Analysing an audit cycle: A critical realist account

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Abstract

This article reports on the use of a framework developed from Bhaskar's critical realism and Archer's social realism to analyse teaching and learning related data produced as a result of the first cycle of institutional audits in the South African higher education system. The use of the framework allows us to see what this cycle of audits did achieve, namely some change in structural systems related to teaching and learning alongside the appointment of key agents. It also allows us to see how the stagnation of sets of ideas about teaching and learning in the domain of culture may mean that assurance of the quality of learning experiences for all students remained elusive.

Keywords

Teaching and learning, quality assurance, institutional audits, critical realism, social realism

Introduction

In South Africa, the advent of democracy in the early 1990s has resulted in a great deal of policy work in higher education in order to provide equal experiences for all. Under apartheid, access to well resourced white institutions had been denied to the black South Africans forming the majority of the population with the result that opportunities for learning at this level were limited to the institutions designed and created especially for them.

Policy work has resulted in all universities now being open to all candidates. In practice, however, poor, working class South Africans continue to gain access mainly to 'historically black universities', institutions which still bear the legacy of apartheid in terms of location, facilities, staffing and so on. In addition, and as recent research has shown (see, for example, Scott *et al.*, 2007; Letseka & Maile, 2003), black students continue to bear the brunt of the poor performance of the system overall with many taking longer than regulation time to complete the qualifications for which they are registered or failing to complete them altogether. This has led to proclamations of a 'crisis' in teaching and learning in popular discourses related to higher education. It has also led to a decision, on the part of the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC), the body responsible for quality assurance in the South African system, to focus the next cycle of its work on teaching and learning (CHE, 2013a).

Various policy documents, including the 1997 White Paper on Higher Education (MoE,

1997), which attempted to set an agenda for the transformation of the system, identify quality assurance as a lever to achieve this goal. Numerous scholars (see, for example, Shore and Wright, 1999; Strathern, 2000; Wright & Rabo, 2010) have identified the way quality assurance has been shaped by neo-liberal discourses and been based on principles such as marketisation, competition, accountability and so on associated with New Public Management, which aimed to modernize and make the public sector more effective. In South Africa, however, although the introduction of quality assurance to higher education was undoubtedly associated with efficiency and accountability discourses, it also offers the hope of contributing to the transformation of society and the opening up of opportunities for all.

Quality assurance work began in the early 2000s and the first cycle of institutional audits has recently been completed. This exercise resulted in rich data being made available to the authors of this paper in order to complete a piece of commissioned research Boughey & McKenna, 2009, 2010, 2011a,b) which attempted to assess the impact of the first audit cycle on teaching and learning in order to inform planning for the second round of work. This paper reports on this research. More specifically it aims to show how this first cycle of institutional audits impacted on teaching and learning across the country and, thus, contributed to the goal of more equal education for all. Since the data for the research had already been generated as a result of the audit process, we had to develop an analytic framework that would allow us to make statements about the impact of the audits on teaching and learning.

Analytical Framework

Margaret Archer's (1995, 1996, 2000) social realism was chosen as means of working with the data. However, Archer's work is based in Roy Bhaskar's (1978, 1979) critical realism so it is here that we must begin the explication of our analytical framework.

Key to Bhaskar's (*ibid*) work is the notion of a stratified ontology differentiating between layers of reality in the world we seek to explore and understand. The first of these layers, termed the 'Empirical', is the world of experience and observation and is the strata from which all exploration must begin. Since human beings experience and observe the world in different ways, this layer is understood to be relative and transitive. The second layer, the 'Actual', is the layer of events, which may not be experienced at all or may be experienced directly or indirectly in multiple ways. Both events, at the Actual level, and participants' experiences of them, at the Empirical level, are understood to emerge as a result of the interplay of structures and mechanisms, located at a deeper layer of reality, termed the 'Real'. The work of the critical realist researcher is to excavate this deeper layer of reality in order to identify the structures and mechanisms, understood to have relatively enduring causal powers and properties and some status as enduring 'truth'.

Bhaskar's critical realism is 'critical' in the sense that it encompasses a concern for social justice. Excavation of structures and mechanisms at the level of the Real allows us to understand the way in which they work together to produce events and experiences and, through that understanding, to foster change. In the case of the research reported in this paper, our aim was to identify the structures and mechanisms from which emerged events

and experiences related to teaching and learning and which were evident in the data produced by the audits. As a result of identifying these structures and mechanisms along with they way they worked together to produce events and experiences, our aim was to use data produced by the audit cycle to identify ways in which teaching and learning could be improved particularly in order to provide better quality provision (conceptualized in critical realist terms as better experiences and events) for students who had not received equal access to higher education under the apartheid state.

Archer's social realism was useful for our research for a number of reasons. In the first place, her understanding of reproduction or change as resulting from an endless series of 'morphogenetic cycles' in which all social and cultural interaction is conditioned by history (Archer, 1995), allowed us to conceptualise the audit processes as a single cycle. For Archer, analysis of a morphogenetic cycle begins by exploring the social, cultural and agential conditioning in place at a fixed point in time. In the case of our research, this entailed exploring the conditioning in place at the beginning of the 2000s as quality assurance work began in South Africa. Such conditioning included the effects of apartheid and the impact of policy work undertaken since the realization that democracy could be achieved in the early 1990s. The next stage of analysis involves exploring interaction between what Archer terms 'the parts' (i.e. structure and culture) and 'the people' (i.e. agency) over a given period (1996:xiv).   The period explored by our study began in the early 2000s when the HEQC was founded and began to produce frameworks for its work to 2011 by which time most audits had been completed. As a result of this interaction, it is possible to make statements about the extent to which morphogenesis (elaboration) or morphostasis (reproduction) of a given system has occurred at a given point. It can thus be seen how the construct of a morphogenetic cycle allowed us to begin to explore the impact of the audit cycle on teaching and learning.

Archer (1996: 66) argues for 'analytical dualism', whereby structure/culture and agency are held to be 'temporally distinguishable' each with its own independent properties and powers. Her insistence on separating out these domains for the purpose of analysis allows for a more nuanced ability to identify where change has or has not happened and where efforts have to be expended in order to foster change. This then results in it being possible to posit morphogenetic cycles for the domains of structure, culture and agency. Our use of Archer's theoretical work therefore allowed us to examine the extent to which changes occurred, or did not occur, in the domains of structure, culture and agency separately over the course of the audit cycle.

Significantly, it also allowed us to examine the way individuals, or groups of individuals, either intentionally or otherwise, had drawn on ideas in the domain of culture as well as on organizational or other structures in pursuit of concerns and projects (Archer, 2000:7) and how, in terms of Bhaskar's layered ontology, this had led to the emergence of the less than positive events and experiences related to the 'crisis' in teaching and learning noted above. In Archer's words this meant that we could begin to see '*whose* conceptual shifts [were] responsible for *which* structural changes, *when*, *where* and under *what* conditions' (original emphasis, 1998:361).

Luckett (2007:7), who also adopts a critical realist position in relation to quality

assurance, argues that the 'flat ontology' of the audit methodology, which essentially operates only at the level of the empirical, 'fails to penetrate the level of the real and uncover the workings of social structure and social agency'. Quinn and Boughey (2009) have shown how this framework can be used to analyse a single audit focusing on transformation at institutional level where 'transformation' is understood in the peculiar context of post-apartheid South Africa. The research reported in this article extends the use of the framework in order to focus on the way an entire national audit cycle contributed to change in teaching and learning specifically.

Research Design

For the purposes of our research, the HEQC made available to us three documents for each of twenty public universities: a self-evaluation report, a profile of institutional data and an audit report. Drawing on our analytical framework, we were able to identify events and experiences in all the documents we examined for our study. Self-evaluation reports and the reports of audit panels essentially detail the experiences and observations of sets of individuals. Self-evaluation reports, for example, made observations about students and staff and also commented upon issues such as success, throughput and graduation rates from the perspective of the university, or various entities within it. Audit reports, on the other hand, made observations about arrangements for quality and decisions made by the university based on the opinion of audit panels. The 'conceptual disaggregation' of institutional data in the institutional profiles then allowed us to conceive of series of events related to teaching and learning. For example, it was possible to conceptualise a table showing success and failure rates of students as events such as a student being unable to complete an examination paper, receiving a good mark on an assignment or even learning of her exclusion from the institution. Once we had identified events and experiences in our data, we were ready to move from the levels of the Empirical and the Actual to try to excavate to the level of the Real.

Our exploration of the domain of culture involved a discourse analysis where 'discourse' was understood as groups of related ideas manifest in language or other sign systems. If a critical realist position is adopted, discourses can be understood as intransitive mechanisms with causally efficacious powers (see, for example, Fairclough, 2005). As a result of the interplay with agency (since, following Archer, agents are accorded the power to subscribe to or resist them) discourses constrain and enable what it is possible to observe or experience. They can thus be understood to lead to the emergence of events at the level of the Actual and experiences at the level of the Empirical. In analyzing discourse, we worked with guiding questions such as 'How are students constructed?', 'How are staff constructed?', 'How is teaching constructed in relation to research?'

Our exploration of the domain of structure involved the identification of various kinds of structure which could be seen to lead to the emergence of events and experiences related to teaching and learning: macro structures such as social class, race, gender and geography as well as meso level structures affecting the entire higher education system such as funding and institutional type. Our exploration of meso level structures included consideration of the way, for example, the funding formula for higher education affected universities with respect to the privileging of research. We were then able to move to a

micro level to identify organizational structures such as faculties, schools, departments, committees and other forms of organizational arrangements as well as policies on teaching and learning.

Finally, our excavation of the level of the Real involved the identification of agents in each of the universities we studied. Key to Archer's work (1996, 2000) is the accordance of powers and properties to agency. According to Archer (2000:6), agents 'develop and define their ultimate concerns: those internal goods that they care about most'. Having identified concerns, agents then develop 'projects' to realize them. The pursuit of these projects then requires the exercise of personal powers and properties. The exercise of these personal powers and properties then involves drawing on mechanisms in the domains of structure and culture, which are also afforded powers and properties in order to allow for the emergence of events and experiences.

Archer identifies two groups of agents: *primary agents* and *corporate agents*. Primary agents, according to Archer, are 'collectivities sharing the same life chances' (2006:263). A group of black working class students enrolled at a university could thus be considered primary agents. Primary agents can transform themselves into corporate agents, defined by Archer (1995:258) as groups

> … who are aware of what they want, can articulate it to themselves and others, and have organized in order to get it, can engage in concerted action to re-shape or retain the structural or cultural feature in question,

as the result of the pursuit of a project.

Further transformation of agency is possible as a result of the transformation of corporate agents into *social actors*. Actors are defined as occupying roles which themselves have properties and powers and which are not reducible to the characteristics of the individuals who occupy them. The role of Vice Chancellor, for example, can be seen to have such properties and powers even though a Vice Chancellorship could be exercised in many different ways depending on the individual occupying the position.

In our analysis, we were therefore looking for these different categories of agency and exploring the ways powers and properties had been used to effect the emergence of events and experiences related to teaching and learning.

For the purposes of the research, each of the twenty South African universities for which we received data from the HEQC was treated as a single case. We were then able to look across cases to see patterns in teaching and learning amongst all universities and groups of universities distinguished by type (traditional, universities of technology and comprehensive universities) and history. Our discussion below is a synthesis of this analysis in order to contribute to our goal of exploring the way in which the first cycle of institutional audits impacted on teaching and learning across the South African higher education system.

Discussion

Our analysis across all universities showed that the introduction of quality assurance to the South African higher education system had resulted in elaboration of the domain of structure.

Although the size of the public higher education system grew from a total of 473 000 in 1993 to approximately 938 200 in 2011 (CHE, 2013b), gross participation rates have remained low moving from 15% in 2000 to 17% in 2011 (c). In addition, and as the following table shows, participation by population group has remained skewed (CHE, 2013c).

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
African	12%	12%	12%	13%	13%	14%	14%
Coloured	12%	13%	12%	14%	14%	15%	14%
Indian	48%	48%	43%	45%	45%	46%	47%
White	57%	57%	54%	56%	58%	57%	57%
Total	16%	16%	16%	17%	17%	18%	17%

In 2005, the year the HEQC began its first cycle of audits, the overall participation rate of the 20 to 24 year old age group was only 16%. However, participation rates for the African Black[1] population group was only 12% compared to 57% for the White population group. In spite of these disparities, all universities were feeling the effects of the increased numbers of first generation black students, some admittedly more than others. As already indicated at the beginning of this paper, working class black South Africans continue mainly only to be able to access the poorly resourced historically black universities because of the quality of their school leaving results and because of financial reasons. All universities, however, try to recruit black students often using a range of alternative access procedures in order to do so. Clearly, this attempt to broaden access to a more diverse student body has international parallels.

At a meso level, a number of national funding initiatives aimed to support the increased inclusion of black students in higher education. Grants to supplement teaching in programmes which extend the time taken to achieve a qualification and which serve as access routes for students who do not make usual institutional admissions criteria had been in place since 2000. In addition, a revised funding formula had introduced incentive-based funding for teaching and learning in 2002 with institutions that failed to meet national norms for teaching outputs receiving a teaching development grant

[1] Population group categories are those used by Statistics South Africa. The term 'black' is used to refer to African Black, Coloured and Indian groups.

alongside a reduced output subsidy[2].

At a more micro level, all the universities we examined as cases had attempted to manage teaching and learning by developing policies and procedures related to assessment, external examining, curriculum development and so on. In addition, committees and other organizational structures such as teaching and learning strategies had been established. Shifts in programme development occasioned by the introduction of a national qualifications framework in the mid 1990s had, moreover, resulted in the establishment of school and programme committees in order to manage teaching and learning.

Also significant was the development of teaching and learning centres as structures intended to support teaching and learning. In the mid to late 1990s, many centres devoted to supporting student learning had been closed as a result of stringency at institutional levels (see Boughey, 2007 for explanation). The advent of quality assurance saw the re-establishment of some of these centres or the development of those that had remained (Quinn, 2007) particularly as a result of commendations or recommendations made by panels in audit reports. Notable too, was the establishment of programmes intended to promote the development of academic staff as educators in higher education either in the form of full programmes at postgraduate diploma level or as short courses. Wherever we looked, then, in the data, we were able to identify morphogenesis in the domain of structure.

Paralleling this elaboration in the domain of structure was morphogenesis in the agential domain. Although percentages in the participation rate of black students had not increased, an increase in enrolments meant that the universities were coping with larger numbers of first generation black students than ever before regardless of their historical status. This group of agents pushed institutions and the academic staff working in them into thinking about teaching because of what, in the data, was widely experienced as students' 'underpreparedness' for higher education. One response to this, was the establishment of positions mandated to provide leadership and strategic direction in respect of teaching and learning. These positions were sometimes at deputy vice chancellor level or, depending on the size of the university, at the level of dean or senior director. Positions of director were also established in new teaching and learning centres and it was also possible to identify posts in faculty structures with responsibilities for teaching and learning including deputy dean positions or programme co-ordinator positions. The audit cycle, then, saw the emergence of what Archer terms 'social actors' in the field of teaching and learning.

Unlike in the structural and agential domains, our analysis of the ideational realm, or the domain of culture, offered a different picture of change. Teaching and learning has long been a site of intellectual endeavour on the part of the field known in South Africa as 'Academic Development'. Since the early 1990s, some of this work has challenged hegemonic constructions of students' 'problems' and can be located at what Haggis

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[2] The Teaching Development Grant is now accorded to all universities, though the amount is calculated according to need as indicated by teaching output statistics.

(2009) identifies as the forefront of thinking about teaching and learning. In spite of the existence of this body of work, dominant ideas constructing students, their learning and the role of academic staff in teaching and learning continued to predominate in the domain of culture. As a result, although agents involved in teaching and learning could draw on structures such as policies on teaching and learning, teaching and learning committees or even funding structures such as teaching development grants, they were also likely to draw on discourses which were less productive of more positive events and experiences and so were arguably less effective in contributing to change. It is to a deeper exploration of the morphostasis in the discursively constructed domain of culture that this paper now turns.

Constructing teaching and learning

Dominant in all the documentation we examined, including reports prepared by audit panels, was what we came to term the 'discourse of the decontextualized learner'. Central to this discourse were the ideas i) that education is asocial, acultural and apolitical and ii) that success in education is dependent on factors inherent to the individual.

From the late 1980s onwards, a wealth of research in South Africa has examined how the social construct of the university privileges some at the expense of others. This work has drawn on the work of Bourdieu (see, for example, Shay, 2004, 2005), Gee (1990) and other literacy theorists such as Street (1984, 1995) (see, for example, Boughey, 2000; 2005, McKenna, 2004a, 2004b) and, more latterly, Archer (Luckett & Luckett, 2009). This work though has seemingly not impacted on dominant discourses as the following analysis of our data shows.

One university, for example, discursively constructed students as needing to be 'talented' and constructed a 'healthy' learning environment as one in which a diverse group of 'talented' students excelled academically. Another wrote of the need to identify the 'most able' students and students with the 'most potential' for admission to the extended programmes providing alternative access routes for black students. Students gaining admission to the university by this means were thus not constructed as having the required social and cultural capital or as having mastered the elevated literacies privileged by the academy but as having inherent merit. Yet another university refers to itself as 'university of choice for *excellent* individuals' and to its desire to 'attract the best young scholars'.

As indicated earlier, historically black universities in South Africa tend to bear the brunt of student 'underpreparedness'. These universities also drew extensively on what we have termed the 'discourse of the decontextualized learner'. One institution, for example, cited a study in which 'lecturers identified inadequate academic support as one of the reasons for low academic success. This includes support for: personal, social and psychological problems, adaptation to a new learning environment, life and study skills'. The 'naming' of students' experiences in higher education in South Africa as due to psychological, social and personal problems inherent in the individual has long been a feature of dominant discourses which have been contested by those working from a

critical position both in South Africa (Boughey, 2002) and internationally (Gee, 1990). The resilience of these discourses was apparent in the documentation examined for the purposes of our study.

Yet another feature of the 'discourse of the decontextualized learner' was the misappropriation of theory and research that acknowledges the significance of social context in learning in order to locate the ability to learn as a factor inherent to the individual. An example of this phenomenon occurs in relation to the use of 'approaches to learning' research (see, for example, Marton & Saljo, 1984). As Haggis (2003:90) points out, the original research linked students' approaches to learning to the way they perceived the *learning context*. Individuals were thus 'reading' the context and adopting an approach deemed appropriate to it. Appropriations of the research, however, reconstruct socially embedded *approaches* to learning as *kinds* of learning and learners:

> Deep approaches to learning' becomes 'deep learning', and ultimately 'deep processors' (Mitchell, 1994), or versions of this such as 'engagers' (Kember & Yan, 2001). In the latter case deep and surface approaches are seen as a form of predisposition or 'learning style', which moves the concept into the confused area of the differences between fixed traits and/or changeable strategies denoted by terms such as cognitive style, learning style and learning strategy … (Haggis, 2003:91)

In South Africa, attention has been paid to the way students 'misperceive' academic contexts (see, for example, Boughey, 2000, 2005) because of understandings carried from home backgrounds into the university. This then leads them to behave in ways that are unproductive of academic learning. The issue is not inherent in the learners but rather that they are misreading the context.

The documents we examined for our study were replete with references to 'deep/surface learners/learning'. The teaching and learning policy of one university, for example, describes the ethos of the institution as 'supporting deep and meaningful student learning that will enable lifelong learning'.

Following the opening up of all universities to students from all population groups in the wake of the shift to democracy, the prestigious historically white universities in particular have competed to identify black candidates for admission, often offering bursaries and scholarships to candidates achieving highly on school leaving examinations. In response to an audit criterion that asked universities to evaluate the mechanisms employed to promote access to students from previously disadvantaged backgrounds, many institutions drew on a discourse exemplified below:

> … many such students appear to lack motivation to study, having registered on the basis of having been awarded a bursary or merit scholarship. An area for improvement, therefore, would be to evaluate practices used successfully for selecting *motivated* students (our emphasis).

Motivation thus appears in the data as a characteristic inherent to individuals that contributes to success regardless of the fact that demonstrations of motivation may be socially and culturally embedded. As McKenna (2004b) has shown, black students are often able to attest to their own motivation in a context where it simply is not being recognised.

The 'discourse of the decontextualized learner' can also be related to language. In South Africa, English, the language of learning and teaching, is an additional language for the majority of students. English is however one of eleven official languages in the country and is used widely throughout the country in all sorts of contexts. Dominant assumptions tend to locate the difficulties students have in using English in academic contexts as a result of their not having mastered the forms of the language or as a result of the lack of a set of acultural, asocial language 'skills' (Boughey, 2002). Such observations are frequently made despite students' ability to use English fluently for a rich variety of purposes outside the academy.

South African work on language (see, for example, Boughey, 2005; Jacobs, 2007; Paxton, 2006, 2007; Thomson, 2008) has long challenged such assumptions about language by drawing on research on literacies (Gee, 1990; Street, 1983, 1995) and on analyses of language (Halliday, 1973, 1978, 1994) which shows how language use is embedded in social contexts and how, thus, appropriate language use is dependent on familiarity with context. This work argues that, what South African students need is not more tuition in the forms of the language itself, but rather structured support and development as they use English to engage with meanings in academic contexts. In spite of the existence of this body of research (conceptualized, in terms of the framework underpinning our study, as ideas in the cultural domain) agents continued in the audit documentation to draw on common sense assumptions and ideas about language as they set about attempting to remedy the 'problem'.

Typically, this meant that attempts to address the 'language problem' involved specialized courses in English 'communication skills' which existed in isolation from mainstream study or, possibly even more at odds with research that argues that literacies can only be acquired and not taught (see, for example, Gee, 1990, Morrow 2009), in what were termed 'academic literacy' courses and modules.

In the face of constructions of students and their learning as decontextualized, it is hardly surprising that teaching itself is understood in a similar vein. In the well resourced historically white institutions, teaching was often constructed as providing a learning environment in which students can exercise the agency to learn. One university, for example, notes that 'the commitment of the University to create *optimal opportunities* for successful study determines the functioning of this management plan' (our emphasis). Another university identifies 'facilitating learning/studying in innovative ways, *inter alia* through the application of appropriate technology and modes of delivery, including decentralised teaching and learning' as a strategic priority. Generous funding is then allocated to the use of technology to support teaching and learning. That the processes of knowledge construction involved in academic learning might be alien to many students is not considered.

Where focus is given to pedagogy more specifically, this is generally in relation to approaches to teaching such as the use of learning outcomes to inform curriculum design or the use of problem based learning. In South Africa, qualifications are described on the national qualifications framework through the use of learning outcomes with the result that some universities invested a great deal of energy in the development of outcomes based approaches to curriculum design and pedagogy. This was by no means the case across the board with many of the more powerful, traditional (and historically white) institutions resisting any move away from knowledge and knowing based in the disciplines.

In South Africa, a great deal of interest had been generated in the field which is known as the 'sociology of knowledge' and which is based in the work of British sociologist Basil Bernstein (1990, 1999) and Karl Maton (2000, 2013) who extends Bernstein's work through the use of 'Legitimation Code Theory'. This work (see, for example, Muller, 2000, 2007, 2009; Shay *et al*., 2011; Shay, 2012) questions the use of outcomes-based and other approaches to curriculum design such as problem-based learning because of their focus on the coherence of curricula to context rather than on the conceptual coherence of knowledge within the curriculum itself. Aligning curricula with context by, for example, selecting the knowledge to be taught on the basis of what is needed to solve a particular problem or develop a specific outcome, 'flouts the sequential requirements of the vertical parent knowledge structure … and students end up with gaps in their knowledge' (Muller, 2009:219).

Wheelahan (2010:8) identifies the danger of ignoring the need to build knowledge structures coherently by pointing out that individuals who are denied access to what Bernstein terms the 'vertical discourse' exemplified by them are denied access to *powerful* knowledge. She goes on to cite Young (2008:14) who notes that

> … powerful knowledge provides more reliable explanations and new ways of thinking about the world and acquiring it can provide learners with a language for engaging in political, moral and other kinds of debates.

In the documents we examined, which admittedly referred to espoused rather than enacted curricula, it was clear that, where any curriculum work was taking place, this was in relation to outcomes-based or problem-based approaches. One university, for example, noted that a decision had been taken to 'ground teaching and learning within OBE' (outcomes based education). The same university appeared to use the terms 'problem based learning' and 'outcomes based learning' synonymously, a phenomenon which suggests a further lack of rigour in dealing with approaches to teaching and learning.

Once again, then, it would appear that research generated in South Africa itself, and the theory that informed it, was being ignored as curriculum development was taking place. This research, largely conducted within an agenda for social justice, clearly points to the need for the black South Africans entering higher education to gain access to what Young (*ibid*) terms 'powerful knowledge' if they are to be able to participate meaningfully in both the world of work and the new democracy. In the context of this observation,

questions about the way curriculum development is contributing to the transformation envisaged in policy documents need to be asked.

Conclusion

Our research allows us to make a number of statements about the first cycle of institutional audits in South Africa in the context of the need for 'transformation' of the higher education system in particular and society as a whole.

Firstly, it allows us to show how the first cycle contributed to structural and agential morphogenesis. Secondly, it also allows us to show how the continuing dominance of a set of ideas which locates the ability to succeed in students, meant that academic agents were arguably less likely to contribute to transformation in teaching and learning. Those working in teaching and learning centres, for example, were more likely to continue with existing approaches (such as the provision of 'stand alone' language courses) in spite of evidence challenging their efficacy. Morphostasis in the domain of culture thus had the tendency to constrain the effects of elaboration in the domains of structure and agency. Our analysis therefore allows us to argue for the insertion of alternative ways of thinking about students and the difficulties they encounter in higher education. Such an enrichment of the 'theoretical stockpot', we argue, offers potential for the emergence of very different kinds of events, and thus, experiences on the part of both staff and students.

Finally, our analysis allows us to make a statement about the effectiveness of the audit methodology itself given the transformational purpose to which it was intended to contribute. In more concrete terms, although the audit process had effects particularly in the domains of structure and agency, it does not seem to have greatly challenged dominant ideas about students, teaching and the curriculum.

As already indicated, the next cycle of quality assurance work in South Africa will focus on the enhancement of teaching and learning (CHE, 2013a). The extent to which the design of this second cycle, which envisages the sharing of good practice along with collaborative projects, can insert ideas that challenge dominant thinking is still open to question. Our research would argue, however, that such challenges are necessary if change for the better is to occur.

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