

Structure and agency in learning: a critical realist theory of the development of capacity to reflect on academic practice

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Theories of learning typically downplay the interplay between social structure and student agency. In this article, we adapt a causal hypothesis from realist social theory and draw on wider perspectives from critical realism to account for the development of capacity to engage in reflection on professional practice in academic roles. We thereby offer a theory of professional learning that explores how socio and cultural structures and personal emergent powers combine to ensure variation in the emergence of such reflective capacity. The influence of these factors on professional learning is mediated through reflexive deliberation and social interaction, with the exercise of one's personal powers specifically identified as a stratum of social reality. We consider further the role of concerns, intention and attention in professional learning, drawing together issues that are rarely considered within the same theory. We thus offer a comprehensive account of professional learning, showing how a focus on structure and agency increases the explanatory power of learning theory.

Key words: Critical realism, realist social theory, professional learning, higher education, reflective practice, early career academics, structure and agency, learning theory.

Introduction

Theories of student learning tend to prioritise either socio-cultural or psychological considerations. Malcolm and Zukas (2001) point out that this division stems from the way in which education as a field draws on the core disciplines of sociology and psychology. They go on to argue that psychological theories dominate research into higher education. The theory of approaches to learning (Marton and Säljö, 1976), for instance, is particularly well established. It addresses the role that a learner's intention plays in shaping the resultant learning. By contrast, social constructivist theories of learning, as with Vygotsky (1962) and Bruner (1996), posit that learning is dependent upon social structures.

There is a need to consider both personal and socio-cultural factors in understanding student learning. Ashwin (2008) argues that the explanatory power of mainstream research into teaching and learning in higher education is limited by a failure to consider both socio-cultural structure and individual agency. For example, Haggis (2003, p. 101) argues that the theory of approaches to learning avoids 'any real engagement with the complexities of location and context'. She calls for studies that construct the learner in a way that respects the 'situatedness' of social practice. Social constructivist theories, meanwhile, fail to explore the varied ways in which different learners respond to the same social context. Eraut (2007, p. 405) argues that socio-cultural and individual theories of professional learning should be treated as 'complementary rather than competing'. Our interest in reflective practice in the professional learning of new academic staff (Kahn et al., 2006, 2008a) encouraged us to use this context as the basis for the present study.

One way forward is to identify a range of socio-cultural influences on approaches to study, as with Marton, Hounsell and Entwistle (1997). They point out that a student's approach to study is influenced by their perception of the context for learning, the tutors' conceptions of teaching, the culture of the discipline and so on. But it remains a challenge to account for the *interplay* between personal and socio-cultural factors in explaining variation evident in student learning; more comprehensive accounts are required.

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In looking to develop accounts of student learning with more comprehensive explanatory power, it is helpful to turn to critical realism, offering as it does an all-encompassing account of human-being-in-nature (Hartwig 2007, p. 104). Critical realism stems from work by Roy Bhaskar in the philosophy of science during the 1970s. Bhaskar (2008) argues that social reality is constituted at a range of levels or strata, incorporating structures and mechanisms that bring about the events that shape our experience. These strata include the intra-personal, the person considered as an entity, inter-personal or social interactions, and the macro level of social structure. Our knowledge of the realities entailed, however, is provisional. This provisionality of knowledge stems in part from the way in which our understanding must adapt 'to accommodate the progressively deeper strata that it discovers and the reconceptualisation of more superficial strata in light of this.' (Hartwig 2007, p. 240). The field is 'critical' in the sense that it is attuned to isolating grounds of error, focusing first of all on explanatory critique in relation to social structure rather than, say, on exposing the will to power. Emancipation remains an underlying concern (Bhaskar, 1993). The contrast with postmodernist perspectives, as also with positivism, is an important one. Maton and Shipway (2007, p. 442) argue:

Positivism, underpinning calls for 'evidence-based' policy and practice based on systematic review and randomised control trials, reduces education to the empirically measurable. 'Critical' or 'radical' (including Marxist, feminist and multicultural) approaches emphasise the effects of wider social relations of power and, under the influence of postmodernism and standpoint theories, have tended towards idealism and relativism, reducing education to the experiences of knowers.

By contrast, critical realist perspectives have the potential to facilitate non-reductionist analysis of the underlying relations between learning environments, educational knowledge and the interior world of the learner.

Critical realism represents a meta-theory rooted in philosophy. Margaret Archer, though, has been keenly aware of the need for more directly applicable theoretical frameworks that are rooted in critical realist perspectives. She has developed a set of mediating frameworks under the banner of realist social theory. One such framework is her account of the interplay between social structure and human agency (see for instance Archer 2000; 2003). This framework seeks to account for the way in which agents use their personal powers to act 'so rather than otherwise' in any given social situation (Archer 2003, p. 3). It offers a promising basis to help explain interplay between personal and socio-cultural factors within student learning.

This present study seeks to apply and adapt such perspectives in explaining the development of capacity to reflect on academic practice. The capacity to engage in reflection on academic practice remains an important area for higher education, given the challenges evident in maintaining and developing academic practice in the presence of shifting social and cultural conditions. More immediately, however, the need to consider interplay between personal and socio-cultural factors was particularly evident in a recent practitioner review of research into reflection on academic practice within programmes of professional education for early career academics (Kahn et al., 2006; 2008a; 2008b). As such this earlier review provides a stimulus for the present study. But it is also helpful to exemplify the conceptual argument that we outline here, and we will thus draw on a number of the studies included within this review (hereafter referred to as 'the review') by way of illustration. To ensure a fluent argument, however, we do not usually draw specific attention to the inclusion of these studies within the review. It will be helpful at this point to summarise the review and its findings.

The review, aimed to ascertain 'the characteristics of coherent theoretically informed approaches to the use of reflective processes within (early career learning and teaching) programmes' (Kahn et al., 2008a, p. 163). It was undertaken using a novel interpretive-practitioner methodology using extracted data and practitioner commentary which maintained a balance between contributions from the research literature and practitioner perspectives. Ensuring construct validity, practitioner reviewers selected studies that they deemed to be of relevance to their own practice, considering the purposes and outcomes of reflection; reflective processes involving personal reflection; reflective processes involving a social dimension; assessment; and the pedagogy of reflective processes. This allowed completed review proformae to provide the basis for analysis using techniques drawn from grounded theory. The framework that emerged from this review highlights the role of reflective tasks

and their foci, personal powers, social interaction, structural factors and epistemological considerations in shaping the development of reflective capacity. The review, however, was not able fully to explain how these factors could together account either for the emergence of such capacity or for the associated variation in outcomes for individuals on the programmes concerned.

Furthermore, choosing the domain of the development of capacity to reflect on professional practice in academic roles allows scope for critique in relation to the notion of 'reflection' itself, given that overlaps are present with realist social theory. Dewey's seminal definition regards reflection as the '... active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusion to which it tends' (Dewey, 1933, p. 9). But such a notion of 'reflection' is one that is open, and in need of additional theorisation as Hatton and Smith (1995), Kreber (2004) and others argue. Further theorists have sought to add specificity. Brookfield (1995), for instance, sees the ability to perceive through different lenses, whether autobiographical experiences, student perceptions, colleague's views and insights from the literature, as a core aspect of what he terms 'critical reflection'. Reflection of this nature involves identifying and scrutinizing one's assumptions, especially those that mask the exercise of power or that work against our best interests (Brookfield, 1995, p. xiii). Van Manen (1977) also articulates critical reflection as focused on issues that pertain to ethics, justice and the wider political and social environment

The intention in this paper, then, is to explore the value of applying critical realist perspectives to learning within the given professional context. We outline Archer's account of the mediation of the influence of structural factors on the actions of agents, before proposing ways in which this account might be adapted to explain how early career academics on programmes of professional education learn to engage in reflection on their practice. Rather than adopt a single viewpoint, we incorporate a range of theoretical categories that articulate different notions of reflection. We thus offer a speculative theory of learning, adapting perspectives from realist social theory.

A critical realist theory of learning

We begin by considering Archer's account of the way that structural factors from the social and cultural context impinge upon the actions of agents. Archer argues that as agents we modify our intentions in light of our perceptions of the changing context, taking an active stance towards the realisation of our own projects. She contends that intentions of agents 'are neither uniform, nor static, nor passive' (2003, p. 134), with personal identity rooted in a constellation of concerns and priorities. It is the pursuit of a specific social project that ensures an individual engages with constraints and enablements present in the given social and cultural context. For instance, Staniforth and Harland's study (2003, p. 83) of collaborative action research by two groups of early career academics illustrates the way someone who perceives that research is valued more highly than teaching may feel they must select their professional projects accordingly. For Archer the realisation of a project then leads to the establishment of a successful practice by the individual. She thus posits a progressive specification of concrete courses of action involving the trajectory:

concerns → projects → practices

with this trajectory driven through personal deliberation on oneself and on one's own concerns in relation to society. For Archer (2007, p. 3), the capacity to engage in such reflexive deliberation, or inner conversation, constitutes a personal power or capacity that emerges in significant part from the practical demands of operating within the world, and which plays an important role in determining why individuals act so rather than otherwise within the same socio-cultural context.

Archer (2003, p. 135) argues that the influence of structure on agency is mediated through a process that involves three stages:

'(i) Structural and cultural factors *objectively* shape the situations which agents confront involuntarily, and possess generative powers of constraint and enablement in relation to

(ii) Agents' own configuration of concerns, as *subjectively* defined in relation to the three orders of natural reality – nature, practice and society.

(iii) Courses of action are produced through the reflexive deliberations of agents who *subjectively* determine their practical projects in relation to their *objective* circumstances.'

It is this model that provides the underlying basis for the speculative theory of learning that we offer in this paper. We will explore these stages and the associated terms during the rest of the paper, although we must recognise that this model was developed in relation to social theory rather than education as such.

Formal education offers a constrained context for learners to pursue their own courses of action. Rogers (1969) long ago argued that students are not generally free to head off in whatever direction their interests dictate. There may thus be a tendency for students whose concerns remain poorly aligned with a programme to look merely to complete its formal requirements. Students, meanwhile, whose concerns align with the programme will have greater scope to pursue action related to those concerns. Intention plays an important role in educational contexts, affecting the character of the learning that occurs, as the theory of approaches to learning recognises and as Boud and Edwards (1999) discuss in relation to learning in professional practice. It is important also to address the role of other agents, as interaction with peers and tutors is typically a significant and required element of an educational programme. Furthermore, we are not interested simply in the mediation of structure to agency, but also in the influence of personal powers. For instance, the way in which a learner attends to an object of learning also affects the learning that results (Marton and Pang, 2006) because the way the learner attends to the object of learning is linked to his or her underlying intentions. Figure 1 provides a schematic summary of the various influences on the concrete specification of educational courses of action. The figure indicates how, in driving the progressive specification of concrete courses of action, reflexive deliberation and social interaction mediate the influence of the various structures and powers. We now articulate more fully the reasoning that underlies this figure, exploring the key aspects in turn.

The influence of context on an individual's concerns and scope for action

Archer's account stresses the role of subjective and objective dimensions, by which cultural and structural factors shape both the concerns that individuals hold and the possibilities for action in relation to those concerns. In relation to the development of capacity to reflect on academic practice, a programme for early career academics evidently represents one structural factor that shapes concerns held by participants and constrains the courses of action open to them. Reflection within the context of a programme of professional education for early career academics typically depends on a task or set of tasks, whether observation of classroom practice conducted by peers (Bell, 2001), projects to develop teaching practice (Booth and Anderberg, 2005), action planning for subsequent professional action (Ho, 2000) or so on. Such tasks may assist the practitioner in focusing on specific aspects of practice and bases for practice. It is clear in this that epistemological issues are relevant in that theories of reflection, professional learning and practice either explicitly or implicitly shape the ways in which practitioners undertake these tasks, as well as any associated social interactions. For example, in Ho (2000), the programme was designed explicitly to draw the attention of the participants towards their own conceptions of teaching. A theory such as 'conceptions of teaching' represents a cultural factor that influences both concerns and the possibilities for action.

While the nature of such tasks will constrain the courses of action that emerge in these settings, they will align to varying extents with the concerns held by the participants. The participant's identity is importantly linked, in that Archer refers to someone's personal identity as defined 'by their individual configuration of concerns' (Archer 2003, p. 130). Academic identity contributes to this personal identity in complex ways, as roles of disciplinary research, professional practice, outreach activity, income generation, administration and teaching may all give rise to potentially conflicting

concerns. Where structural and cultural factors ensure that research is more highly rewarded and esteemed, then a concern to develop teaching is likely to be attenuated.

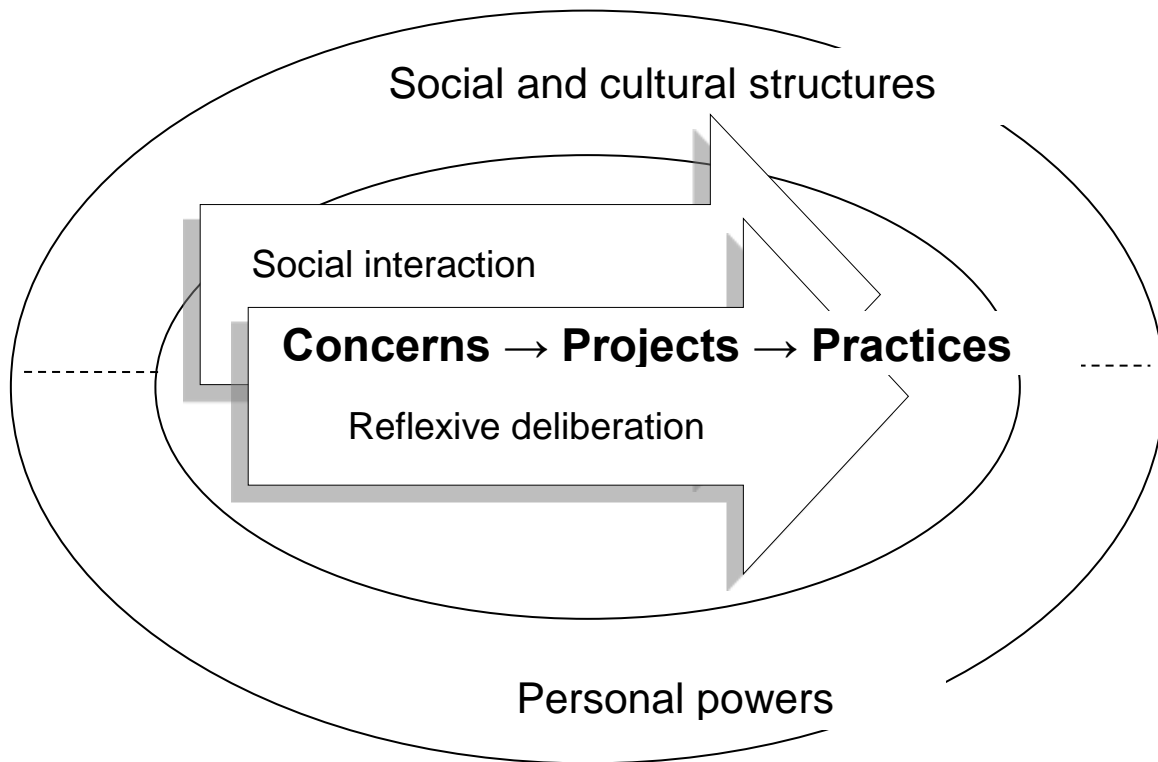


Figure 1. The role of reflexive deliberation and social interaction in mediating the influence of both social and cultural structures, and personal powers on the progressive specification of courses of (educational) action.

Archer's account would further suggest that the extent to which an educational task articulates with the concerns of a participant, or is able to engender concerns on their part, will affect the extent to which the participant is actively engaged in their learning. As for early career academics, the teaching development projects required of the participants in the study by Booth and Anderberg (2005) could be shaped quite directly in light of the participants' concerns, although clearly this is affected by the degree to which they hold concerns focusing on the development of teaching. This links to the scope for participants to set their own agendas, something that may occur more fully when reflection is perceived to be located within the departmental workplace rather than the programme classroom. Within a professional setting, practice provides the primary domain – or order – for action in relation to concerns, certainly in comparison to the more obviously cognitive context of an academic programme. This is the case partly because practical knowledge escapes our conversation about it, given its performative role in relation to the natural order of our physical environment, its embodiment through skills, its tacit nature through incorporation into activity and the associated use of artefacts which themselves require the command of further skills, as Archer argues (2000, p. 166). We cannot put any construction we choose on the practical challenges of teaching a specific group of students in a given classroom.

Furthermore, some categories of reflection may address issues that lie beyond these immediate practical challenges, pertaining to departmental structures or cultures over which an early career academic may have limited influence. We can see why an academic development programme might struggle to ensure that all of its participants develop the capacity to engage in critical reflection. Bell (2001) found that less than one quarter of the participants on a given programme were able to engage in such reflection. It remains a challenge to identify incongruities between one's beliefs about

teaching and one's actual practice. And it is perhaps unrealistic to expect that even a supported exploration of one's experiences would enable an entire cohort of participants on such a programme to perceive and critique underlying social and cultural structures, especially given limitations on time likely to be in place for an early career academic operating within a performance driven culture. But we may also see in this some of the limitations of the concept of 'critical reflection'. It remains a challenge to understand the factors at work and their interplay in an open system incorporating various strata, let alone to redirect the system. We would argue that these challenges go beyond those acknowledged by Carr and Kemmis (2005), in their recognition that the culture of modernity favours a form of technical means-end reasoning which closes down space for criticality. As Bhaskar argues (1993), substantive understanding precedes emancipation.

The role that personal powers play in learning

Learning, though, is affected by the manner in which a learner employs his or her own personal powers. Archer herself emphasises how reflexive deliberation on one's contexts and concerns shapes the projects that one undertakes. In (2003) she identifies four characteristic patterns of reflexive deliberation, or modes of reflexivity. Communicative reflexives are those who characteristically share their inner dialogues with others before deciding on a course of action. Autonomous reflexives base their actions principally on their own internal conversations, prioritising performativity in the face of social constraints and opportunities. Meta-reflexives are critical of their own deliberations and of what constitutes effective action within society. Finally fractured reflexives are those for whom reflexive deliberations characteristically intensify distress rather than result in purposeful courses of action. Archer (2007) further traces how experiences of contextual continuity and contextual discontinuity, as with shifts in employment or locality, contribute to the way in which agents both display characteristic patterns of reflexivity and prioritise different sets of concerns.

Clearly there is overlap between reflexive deliberation and the notions of reflection explored in this paper. Archer's account emphasises the link between reflexivity and action; while our earlier definition of reflection from Dewey emphasises the basis for practice. There may be ways in which one's dominant mode of reflexivity ensures varying propensity to engage in different categories of reflection; introducing yet further interplay into our account. For instance, technical reflection comprises one of the categories outlined by van Manen (1977). This refers to an examination of the means that have been used to achieve certain ends. It is possible that autonomous reflexives will find a natural affinity with such a category of reflection, given their focus on performativity. Such affinities may in themselves explain part of the variation evident within studies such as those by Bell (2001) and Kreber (2004) in the emergence of capacity to engage in different categories of reflection. Archer (2007) attributes shifts in the distribution of these modes of reflexivity within the population to wider social and cultural factors that operate at global and societal levels, offering further interplay between strata of social reality.

Reflexive deliberation may also play a role in influencing the intentions that a learner holds in relation to learning, while recognising that these intentions remain varied and dynamic. We hypothesise that where reflexive deliberation is inhibited in relation to a participant's primary configuration of concerns, whether through a programme prioritising an alternative configuration or simply allowing little space for deliberation, that participants are more likely to form an intention simply to complete the formal programme requirements. Such an intention may be more likely to occur where a programme is taken as a result of a condition of employment, as is often the case for the programmes involving early career academics. Cooper (2005) suggests that there is a tendency for a compulsory programme to provoke participants into testing out its validity. Alternatively, where reflexive deliberation is allowed to occur in relation to their own concerns, we suggest that participants are able to take a more active stance in shaping educational projects to ensure that connections are made with aspects of their practice. We can say that in the former case the project is one of educational compliance, whereas in the latter case the project involves professional learning more properly. An active stance is more likely to occur where insights for practice emerge from engaging in reflection, and, indeed, where scope is present for practice to change as a result of such

insight. Reflection should lead to the creation and application of resources for the development of practice.

We do not claim this account fully characterises the range of learner intentions and their relationship with different patterns of reflexive deliberation. We claim a new interpretation of the connection, clearly drawing on the theory of approaches to learning for our overall characterisation of intention, but recognising that further intentions are certainly possible. For example, we may see occasions where a participant's intention is to influence change on the programme itself, with scope for action in relation to such an intention stemming in part from the closeness in context between the programme and their own professional role within academia. We see here the relevance of the situated basis for intention in learning, as Haggis (2003) argues.

The focus of attention employed by the participant in relation to an object of learning is further important to consider in understanding how outcomes of learning vary with respect to the use of personal powers. Marton and Pang (2006) argue that learning involves discerning the critical aspects of the object of learning, as against a background of invariance in relation to other aspects of that object. However in relation to academic practice, the participant plays a role in determining which aspects of their practice are of most significance, given the complexity and context-specificity of teaching. Boud (1999) emphasises that the scope to set one's own agenda is significantly enhanced when academic development takes place within one's own work setting. In such a case we suggest that a participant's own concerns will directly influence their own focus of attention, linked as such attention is to reflexive deliberation and to self awareness in relation to learning. Kreber (2004) found that motivation to maintain a specific focus of attention during reflection depended on whether staff felt it was relevant to them; and in this disciplinary background was found to be more relevant than length of experience. But an intention to comply with the requirements of a task may be less likely to trigger or sustain attention to aspects of one's own practice; and thus there will be a reduced likelihood of creating resources for the enhanced or new forms of practice.

Our analysis here is evidently complex. Engaging in reflexive deliberation itself involves the use of a personal power. The exercise of that capacity then serves to mediate a number of further personal powers that bear on learning, whether related to intention or attention. The *exercise* of a personal power represents a further stratum of social reality, in addition to those proposed by Bhaskar (2008). Personal powers and the *exercise* of those powers pertain to different strata of reality, given the scope for mutual interaction and the way in which they concern different timescales. A personal power is typically developed over many years, and yet exercised from one moment to the next. A similar disparity is present between the timescale that characterises social interaction and that of the more enduring social structures. Archer uses the term 'historicity of emergence' (1996, p. 65) to refer to the way that structural entities emerge over time, allowing as this does for such analytical separation. We include within Figure 1 a role for reflexive deliberation in serving to mediate the influence of further personal powers on learning. But we would further suggest that social interaction plays a comparable function to reflexive deliberation in mediating the influence of these various factors on courses action within the educational setting.

A role for social interaction in learning

Theories of learning have long incorporated a place for social interaction. Archer, though, places little direct emphasis on social interaction in her model from (2003) of the process by which structure is mediated to agency, although earlier work of hers does include a place for social interaction in shaping the development of new forms of agency (1995, p. 247-93). It is clear, though, that interaction with a teacher and with fellow students may affect the formation of one's intentions and the focus of one's attention with regard to learning; and indeed may affect the nature of the reflexive deliberation in which one engages. Archer herself also acknowledges this in identifying the overlap between social interaction and reflexive deliberation for communicative reflexives, whose inner dialogues are characteristically completed through conversations with others. One would expect that the contemporaneous nature of social interaction and reflexive deliberation in educational settings would afford significant scope for a mutual interaction.

It is helpful here to return specifically to the review. One of the most striking findings from this review was the role accorded to social interaction in general, and dialogue in particular, in facilitating reflection on practice. Indeed, Brockbank and McGill (2007, p27) themselves directly comment on this finding from the review. Others indeed make a similar claim for the importance of dialogue, with Brookfield (1995, p. 140) viewing the exchange of ideas as central to critical reflection and Hatton and Smith (1995) introducing the category 'dialogic reflection'. Dialogue in the review was seen to allow for the extended consideration to problematic aspects of practice, the voicing of experience and the views of others, the inclusion of challenges, prompts, questioning and crossing of boundaries, the use of specialist language, and so on. MacKinnon (2001), for instance, argues that encouragement from others is needed for one to sustain the exploration of a problematic issue. Loughran (1996) from within the related field of teacher education, meanwhile, emphasises the need to model good practice, so that reflective processes are made evident through such strategies as thinking aloud and offering personal examples. Social interaction thus provides a basis for the genesis of new perspectives and approaches to practice, and thus for the concrete specification of courses of action. We can see also that variation in social interaction on counts such as these will influence the concerns held by learners, and also the possibility to maintain a given focus of attention. Command of specialist language, for instance, can facilitate a more extended discussion on given issues.

We should not, though, expect dialogue about practice to provide an adequate support for reflection where that dialogue is limited to an educational setting. Archer argues (2000, p. 182) that new discursive knowledge can impact on practice, even if the effect is both indirect and delayed. But it is important in this case that the new theory enables the practitioner to complete all that they did before, and more besides. The primary solution that Archer offers is to share practice. A clear basis then exists for social interaction, and thus for developing common concerns, understanding and commitments. The collaborative curriculum designs advocated by Cranton and Carusetta (2002) and by McIntyre and Cole (2001) in order to develop reflective capacity offer scope for negotiation, contestation and problematisation on the part of those involved, with co-observation and action research also relevant. Cranton and Carusetta, for instance, suggest that collaboration between faculty can help lead one to adopt new perspectives on teaching and learning, as colleagues identify assumptions behind one's practice or alternative viewpoints. Gustavsen (2001) further argues that capacity for the development of practice is affected directly by the richness and variety of the professional relationships that one maintains. These research findings concern not only the possibility for practitioners to generate insights into possible developments in their practice, but also their capacity to engage in coordinated action as professionals. We would suggest that professional identity is grounded in the relationships that one maintains, as well as in one's configuration of (professional) concerns.

Conclusions

In our account of the emergence of the capacity to engage in reflection on academic practice, learning is both dependent on social structures *and* on personal powers. We have suggested that this dependency is mediated through activity that occurs over time, namely the exercise of powers of reflexive deliberation and the occurrence of social interaction. Adapting perspectives from realist social theory, we contend that learning in our given context may be modelled as follows:

- (i) The situations that learners confront involuntarily are objectively shaped by structural and cultural factors, including the programme itself and tasks incorporated into the programme, the knowledge structures involved and the context for professional practice.
- (ii) These factors possess generative powers of constraint and enablement in relation to learners' own configuration of concerns and foci for attention, as subjectively defined in relation to nature, practice and society.
- (iii) Projects of professional learning or educational compliance are produced through the reflexive deliberations of learners and their contemporaneous interactions with teachers and fellow students, allowing learners subjectively to determine these projects in relation to their

own capacities and objective circumstances, resulting also in variation in the creation and application of resources for the adaptation of practice.

The stratified basis for the emergence of reflective capacity is apparent on a range of personal and social levels, with interplay between the different structures and powers helping to account for variation in learning. We see here the power of a critical realist reading, in being explicitly about the ontological foundations for a comprehensive view of professional learning.

We claim that our account of learning in the given context is more comprehensive than that provided either by social constructivist theories or by psychological theories such as approaches to learning. Valsiner and van der Veer (2005, p. 82), for instance, argue that Vygotsky held the postulate ‘The social nature of human cognition emerges in the process of internalization of external social experiences by individuals in the process of socialization.’ We have similarly been able to see how the development of capacity to engage in reflection on academic practice emerges in part from social interaction, recognising also the way in which this feeds into the development of practice. But at the same time we have also explored ways in which capacity to engage in reflection emerges also in relation to the concerns of the individuals involved, and to their own characteristic patterns of reflexive deliberation. In this we go beyond both the theory of approaches to learning and the most obvious reading of realist social theory.

Ashwin (2008) argues that a focus on structure and agency should increase the explanatory power of research into teaching and learning in higher education. The present study incorporates all of the main factors identified within the review by Kahn et al (2008a) as pertinent to the emergence of capacity to engage in reflection on academic practice. As we have already noted, these factors constituted reflective tasks and their foci, personal powers, social interaction, structural factors and epistemological considerations. The power of the explanation means we have been able to offer new insights into the variation in outcomes for individuals on the given programmes of professional education.

Further research will be of value in elaborating our model itself, considering, for example, the role of reflexive deliberation and social interaction in ensuring variation in the focus of attention or one’s intentions towards a task. Archer (2003) has already considered how characteristic patterns of reflexive deliberation influence the concrete specification of courses of action, but there is scope also to consider the influence on learning that arises from characteristic patterns of social interaction. A useful tool here may be Douglas’ group-grid typology (see Wildavsky et al. 1998), which concerns the extent to which one’s life is absorbed in group membership and one’s social context is regulated. There is scope also to explore to a further extent the mutual interactions between reflexive deliberation and social interaction.

We suggest that there is wide scope for analysis of the relations between structure and agency to inform studies into higher education. A number of studies have already begun to apply realist social theory to the study of higher education (see Clegg, 2005; Lockett and Lockett, 2009; and Kahn, 2009). Ashwin (2008) argued also that there is value in comparing the same account of the relation between structure and agency across different contexts. Scope for comparison will evidently increase as additional studies are undertaken that apply realist social theory to the study of higher education. This would help to address the relatively weak theoretical basis for research into higher education that Tight (2004) identifies, and that Teichler (1996) attributes in part to the way in which higher education research is typically focused on objects or themes, rather than on theory. We have shown in this present study how a comprehensive theoretical account may assist synthesis within the field, by exposing the interplay between socio-cultural and individual aspects of learning.

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