary knowledge (Wheelahan, 2010). It is also important for academics to interrogate the extent to which their disciplines include theories, perspectives and applications of knowledge that emanate from the global South and where possible to contribute to the expansion of their disciplinary canons (Nyoka, 2013).

CONCLUSION

In this chapter we considered how the challenges to South African higher education institutions, curricula and pedagogy that have emanated from the student

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protests, (2015–2016) have contributed to academics' and academic developers' experiences of pedagogic frailty. The call for decolonisation has resulted in disrupting higher education in unprecedented ways.

Using the four dimensions that contribute to pedagogic frailty we speculated on how academic staff developers in South Africa and possibly elsewhere, can reframe their practices to take into account: Firstly, the need for academics to explicitly articulate a set of strong ideas and shared values to inform their pedagogic practices. Secondly, the need for academics to strengthen their identities as teachers of their disciplines so that they are able to respond to the ontological and epistemological needs of all students, especially those who have, in the past, been alienated and thus excluded from the goods of the university. Thirdly, the need for academics to reconceptualise the research-teaching nexus to include service learning as a pedagogic strategy. This will enable them to recognise and exercise the moral obligation to rethink the roles of disciplinary knowledge, curricula and pedagogy. Fourthly, the need for academics to look beyond the ivory tower of the university and of their disciplines in order to respond to contextual realities in the world so that the real learning needs of all the students in front of them are addressed and all students receive the education they deserve in a country that it is in the process of casting off the shackles of its colonial and apartheid past

NOTE

- ¹ Positionality refers to how people are defined (race, gender, class, sexuality, etc.) and subjectivity refers to how social, cultural, economic and political factors shape students' lived experiences.

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