SECTION FOUR
The Academic

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Critical professionalism: a lecturer attribute for troubled times

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Introduction

This chapter describes the research-based project, Critical Professionalism, which gave rise to several of the chapters in this volume. We suggest that the concept of critical professionalism, with its strong value-orientation, makes a foundational contribution to approaches to professional development for teaching for the public good in South Africa and other parts of the world. We use data generated from this project to tease out some of the characteristics of critical professionals, as well as some of the key ingredients necessary to support the emergence of academics as critical professionals. We begin by setting the scene for the study and explaining why, in the present era, academics' sense of agency, criticality and professionalism might be threatened – to a fair degree by the rise of the audit culture and a strong managerial and prescriptive approach to steering the direction of higher education.

The changing international context

Various changes to the conditions of academic life in the past two decades have threatened academics' sense of autonomy and agency, a point made eloquently by Singh in chapter one of this volume. Currie and Vidovich (2009) identify this as a global trend. It has become almost commonplace to refer to the rise of control over academics' working lives. The literature on the rise of managerialism and performativity (Baty, 2012; d'Andrea and Gosling, 2005; Jones, 2007; McLean, 2006; Sparks, 2007) has shown that the increasing in

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control aims to make academics more accountable and responsive to set objectives. These objectives include making institutions more competitive, more effective in terms of student retention and pass rates, more responsive to the workplace, more responsive to students as clients and, on occasion, to the challenges of social inequality, climate change and discord.

Bansel *et al* (2008:682) make the important point that technologies of the university audit, which tend to emphasise quantity over quality, 'narrow the possibilities for intellectual work, especially the work of critique, and produce the subjects of academicity as increasingly anxious and compliant'. It is ironic that while creativity and agency are required to help academics rise to the challenges of our times, these attributes are constrained by the very management processes universities use to corral academics into responding to some of the self-same challenges. Furthermore, it is ironic that we encourage the need for debate and discussion of appropriate graduate attributes and graduate capabilities, as discussed in chapters six and seven of this volume, but we do not stress in like fashion the need for lecturers to acquire and display similar attributes.

The local setting

Global trends have impacted on the working lives of academics in higher education in South Africa, but the local situation adds its own complexities and challenges. The rise of performativity and managerialism (le Grange, 2009), the emphasis on widening participation and the lack of transformation and social inclusiveness in South African higher education (Ministerial Committee on Transformation and Social Cohesion, 2008) are discussed in the introduction to this volume.

The university this study was conducted in – Stellenbosch University (SU) – displays many of the particularities informed by South Africa's apartheid past. Gibbon (2010:84) maintains that the University, though one of the strongest academically in the country, remains within a 'bubble of privilege'. Contrary to its comparative isolation and exclusivity, SU's intention to contribute to the development of both South Africa and Africa is strongly signalled in policy and is given much support by its academics. The University's principal has indicated the institution's aspiration to make a significant contribution towards social development in the region by embracing the ideal constructed by Freire: a 'pedagogy of hope' (Botman, 2007).

While the institution displays many specific and localised characteristics, its academics also experience obligations and challenges similar to those of

academics elsewhere in South Africa and in the developed world. One notable feature is the rise of the audit culture: we measure student responses to our teaching via a likert scale and impression score; we benchmark faculties' efficiency via their student success rates; and we measure academics' research prowess by the number of their publications on various national and international publication lists. Less openly discussed is the way academics are valued according to how much funding they bring to the University, from student fees to the more profitable consultancies with the public and private sectors.

Thus academics who embark on a journey towards critical professionalism face both constraints and opportunities, a condition of duality which McLean (2006) identifies as facing academics in the UK. This contrasting set of relationships – of reduction of autonomy on the one hand and the potential for contributing to society via teaching and research on the other – forms the backdrop of our study.

The critical professional

Walker offers the term 'critical professional' to suggest the combination of criticality, reflexivity and questioning the purpose and values underpinning teaching in higher education for the public good on the one hand, and professionalism – with an emphasis on public service and the commitment to learning – on the other. She offers the classroom as a 'landscape of possibility' (Walker, 2001:214); a location in which one can exercise agency and contribute towards various aspects of the public good. The Critical Professionalism research project she ran with a group of lecturers at Glasgow University, based on action research, dialogue and reflection, demonstrates an alternative approach towards the development of academics who wish to teach for the public good.

If academics purport to be preparing students to be critical, creative, original participants in an increasingly connected world, we need to engage with each other in a similarly critical and creative manner. Nixon's (2001) and Nixon *et al*'s (2001) description of a 'new professional' is a useful starting point for what a critical academic professional might be. Vital attributes presented by Nixon (2001) are: responsibility towards students, colleagues and the wider community; being open to difference; and concern with how power and domination work. Nixon sees the academic as having a shared concern with students: learning. Palmer (2007) uses the term 'new professional' to suggest someone who is able to resist the constraining power of institutions.

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We use the term *critical* professional to emphasise the critical, reflexive and scholarly element within this professionalism. Nixon *et al* (2001:234) assert that academics as educators should consider not just *why* they think or do what they do, but also *how* they go about thinking about this. Reflection and enquiry are necessary attributes for academics, since with reflexivity we can free 'ourselves to consider fairer alternatives' (McLean, 2006:14) and become social agents who can resist structural constraints. Rowland (2000) argues that when we teach we express our values and should thus reflect on these values. We should learn to reflect on knowledge and practices but also on values, emotions and beliefs. A disciplined process of reflection can enable the new professional to distinguish between 'emotions that illuminate our environment and those that simply reveal our own shadows' (Palmer, 2007:11).

Becoming critical professionals

The various attributes of the critical professional are also linked with the process of *becoming* a critical professional. This process involves taking responsibility (Nixon, 2001), having a strong values base and working with others. As a valuable form of professional self development, Rowland (2000) includes enquiring about the learner. To perform as a critical professional the enquiry must be action based, critical and participatory, and must seek to transform both theory and practice, rather than focus on enquiry purely for its own sake (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2005). This process is fostered by social engagement within a community of enquiry, 'a group of people who work together with a shared purpose which entails some collaborative attempt to explore issues or answer questions and hence potentially create new knowledge or understanding in a given domain' (Christie *et al,* 2007:264). According to Cox (2004), in faculty learning communities (FLCs), where staff come together voluntarily to engage in research and development, openness, trust and empathy develop amongst colleagues. Anne Austin interviewed academics who described having a passion for social responsibility and found that they enjoyed being part of a community with others who shared this passion (London, 2003). Walker (2001) maintains, moreover, that collaborative partnerships can have an advocacy role, where academics become 'activist professionals'.

Davidson (2004:307) maintains that in order to become critical professionals, academics as educators should engage in critical interdisciplinary dialogue. Interdisciplinary engagement forces individuals to externalise their own assumptions and consider them critically from a fresh perspective (Winberg, 2008; Trowler and Cooper, 2002). It allows an approach towards problem-solving to become more multifaceted and, by linking the local with the

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abstract, provides a means to grasp the complexity of human experience (Pohl and Hadorn, 2007). Interdisciplinary forms of engagement should be based on an acceptance of and respect for disciplinary differences (d'Andrea and Gosling, 2005; Davidson, 2004). This is different from generic approaches towards the professional development of academics, which are disengaged from the disciplines. The latter mitigate against criticality and assume that 'academics are consumers of specialist pedagogical research' (Davidson, 2004: 307). This removes responsibility for self-development from academics.

The Critical Professionalism research project

In this section we present the research project, which combines an inter-disciplinary professional development approach with collaborative research. The project was originally set up to encourage academics to engage in exploratory studies of their own in their teaching and learning contexts, and to engage in self-reflective practice with colleagues from other disciplines. The process was supported by two professional development practitioners from the University's Centre for Teaching and Learning. The project was intended to be influenced by the views and needs of the participating academics, and its mode of operation was exploratory and loosely structured.

A brief description of the activities conducted under the Critical Professionalism project should suffice. Academics who were known to the leader of the project (and first author of this chapter) from previous research or via her work in teaching and learning at the University, were invited to join. A group of twelve academics from across the University began meeting within the Critical Professionalism group early in 2007. The group was diverse in terms of age, gender, race and language, as well as academic seniority. It comprised academics from both the Centre for Teaching and Learning and the following faculties: the arts, education, natural sciences, health sciences, engineering and agricultural sciences. The group met roughly four to six times a year, for conversations, presentations from guests or to design and implement common research activities.

The group's cohesion came from a fourfold set of aims, as articulated by the participants themselves at various stages during the project. The first was to become more effective educators. The second was for individuals to become more empowered. A third aim was to understand issues of biography and diversity as the latter played itself out at SU. The fourth aim was for team members to engage in interdisciplinary and reflective conversations.

The manner in which participants interpreted and reinterpreted the purpose of the project in light of their own needs and interests is not atypical of teaching and learning situations in general. For example, in small group discussions participants changed the direction of the discussion or reinterpreted the questions in light of their own preoccupations. This could be seen as a weakness of this project, owing to its lack of structure and direction – or as a strength, since it gave participants a sense of ownership and investment:

> I've experienced the more intense community involving critical professionalism compared to some of my immediate colleagues. (Rashied[1], Education)

While Michael described the process enthusiastically as like being in a 'coffee club' and 'muddling along', Arnold, an educational developer who remained on the margins of the project, found the team process to be too meandering:

> When you are setting out on the one hand to gel the team as soon as possible, you want them to do something, have results and share and talk about it, and on the other hand to get them to, almost through a piece of theoretical work, to the point where they understand what and why they want to do it, as soon as possible to try and facilitate that gelling process, I wonder if it's possible to do it more quickly than eighteen months. (Arnold, Centre for Teaching and Learning)

The first exploratory activity required team members to respond to a set of three questions posted in a module on a learning management system utilised for the project. These questions were:

- In light of our concern with social justice, what kinds of graduates should Stellenbosch University produce, and what would the challenges be to producing such graduates?
- What are you doing towards producing these kinds of graduates, and what challenges are you experiencing?
- What, in terms of your own biography, brought you to the understanding you sketched in question one? And what challenges have you faced?

In response to question one, team participants said they hoped to produce graduates who were competent and able to contribute to the public good in one way or another:

> I want a graduate to walk out into the world being able to say: 'I am a healer' ... and embrace and practice that, without discrimination of any kind. (Tanya, Health Sciences)

In response to the second question, colleagues gave examples of the attempts they were making to meet their students and support their learning, but noted a common constraint: their lack of a sense of commonality with a rapidly diversifying and increasingly young student cohort:

> As you become more distant from being a student yourself, you perhaps don't realise what the reality is for people ... you feel that you have some idea of the complexity of a deeper society ... but then you see individual examples which make you realise that ... you have no idea. (Michael, Natural Sciences)

Answers to question three demonstrated that some team members see themselves as part of the dominant group, experiencing the strengths and limitations of this association: 'the self assurance and sense of entitlement to an equal education that was built during my school years carried over and grew during my university education' (Jacky, Engineering). Others in the team identified the strength engendered from being from a marginalised group: 'I am passionate about my work because I achieved my degrees against many odds' (Sharon, Health Sciences).

To give the group a clearer focus, and to ensure that each team member participated in at least one concrete research activity, a common open-ended questionnaire was administered by each participant to a group of students they were teaching. It contained the following questions:

- How did you reach this point in your education?
- How are you experiencing this course/module/programme now?
- Where are you heading to?
- Anything else about the educational journey you are undertaking which you would like to bring to my attention?

Answers to the 550 questionnaires collected were analysed by the group as a whole. Although reported on at the University's annual scholarship of teaching and learning conference, it did not lead to a full report and publication. This was partly because its open-ended nature made reporting difficult, and partly because there was a lack of adequate biographical information on each respondent. Progress was also hampered by practical constraints such as inexperience and lack of time.

This reflected the team and its leader's lack of research sophistication. However the process spurred several academics to conduct further exploratory processes with their students: Tanya developed a funded project to explore the learning experiences of her postgraduate students with a focus on aliena-

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tion and engagement; Rashied followed up the questionnaire by interviewing the students who expressed discomfort with his teaching aims and style; Michael arranged a series of large group interviews with the first-year students he was teaching, and involved other academics from his department; Danielle gave a seminar on her survey results to her department, following this up with interviews with each departmental staff member to ascertain their thoughts about teaching and about the students in this department. Other group members developed entirely original research projects. Susan gave her second-year graphic arts students an assignment in which they were asked to design a web page, using data they collected with international students, on the topic of xenophobia. André, from the Centre for Teaching and Learning, collaborated with Lauretta from Classical Studies to reorientate the first-year module according to a community of enquiry approach. This permitted more experienced professors to share their wisdom with the first-year students (Young and Kotze, 2009).

A visit to South Africa by Melanie Walker, one of the educators whose ideas helped form the research project, led her and her colleague Monica McLean to conduct a series of interviews with project participants. In the penultimate research activity designed to foster reflection and at the same time track the experience of the project's participants, each team member conducted audiotaped interviews with another.

All data generated in the project was coded and analysed according to simple categories such as motivation to join, benefit or the attributes of critical professionalism displayed. The data from this final set of interviews provided much insight into how the team participants saw themselves, what attributes of critical professionalism they displayed and what aspects of the project's process they particularly valued.

In addition to the research activities spawned by the project, seven conference publications were produced, three journal articles written and four of the chapters in this book, including this one, were produced. The final outcome was a colloquium held at the University entitled 'Hopeful Pedagogies', which was accompanied by a blog of the same name (blogs.sun.ac.za/hopefulpedagogiessu). The study taught those of us who participated in it several useful lessons, which are enumerated here.

Lessons learned
Support for critical professionalism in higher education

In this study seven dynamic aspects of encouraging critical professionalism came to the fore:

Interdisciplinarity

Group members spoke universally of the benefit of engaging colleagues from other academic disciplines. The diversity a university has to offer is too seldom exploited by its academic staff. The pressure to perform within academic environments and the nature of specialised research keeps people apart. We agree with Nixon (2001) that interdisciplinary engagement relies on respect for the epistemological and methodological differences of the various disciplines, which provided team members with new insights.

The refreshing exposure to other disciplines and discourses, in addition to insights which are variously influenced by team members' academic disciplines, helped hold the group together. Ridding students of their discipline-specific 'baggage' helped focus attention on their academic realities:

> Being involved in the project has made me constantly conscious of the difficulty and uncertainty that students face. I think I had a tendency to regard them as adults who should take responsibility and initiative in their learning, and that I am there to facilitate. I still hold this view, but I am more attuned to their struggles regarding social and academic integration. (Xoliswa, Arts and Humanities)

Reflection on (student-centred) teaching

Teaching was the aspect of their profession the group was formed to address. The group's interdisciplinarity and administering the student questionnaire in particular focused much of their reflection on the challenge of being student-centred teachers:

> It has made me much more critically reflective on my teaching practice and the influence that I have on my students. I would not have had this insight or knowledge if I had not participated in this project. In other words, it has brought a level of professionalism to my teaching. (Jacky, Engineering)

> Some of the students really appreciated the fact that you took an interest beyond just the mathematical feedback ... it made me think quite a lot about how I view and treat my students. (Michael, Natural Sciences)

It was clear that most participants grew to understand new facets of their role as educators. Being part of a community of practice exposed participants to

a broader reality and sustained their motivation to explore this reality more deeply:

> As you become more distant from being a student yourself, you perhaps don't realise what the reality is for people ... and even in a broader sense, you feel that you have some idea of the complexity of a deeper society ... but then you see individual examples which make you realise that ... you have no idea. (Lauretta, Arts and Humanities)

As the common interest was teaching, the focused group discussion and reflection beyond academic discipline led members to reflect on the view that teaching is principally about the relationship the teacher has with their students.

Ease

Inevitably, a process of learning and growth leads to unintended or un-expected insights and opportunities. For most this was the realisation that teaching-related research is surprisingly accessible. One interacts with data sources every day and has an intuition that can readily be tested and debated:

> It's logical stuff ... things that you know but you never saw this way ... It was just spoken about or one or two students had mentioned it to you, or you could see the issues, but now ... those issues that can be seen in the class, came out in the questionnaire. (Danielle, Agricultural Sciences, translated from the Afri-kaans)

At its most basic level, what the group provided was a simple opportunity to formulate and raise to a more overt level what all academics, at least sub-consciously, grapple with throughout their career:

> It just made me do what was on the backburner in the past in my academic life ... going over to (the group's) meetings, has given me that chance to speak about my teaching, in intellectual ways. (Rashied, Education)

That participants' intuition could be so effortlessly interrogated, enriched and given a foundation was instantly rewarding.

Impact on colleagues

All the group members were conscious of how the model of critical profes-sionalism could be shared with colleagues in their academic departments. The security and stimulation that arose from participating in the group pro-ject motivated the members to share their experiences with colleagues and, in some instances, invite them to join the group. Some members went to sub-

stantial lengths to include their departmental colleagues in activities which arose from the project. We see this desire to share as a vital part of such a critical professionalism.

Freedom to explore

Encouraged by their participation in the project, most members continued with pursuits that focused on research into teaching, via further studies, publishing, networking or even new career opportunities. For some members the process of building on what the project had begun and taking it to a deeper level was focused and well defined. Others experienced a persuasive sense of 'muddling along' – not in a random, ill-conceived way but as having the freedom to explore with no fixed goal in mind other than to be more critical professionals. Indeed, the critical professional necessarily remains engaged in such a process of exploration.

Academics taking responsibility for their own development

Mechanisms for discipline-specific research and development are embedded in the operation of a university. They form the very basis of what constitutes a university. These invariably revolve around collegial interactions – seminars, lectures, discussion. Ironically, however, professional development is most often the domain not of academics themselves but of external or peripheral units which often meet with scorn (or at least disinterest) from academic staff. As Nixon (2001:182) observes: 'If academic workers were to become serious about their own professionalism, they would ensure that the task of professional development was clearly located within the academic structures of higher education preferably at department or faculty level.'

The approach of the Critical Professionalism project plays into this dynamic of a university. The freedom to explore, with similarly minded colleagues and alone, is what draws academics to their profession. We should use this freedom to develop it.

Attributes of the critical professional

Our analysis of the writings of the Critical Professionalism team has foregrounded various attributes of the critical professional which, we believe, are in agreement with what has been said in the literature on critical or 'new' professionalism. We see the critical professional as one who enjoys *interdisciplinary* engagement, while retaining a strong interest in one's own discipline.

We see a critical professional as one who is *reflexive*, in various related ways: the critical professional questions his or her own role in relation to society

and to knowledge, and in relation to the educational biography. The critical professional is also reflective, in the sense of considering how he or she teaches and how this could be done better.

In line with the argument put forward by Nixon (2001), the critical professional is *accountable*: most importantly to the students but also to other academics in the institution and to the broader society with whom the students would engage as professionals. This accountability should not be reduced to mere counting as stressed in the audit culture, nor to policy compliance in relation to university administrations and national bureaucracies.

A trait of the critical professional described in much of the literature on professional development in higher education is scholarliness, or scholarship. The enthusiasm for *scholarship* on teaching has been demonstrated by the members of the Critical Professionalism group. What is not so often cited, however, is a form of scholarliness which could be described as '*curiosity*', 'inquisitiveness' or even a 'playful' approach towards discovery. Participants in the Critical Professionalism project enjoyed applying familiar research techniques derived from their disciplines to new topics, learning new research techniques or investigating new topics.

Activism was demonstrated as a trait of many of the team members, who were most anxious to share what they were learning with colleagues in their department and, on occasion, with the University at large.

A final and most significant trait of the critical professional, according to our experience, is a *sense of agency.* All members felt free to join the group, free to contribute in the discussion and free to make changes to their teaching.

Implications

What are the implications of the description of critical professionalism we have outlined? With regard to the professional development of academics, there are two. The first is for academics and their faculties to take primary responsibility for their development. At the heart of academia and the academic's choice of career is the freedom to engage in unfettered scholarly exploration. This should be exploited to foster academics' professional development. Secondly, and flowing from the first, is for a culture and possibly a system to be created at university level which facilitates, encourages and supports such development. We agree with Davidson (2004) and d'Andrea and Gosling (2005) that appropriate professional development strategies are those which facilitate dialogue amongst academics and enable academics to make explicit the theoretical underpinnings of their disciplinary cultures within interdisciplinary forums.

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And what are the implications of our designation of the attributes of the critical professional, in particular that of sense of agency? If we agree with those who see agency as a combination of the will of an individual to act, the ability of an individual to act and the provision of the opportunities by an institution to make space to support this action (Walker, 2006), this requires higher education institutions to endorse freedom to act via its policies and procedures, as well as to make material and policy provisions for this flourishing of its academics. It places a high level of responsibility on academics to practise accountability, towards students, to the institution and to society. Thus we ask is agency not taken, or *exercised*, rather than *granted*?

Finally, we find the concept of critical professionalism as we and others have defined it, with its strong sense of social and educational accountability, to be a useful way to understand the role of the teaching academic who wishes to advance the public good via teaching in higher education.

Acknowledgements

Note

1 All names are pseudonyms, chosen to reflect the demographics of the group.

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