

**FACTORS MEDIATING PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT
WITHIN HIGHER LEARNING INSTITUTIONS:
AN ACTIVITY THEORY PERSPECTIVE**

Submitted by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	i
LIST OF FIGURES.....	iii
ABSTRACT	iv
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION.....	1
Aims of the research.....	1
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW.....	3
The importance of acquiring knowledge and skills.....	3
The role of language.....	5
The role of technology	7
The role of peers.....	9
The role of socio-political, economic, and cultural factors	9
CHAPTER 3: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK	14
Vygotsky: First Generation Activity Theory	14
Leont'ev: Second Generation Activity Theory	16
Engeström: Third Generation Activity Theory	17
CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY	21
Research questions	21
The choice of case study design.....	22
Locating the study	22
Method of data collection.....	22
Sample	24
Ethical considerations.....	25
Informed consent	25
Confidentiality.....	26
Benefit to participants.....	26
Data management	26
Methods of data analysis	27
Methodological limitations.....	30
Research sample.....	30
Data collection.....	30
Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA).....	32
CHAPTER 5: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION.....	33
Language of instruction.	34
English language proficiency	34
Implications for assessment of student learning	37
Implications for sociality	38
Possibilities for peer-facilitated learning	39
Reliance on summary texts	40
Technology	43

Negotiating norms	44
CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION	50
The aims of the study revisited	50
Summary of the Research Findings.....	50
Limitations of the research and recommendations.....	52
REFERENCE list.....	54

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Vygotsky's concept of mediated action	14
Figure 2: Engeström's extension of the concept of mediated action.....	18
Figure 3: Blackboard confidentiality announcement.....	25
Figure 4: Summary Table of salient issues in study.....	29
Figure 5: Engeström's Activity System as applied to analysis.....	33
Figure 6: Lecture slide on embodiment.....	41

ABSTRACT

In the context of a higher learning institution, this paper identifies the factors that mediate students' personal and professional development from an Activity Theory perspective. Data took the form of written reflections submitted by second-year psychology students' as part of their course requirements. The reflection exercises were designed to help students to use the knowledge acquired in the second-year programme to reflect on their own understanding of 'self' and the practice of psychology in society.

Data was analysed from an Activity Theory perspective and employed interpretative methodologies. The findings of the study shed light upon the role of contemporary contextual factors mediating students' personal and professional development at a higher learning institution.

Keywords: Activity Theory, higher education, students, development

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides an outline of the aims of the study. These aims are located in the context of higher education in contemporary South Africa. The introduction concludes with a brief outline of each of the other chapters that make up this report.

AIMS OF THE RESEARCH

The primary aim of this research is to identify the factors that mediate students' personal and professional development within higher learning institutions. Education is said to be one of the most significant vehicles in the attainment of personal and professional development (Oladokun, 2006).

Education in South Africa has occurred in the context of many socio-political changes in our recent history, the most significant of which being the end of 46 years of apartheid (Stears, 2009). As such, the role of education in personal and professional development is mediated by the socio-political context in which it occurs.

In South Africa apartheid policy and practice meant that South Africans did not have equal access to education, nor was their quality of education equal. Education was structured according to the positivist world-view which had very little connection to the lives of black South Africans. The policy that informed education during this time claimed that science was not for black people and as such black education was poorly resourced (Stears, 2009). In the context of post-apartheid South Africa this

research is interested in establishing what contemporary factors mediate personal and professional development. A focus on the contemporary context is useful because it allows us to explore which issues are being addressed and which issues continue to impede personal and professional development. These factors are elaborated upon in the literature review.

The decision to focus on the contextual factors that mediate personal and professional development has implications when choosing a theoretical framework. The theoretical framework used in this study is Activity Theory, which was developed by Vygotsky with the aim of elucidating the role of socio-cultural factors that mediate human development. Activity Theory will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3.

The chapters that follow include a review of the literature that informs the study. This chapter has included the important socio-cultural factors that mediate personal and professional development and has provided a rationale for using Activity Theory as the theoretical framework. The next chapter provides a discussion on the theoretical formulation of the study. An in-depth account is given to validate the development of Activity Theory and its applicability to this study. A discussion is then provided on the design and methodology used in the study. The primary aim of the research guides the research design and methodology. This chapter is followed by an analysis of the discussion and findings in relation to Activity Theory. The study is then concluded with a summary of contributions, limitations and recommendations.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section the researcher presents a review of the literature. The review provides an overview of important socio-cultural factors mediating personal and professional development in higher education systems in contemporary South Africa. Discussion of these factors highlights the importance of taking a contextualized approach and provides the groundwork for the appropriateness of employing Activity Theory as a theoretical framework for this study, and will be discussed in Chapter 3.

THE IMPORTANCE OF ACQUIRING KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS

Within the context of higher learning, knowledge and skills are imparted to students during their course of study. Oladokun (2006) argues that education is one of the most significant vehicles in the attainment of personal and professional development because education not only gives us the knowledge and skills that we need in order to be competent professionals; it also contributes directly towards our personal well-being and happiness. This is because the same knowledge and skills that make us competent professionals also help us to adapt to the broader social environment (Oladokun, 2006).

Education is said to empower students with knowledge and skills in order to better their lives. Education institutions not only equip students with knowledge and professional or vocational training, which includes spoken and written language, but they also serve the community at large socially, culturally and economically. Hence, education broadens the students' experience of the social world and enhances their

communication skills and critical thinking ability, while also preparing them for adult role relationships (Al-Zuaibir, 2011).

Related to the transfer of knowledge and skills is the issue of the sort of knowledge and skills that are transferred. It is advocated that curriculum design, which is a fundamental tool for delivering information, should engage in continuous revision and reflection in order to ensure that the needs and rights of learners are addressed and maintained. Those who design new educational frameworks have an obligation to research their subject disciplines in order to ensure that the course content is relevant in terms of social and cultural context. Research should include both content of the courses and the proposed application thereof in order to ensure their relevance to the multi-cultural diversity which exists in South Africa (Hockman, 2005).

With regard to this, it has been acknowledged that during apartheid (1948-1994) the curriculum at higher learning institutions in South Africa, being influenced by the ideology of the times, was insensitive to the needs of many of its citizens (Stears, 2009). Consequently, in post-apartheid South Africa, there is a need to address this through curriculum renewal and the introduction of courses that are more appropriately designed for the community of practice.

The medium through which knowledge and skills are imparted in higher learning institutions is also an important factor. This includes an analysis of the role of teachers and their teaching methods, the use of technology in teaching and learning practice, peer-facilitated learning, the use of various forms of text (i.e. books, journals, class

notes) through which information is disseminated, and the language of instruction (Oladokun,2006; Vaughn & Baker, 2008) .

Writing on the importance of teachers and their different teaching philosophies, Vaughn and Baker (2008) argue that teaching styles play an important role in mediating personal and professional development in this activity system. Teachers who follow a more traditional teaching style tend to approach teaching with an authoritative and expert stance. They focus on expected rules for learners, they direct learners and they emphasize factual information. More recently, a shift in learning styles has occurred where many teachers now lead by personal example while suggesting guidelines and appropriate behaviour. This approach teaches learners by asking questions, exploring options with learners and emphasizing learner responsibility, independence and initiative (Vaughn & Baker, 2008). The teaching style preferred by teachers therefore impacts on the activity of the system as it informs teaching and learning practices that mediate personal and professional development.

THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE

Language plays an important role because without language active engagement with knowledge would not be possible. Meaning and understanding is developed through language (Lindberg, 2003). Consequently, learning outcome is related to the language proficiency of students.

In South Africa English is mostly used as the medium of instruction in higher learning institutions. There are 11 official languages in South Africa and hence many students are required to study in a language other than their mother tongue. These students are systematically disadvantaged since language proficiency mediates the learning process and outcome. This realization prompts teachers in South Africa to be sensitive to non-mother-tongue learners and to promote a motivating learning environment (Benzie, 2010).

Legislation (Act 12 of 1998) in South Africa currently asserts that education should be available and accessible to all. The aim is to rectify the imbalances in education by providing equal education and incorporating learner support as a regulation ("Education Policy Act 12 of 1998", n.d.). In keeping with this legislation, the University of Fort Hare includes learner support services to assist students in achieving learning outcomes. Included in the university's mission statement is the promise to uphold the principles of equity across gender, racial and disability lines. The services include a Foundation Programme and a Grounding Programme which are committed to building a culture of reading, writing, critical thinking, dialogue and social engagement that builds students' competence both personally and academically. Additionally, the University hosts a Teaching and Learning Centre (TLC) which addresses challenges in communication and language proficiency faced by students.

In addition to overt University structure, Benzie (2010) offers some useful techniques that will aid students' development. These include mentor programs and group class activities which aid in language development and communication. In order to achieve

successful language proficiency, learners should be able to communicate and engage fully in a range of cultural contexts. This implies that students need not only to acquire knowledge of language but also to be able to use that language for different purposes; for example, personal communication, social environments and learning institutions. In relation to the Activity Theory perspective it is thus evident that language proficiency has a profound impact on students' personal and professional development (Benzie, 2010).

THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY

The use of technology in teaching and learning practice is an increasingly important topic for discussion. There are an increasing number of student enrolments in higher education facilities, and technology is seen to be a tool for coping with this. Benefits of technology include video conferencing which enables lectures by one lecturer to occur across campuses simultaneously, thus cutting costs and increasing the accessibility of lectures. Technology increases the efficiency and reduces the cost of exam processing by allowing for electronic submission and marking of assessments. Lecture notes are also delivered electronically and the live projection of practicals through closed-circuit television are made possible. Technology makes it easier for students to study where and when they want to, because learning materials can be accessed off-campus after hours (Gower, 2010).

According to O'Neil (1981), the different forms of text (books, journals, class notes) can play various roles in this activity system. Text is the main interface where the students engage with the subject. It is thus a useful medium of orientation and also

a means for study outside the classroom. Moreover, text allows the comparison and swapping of stories that talk to the cultural and historical contexts in which they are formulated (O'Neil, 1981).

More recently, literature on technology-enhanced learning suggests that technology is not simply a vehicle for delivering information, but actually changes the way in which we learn. From this understanding students are believed to learn *with* technology rather than to learn *from* technology. Technology increases the control that learners have over the learning process and offers a more efficient and effective means to traditional alternatives (Churchill, 2005).

Academic literature (Dale & Pymm, 2009) portrays technology as a prominent mediating factor in students' personal and professional development in contemporary society. Technologies are seen as a significant part of young people's lives (among these being mobile phones, virtual reality and computer games). Students in modern society are termed 'digital natives' who "think and process information fundamentally differently" (Dale & Pymm, 2009, p.84). Erstad (2003) states that new technologies should not only be seen as a continuation of old technologies but rather as a medium that transforms the way we create knowledge and meaning, communicate, and interact. Technology can thus be seen to play a role in the acquisition of knowledge and skills that mediate personal and professional development.

THE ROLE OF PEERS

According to Boud, Cohen and Sampson (1999), peer-facilitated learning also plays an essential role in personal and professional development within higher learning institutions. Students who work in collaboration are able to share responsibilities, compare and discuss information, and develop a richer understanding of the subject material. Students gain insights through teamwork and being a part of a learning community. They develop the ability to enhance enquiry, and their reflection increases their communication skills. Thus peer-facilitated learning contributes to the social, emotional and cognitive needs of learners. This collaboration is an essential element in fostering unity and creating understanding amongst students.

THE ROLE OF SOCIO-POLITICAL, ECONOMIC, AND CULTURAL FACTORS

In addition to the role of 'traditional' factors, socio-political, economic and cultural factors have also been identified as important mediating factors in students' personal and professional development. This is because the information delivered through the curriculum, the facilities (e.g. school buildings), technology (e.g. computers) and all other resources (e.g. teachers, books, etc.) that are made available to learners are all subject to and directly influenced by these factors. Thus these factors are seen to play a significant role in what is taught in the classroom (Bozalek & Matthews, 2009), including being pivotal in mediating and regulating the availability of resources and how and to whom these resources are delivered (Churchill, 2005). For example, many rural communities and schools in South Africa are affected by adverse factors such as poverty and the lack of basic requirements such as water and electricity, and

this inhibits the opportunities for the attainment of, and ability to use, modern technology (Xu, 2002).

Furthermore, politics influences curriculum. In recognition of this the New National Curriculum, which was introduced in post-apartheid South Africa, was designed with the explicit purpose of offering a new approach to education. This new approach to education advocated the development of knowledge and skills relevant to the social and cultural context (Hockman, 2005) and also the importance of education for democracy and citizenship (Stears, 2009). This policy constituted the right of all South Africans to equal education. It did not however adequately address structural inequalities such as library facilities, equipment, and basic necessities such as electricity; leaving black education poorly supported and resourced (Stears, 2009). It is argued that former 'whites only' educational institutions, although they are desegregated, are still disproportionately privileged institutions (Xu, 2002). This means that access to quality education and educational resources continues to be an issue in the post-apartheid context.

Students belong to communities that are not equally resourced. According to Vygotsky (as cited in Stears, 2009), the direction of development occurs from the social to the individual. As such, learning does not take place in cognitive isolation, but rather within the context of various social, political and economic contingencies (Stears, 2009). This means that there are developmental implications for students from differently resourced communities.

It is important to acknowledge that students belong to multiple communities - geographic, religious, ethnic, educational (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005). In terms of educational institutions there is a further divide between institutions that are resourced and those that are under-resourced. These institutions also function to serve particular communities accordingly. Furthermore, each community has its own rules and expectations which influence and sometimes restrict students' personal and professional development. In the community in which the researcher was raised, it was expected that men would be the breadwinners. One consequence of this was that it advocated a special entitlement, relative to women, to access higher education.

'Cultural capital' (Reay, Crozier & Clayton, 2009) refers to the interaction of socio-cultural and economic factors that influence human behaviour. The 'cultural capital' of students is said to determine, to a large extent, their learning outcomes and hence their personal and professional development (Reay, Crozier & Clayton, 2009). Alexander (2002) proposes that cultural influence and economic conditions need to be considered by curriculum designers in order to develop a deeper understanding of students' backgrounds, assumptions and expectations, which will then enable the development of learning experiences that allow students and teachers to move between different cultures to obtain desired outcomes – language being a fundamental element in such contemplation, since language and culture are seen to be inseparable (Fageeh, 2011). It has been argued that low performance by students may be in part due to factors beyond the scope of the formal educational system. Declining social and economic conditions of learners and their families negatively

impact on student motivation, family support and students' ability to engage with educational expectations (Xu, 2002).

Unequal opportunities are apparent in different kinds of teaching and learning practices in higher learning institutions. Traditional and non-traditional teaching and learning practices have implications for student/instructor responsibilities and rules and interactions between students and their instructors. Stears (2009) argues that students' learn best in an environment that is mutually and actively negotiated by the instructor and the learners. This means that instructors should acknowledge different cultural experiences and knowledge, and they should play an active role in the empowerment of learners (Stears, 2009).

Vygotsky (1978) maintains that meaning is jointly constructed. Hence knowledge is a result of struggle and engagement and is deeply related to argumentation and mediated action in social context. Erstad (2003) suggests that empowerment is related to the active use of different tools, and as such, instructors at higher education institutions should help learners to acquire the competence and power to use them, rather than reinstate traditional hierarchies that are not conducive to the optimal development of the learners.

The process of becoming, or the attainment of students' personal and professional development within higher learning institutions, occurs at two levels. On one level, access to information through instruction at higher education institutions mediates engagement with knowledge and skills development and, consequently, their personal and professional development. On another level, students' engagement

with knowledge and skills development as well as the methods of instruction are mediated by contextual factors (social, political, economic, cultural), which must therefore also be seen to play a role in mediating students' personal and professional development within higher learning institutions.

In the following chapter a discussion is provided on the appropriateness of using Activity Theory as a theoretical framework in this study in order to establish the socio-cultural factors that mediate students' personal and professional development.

CHAPTER 3: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this chapter a brief overview of Vygotsky's work on mediated action as it pertains to the development and progression of Activity Theory is given. Following on this, a discussion on Leont'ev's contribution to Second Generation Activity Theory is provided. The main focus of this chapter is on Engeström's development of Third Generation Activity Theory, which is drawn upon in this study. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the relevance of Activity Theory as a theoretical framework for this study.

VYGOTSKY: FIRST GENERATION ACTIVITY THEORY

Activity Theory emerged from the work of Vygotsky (1978), who was interested in developing a psychological theory that could account for the way in which human behaviour is mediated by the socio-cultural context. This assumption is represented diagrammatically in Figure 1 (below).

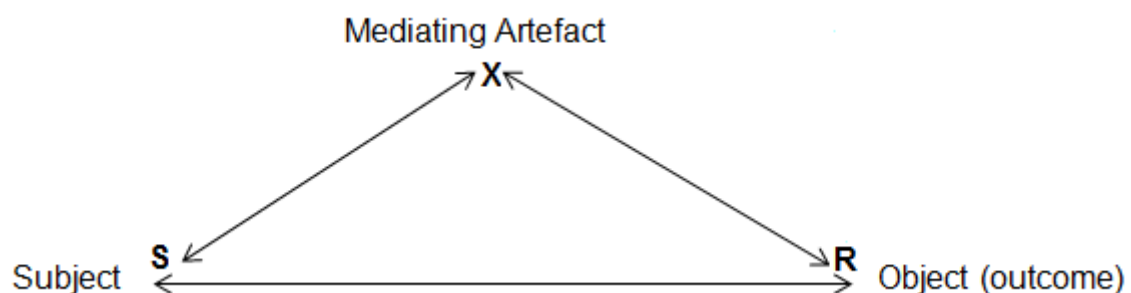


Figure 1: Vygotsky's (1978) concept of mediated action

According to Vygotsky (1978), all human behaviour is intentional, and directed toward achieving a particular outcome. However, an individual's ability to achieve this outcome is mediated by contextual factors. Vygotsky (1978) argued that these factors take the form of socio-cultural artefacts, or *tools*, that individuals can draw upon to achieve their aims.

Vygotsky (1978) argued that knowledge is embodied in culture, and cultural transmission of knowledge occurs through interaction with living representatives of culture. Within the educational context this means that both students and teachers are active participants in the learning activity. However, because teachers structure learning, they mediate the learning process by guiding, interpreting and giving meaning to the students' experiences. Vygotsky coined the term 'Zone of Proximal Development' to describe this process. It refers to "the distance between the actual level of development as determined by independent problem-solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (as cited in Hook, Watts & Cockcroft, 2002, p.192). In other words, it distinguishes between the level of achievement that students are able to achieve on their own, and what they are able to achieve with guidance. The students' personal and professional development is therefore seen to reflect both their cultural experiences and also their opportunities for access to more knowledgeable others who have already mastered particular domains of expertise and knowledge (Hook, Watts & Cockcroft, 2002).

LEONT'EV: SECOND GENERATION ACTIVITY THEORY

While Vygotsky's concept of mediated action provides a way of understanding how human behaviour is mediated by the context in which it occurs, his formulation did not adequately elaborate on the role of other human beings (the group to which the individual belongs, for example) and broader social relations. Second Generation Activity Theory was influenced by the work of Leont'ev, who expanded on the difference between individual action and collective activity by focusing on the *division of labour* (Hardman, 2008). The division of labour refers to the division of tasks within a community (Hardman, 2008).

Vygotsky's (1978) concept of mediated action focuses on mediation at the level of individual actors, and only hints at the collective context of systems of human activity. Leont'ev (1979) elaborated on the importance of collective context and illustrated how cognitive change occurs within a collective context. Leont'ev defined activity as "purposeful interaction of the subject with the world, a process in which mutual transformations of the poles of subject-object are accomplished" (as cited in Hardman, 2008, p.6). It is said to include the context surrounding human actions. Second Generation Activity Theory thus situates learning within a wider context, accounting for the collective and dynamic nature of activities. Activity, and hence learning, is seen as a social endeavour and Leont'ev's work provides a sense of how individual actions play out against the meaningful background of a social activity (Hardman, 2008).

The *division of labour* is introduced to describe the social distribution of activity. Society and culture are noted to have a great deal of influence on the human mind.

This implies that collaborative activity is a common occurrence (Leont'ev, 1979). Although participation is essentially inevitable, it is a complex phenomenon because there is no clear relation between what an individual is doing and why he is doing it (Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006).

ENGESTRÖM: THIRD GENERATION ACTIVITY THEORY

Third Generation Activity Theory builds on the work of both Vygotsky and Leont'ev. However, Third Generation Activity Theory takes the notion of hierarchical levels of human functioning further. It does this by illustrating how “individual actions are transformed into shared, collective objects through interactions with community members, or indeed how the division of labour impacts on individual actions in collective activity” (Hardman, 2008, p.6).

Third Generation Activity Theory adds two additional dimensions to the notion of mediated action: *community* and *rules*. *Rules* are the laws, particular conditions, or normative expectations governing human behaviour. In relation to *community*, a collective of which an individual is a part, *rules* can refer to the social and cultural conventions that determine doing and appropriate doing (Engeström, 1987). Figure 2 (below) provides a diagrammatic representation of mediated action from the perspective of Third Generation Activity Theory.

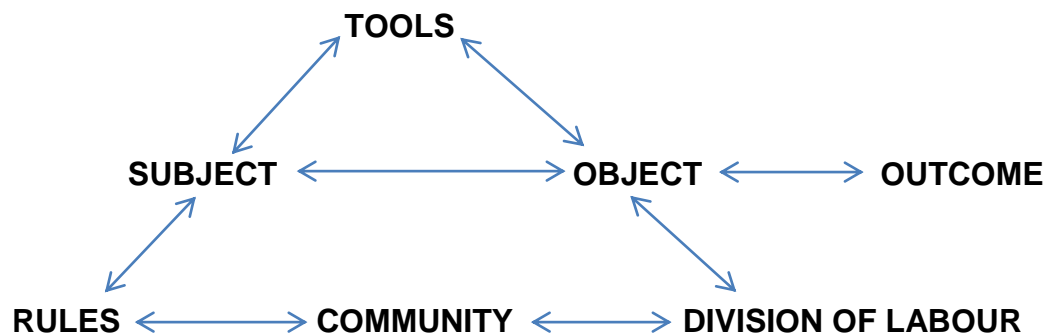


Figure 2: Engeström's (1987) extension of the concept of mediated action

In this study, which explores how students' personal and professional development within the context of higher education is mediated by contextual factors, Activity Theory provides a theoretical framework that identifies salient dimensions for analysis. This is because the dimensions of mediated action (subject-specific factors, tools, rules, community, and division of labour, represented diagrammatically in Figure 2 above) can be used to speak to the issues that are highlighted in the literature review.

Students (subject) develop personally and professionally (outcome) through the acquisition of knowledge and skills development (object). This process is mediated by the use of particular tools, implicated by students' community of origin. It is subject to the rules governing the acquisition of knowledge and skills development, and impacted on by the division of labour within higher education institutions.

Thus, this study approaches personal and professional development in higher education as an activity system. In this activity system, *tools* can be thought of as, for

example, course content, the availability of instructors and instructor expertise, and the other modes through which students engage with knowledge, such as books and academic journals, and as well as various technologies for engaging with knowledge. A focus on *tools* allows for an analysis of, for example, the need to develop an appropriate curriculum. This is an issue that is highlighted in the literature on personal and professional development in high learning institutions (Stears, 2009).

In the context of this study, rules can be thought of as guiding entrance requirements to university, directing learning outcomes, and instructing academic practices such as citation and referencing styles. By focusing on rules, it is possible to make observations about the interaction of various dimensions in the activity system. This is elaborated upon below.

In the context of this study, *community* refers to the student community within higher education. However, it is important to keep in mind that different universities serve different communities, some of which are traditionally more advantaged than others. In the literature review it is argued that students come from differently resourced communities, and that this has implications for their personal and professional development (Alexander, 2002). Students who come from resource-poor communities are often under-prepared for higher education. Thus, entrance or examination requirements (rules) can inadvertently discriminate against students from less advantaged communities.

Furthermore, as student communities are geographically located, it must be acknowledged that other factors such as ethnic, racial and religious differences are also salient mediating factors at the level of community.

In the context of this study *division of labour* refers to the responsibilities allocated to students and teachers. The New National Curriculum is committed to addressing inequality, and as such teachers structure their lectures at the level of previously disadvantaged communities. The use of slides by lecturers provides learning material in a concise and easy-to-read format which addresses the limited English proficiency of learners. Learners are encouraged to make use of the student support centres to increase competency and to engage effectively with learning material (Stears, 2009).

In closing, Third Generation Activity Theory provides a theoretical framework in which personal and professional development within the context of higher learning institutions is viewed as an activity system. Within this system, personal and professional development is mediated not only by the immediate tools within this environment but is also influenced by rules, community, and the division of labour. Thus, Activity Theory acknowledges the dynamic interplay between various components in the activity system. The focus on mediation and the use of tools in a socio-cultural context make Third Generation Activity Theory applicable in determining the socio-cultural factors that mediate students' personal and professional development within higher learning institutions (Hardman, 2008). In the next chapter the various methodologies employed in this study will be discussed.

CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, decisions pertaining to research design and methodology are discussed. This discussion is situated in relation to the research aim, and the questions framing the inquiry. It includes an explanation of the procedures for data collection and analysis, as well as strategies employed to ensure the validity and reliability of the results.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

As mentioned in the introduction, the aim of this research is to elucidate the socio-cultural factors mediating personal and professional development in a higher education context. In Chapter 2 an overview of some of the mediating factors that are relevant to the context in which my study is located. In Chapter 4 the appropriateness of Activity Theory as a theoretical framework for this study was discussed. The focus on mediating factors led to the articulation of two questions that inform this inquiry. The first question is: 'Which socio-cultural factors mediate personal and professional development in a higher education context?' The second question is: 'What are the implications of these factors for personal and professional development?' With regard to this, the researcher was interested to know whether the socio-cultural factors identified hinder or facilitate personal and professional development.

THE CHOICE OF CASE STUDY DESIGN

This research takes the form of a case study. Rather than exploring socio-cultural factors mediating personal and professional development in the entire higher education context, this study explores factors in one particular case. A case study makes it possible to capture the uniqueness of a particular case rather than to use it for wider generalisation, or for theoretical inference (Yin, 1994). Thus, it is the specificities of the inquiry that defines a case study rather than the characteristics of its methodology.

Locating the study

This study focuses on the socio-cultural factors mediating personal and professional development among undergraduate Social Science students at a historically disadvantaged tertiary institution in South Africa. This location was chosen for two reasons. The first reason was that it was accessible. The second reason was that it provided an opportunity to explore how socio-cultural factors mediate personal and professional development in a context where the role of these factors are perhaps more salient than they might be in more affluent contexts.

METHOD OF DATA COLLECTION

Data took the form of student reflection exercises written by second year psychology students. These were designed to help students to use the knowledge acquired in the second year programme to reflect on their own understanding of 'self' and the practice of psychology in society. The focus on self and society in the second year

course provided an ideal context to elucidate socio-cultural factors mediating student's development. The student's reflections were submitted on Blackboard – a virtual learning environment (VLE) with a suite of tools designed to support teaching and learning activities. Accessing the reflections in an online environment meant that the data was available in electronic text.

The students were asked to submit written reflections on three topics. Question one had a number of sub-questions which were intended to stimulate responses. Question two and three provided an instruction required to lead the discussion.

1. What does it mean to be a person?
 - a) Do our body and mind play a role in shaping who we are?
 - b) What makes people similar to and different from one another?
 - c) What role do subconscious fears and individual experiences play in shaping who we are?
 - d) What part do society and culture play in shaping who we are?
2. What does it mean to be 'me'?
 - a) This question requires a reflection on Personality Theories which can be included in the discussion.
3. What does it mean to be a psychologist?
 - a) Students are required to incorporate an understanding of personality development within their responses.

In addressing the questions above, students were advised to draw upon points that arose from class discussions and from their own experiences. They were also encouraged to add any other questions that they considered pertinent to their discussion.

SAMPLE

The entire sample consisted of 338 written reflections which were submitted by 150 students. As the data corpus was very large, it was necessary to draw a sub-sample. This was drawn from the reflections for analysis based on the principle of *theoretical saturation* (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999). Theoretical saturation is a term taken from Grounded Theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). It “marks the point when one stops collecting new material because it no longer adds anything to one’s unfolding analysis” (Terre Blanche et. al.1999, p. 288).

Given that the researcher had access to all of the reflections to begin with, theoretical saturation meant analysing reflections until no new themes emerged. As the data was derived from students written reflections on three different topics, the process of theoretical saturation was followed for each topic. After this process was followed, the sub-sample consisted of 131 student reflections.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Informed consent

Students were notified that their Blackboard submissions would be used for research purposes. This notification took the form of an electronic message that appeared on screen automatically when student's logged onto Blackboard. A copy of the notification appears in Figure 3 (below).

Figure 3: Blackboard confidentiality announcement

Notice

Blackboard is a teaching and learning tool. From time to time the Department will use information uploaded to this site for research purposes. In such instances all identifying information is changed or omitted such that your identity is kept confidential. By using Blackboard you consent to these provisions. All queries pertaining to this should be addressed to Jacqui Marx.

Students were given an opportunity to decline to participate in the research by notifying the course coordinator. It was decided that, in the event that a student declined to participate, that student's submissions would be excluded from the data corpus. However, no such requests were received. As all the students registered for the course were over the age of eighteen years, they were able to offer their own consent. However, as this research was conducted within an institutional setting, consent from the institution was also obtained.

Confidentiality

Consent to conduct the research was obtained on the provision that students would not be individually recognised. To protect students' identities, students' names and student numbers, which labelled their submissions, were replaced with a number code. Any other information that had the potential to identify an individual student was either changed or removed.

Reflections, once changed to protect students' identity, were stored on Atlas TI, with access given only to the primary researcher and supervisor.

Benefit to participants

The students in this study did not obtain any direct benefit from participating in this research. However, the department and the institution may gain valuable knowledge and insight into the factors that mediate students' personal and professional development, which may be used to inform future teaching and learning practice in such a way as to enhance the experiences of future students at the institution.

DATA MANAGEMENT

The students' written reflections, in the form of electronic text, were uploaded onto Atlas TI – a computer programme used to assist in the analysis of qualitative data in that it provides a means for managing large volumes of data. Atlas TI makes it possible to code data according to specified themes. Frequency counts are then

derived from these instances (Silverman, 2000). It offers a structured data management system that is critical to tracking, accessing, and documenting the available data and contributing to efficiency of data analysis (Wickham & Woods, 2005). As such, Atlas TI acts as an assistant for data management as well as contributing towards the inter-rater reliability of the results of the study. It also becomes possible to create diagrammatic representations of the emerging themes (Silverman, 2000).

METHODS OF DATA ANALYSIS

The analysis took a mixed-method approach. First, a thematic analysis was employed in order to code data in relation to recurring themes. These themes were informed by the Activity Theory framework (Engeström, 1987). This involved the identification of themes salient to the different elements of an activity system: tools, rules, community, and division of labour. This culminated in a frequency count of all the identifiable themes which made it possible to identify particularly salient themes (themes with the most coded instances).

Once these salient themes were identified, a more in-depth Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis was conducted in order to explore these themes in more detail. “Phenomenology is concerned with the ways in which human beings gain knowledge of the world around them” (Willig, 2001). A phenomenological approach relates to the world as it is experienced by students within the context of higher learning institutions in contemporary South Africa.

Three phases of contemplation are used to gain understanding within Phenomenological Analysis: (Willig, 2001)

1. Epoche: This requires the suspension of presuppositions and assumptions, judgements and interpretations.

2. Phenomenological reduction: Wherein we describe the phenomena before us in totality; creating awareness of what makes the experience what it is.

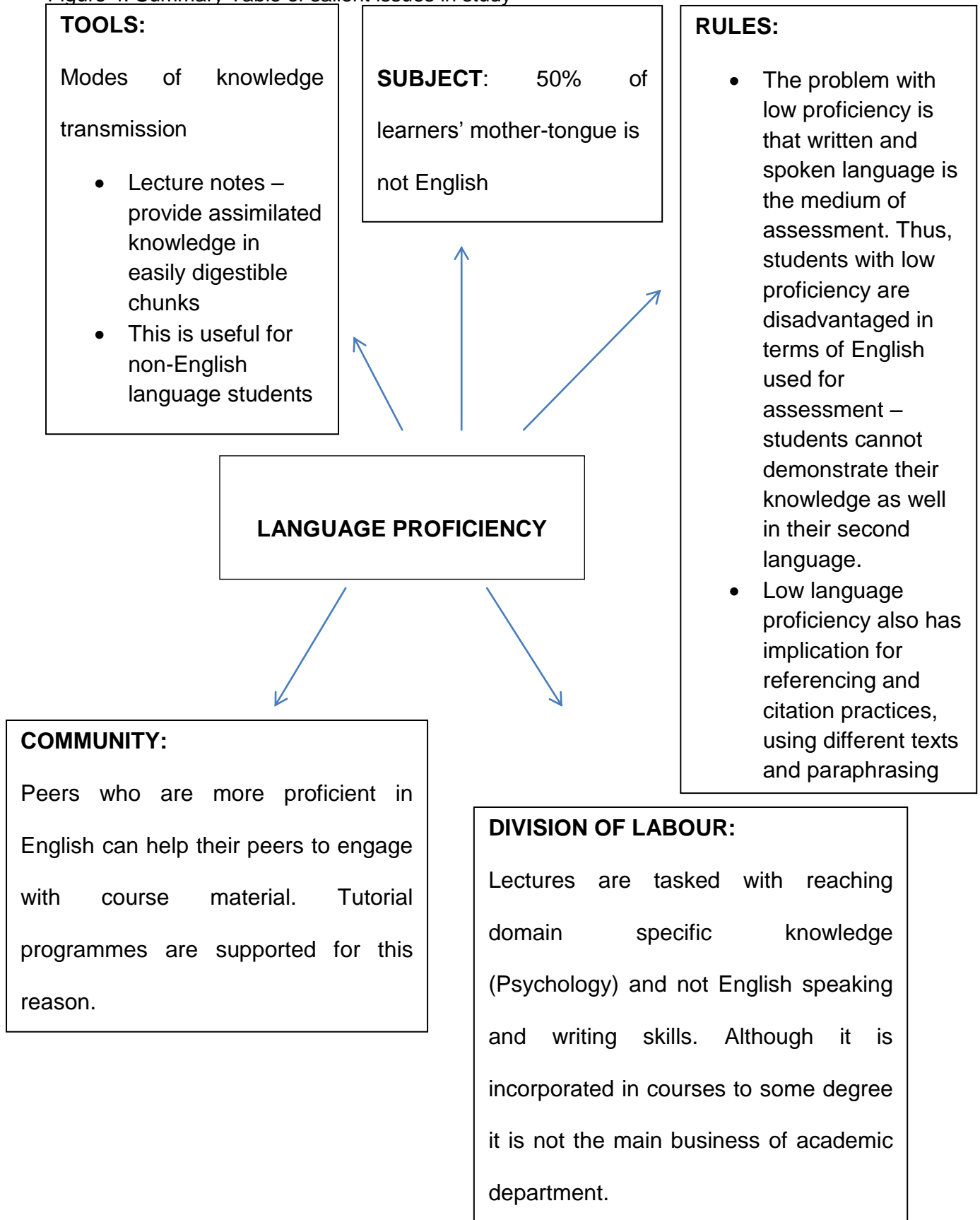
3. Imaginative variation: In which we attempt to access the structural components of the phenomenon and aim to identify the conditions associated with the phenomenon.

The procedural steps for doing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis in the study were as follows. The first stage was to read and re-read the students' reflections. Notes were made that documented initial thoughts and observations. The second stage was to identify and label *themes* that were prevalent in the data. Each *theme* was conceptualised. The third stage introduced structure into the analysis. In this stage each *theme* was analysed in relation to others, and inter-relationships between them were established. The fourth stage involved the production of a summary table of the structured *themes*. This included quotations that illustrated each *theme*. The summary table provides a clear and systematic overview and captures the students' experience in context (Willig, 2001).

Thus, the analysis aimed at making sense of human experience within the context and perspective of human experience. Moreover, it acknowledged that we cannot

apprehend human development without understanding the socio-cultural context which shapes it.

Figure 4: Summary Table of salient issues in study



The data analysis included drawing on the *refutability principle* with the intention of refuting assumed relations between phenomena. This was made possible by using the *comparative method*. Analysis started by analysing a small number of student reflections. As categories became evident it became possible to test emerging hypotheses by steadily expanding the data corpus. The use of appropriate *tabulations* in respect of frequency counts contributed to this end (Silverman, 2000).

METHODOLOGICAL LIMITATIONS

Research Sample

The study consisted of a sample of 338 reflections submitted by approximately 150 2nd year students. A sub-sample was drawn of 131 reflections for the data analysis. The research must acknowledge the limitations of conducting research in a single higher learning institution and then generalising the findings to represent higher learning institutions in general. The sample was also drawn from a single class within this institution and thus the context (2nd year psychology students) may present data that is not representative of the views of the university at large.

Data collection

The data collection was in the form of written reflections. The students were required to write three reflections as part of their course requirements. Since these reflections were structured in terms of particular topics, this determined, to some degree, what students wrote about. Consequently, some important issues might have been overlooked. For example, gender inequality and economic factors are not explicitly

identified and discussed by students in their reflections; although these might be salient factors mediating opportunities for personal and professional development.

The possibility also exists that power dynamics may also have influenced the students' responses. The possibility exists that students' personal views may be compromised in order to provide reflections that were in line with what they believed the lecturer would want. There is thus a possibility that information may be lost or obscured in this process. A possible recommendation for future studies is to create focus groups. This term is a general term given to the research interview with groups of people. Accessing information in this manner will allow for inter-subjective experience to be known. "Inter-subjective experience is experience shared by a community of people" (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999, p.388). An additional benefit is that focus groups can be made up of students across faculties, including diversity of gender, race, culture and so forth. This sample would ensure a broader representation of the student population in the higher learning institution.

The research recommends that this study be used as a foundation for further research. It may be useful to replicate or conduct similar studies in a range of higher learning institutions in South Africa. This would both validate this study and additionally it would build on knowledge gained in this study. A broader study would also provide the possibility of including other themes or findings that were not evident in this study. A study that can reflect the factors that mediate students' personal and professional development through a national investigation could prove beneficial to the Education Department in analysing and reassessing the future curriculum. Thus this study acknowledges the potential of the study to be expanded upon and acts in

essence as a pilot study for the investigation into factors that mediate students' personal and professional development within higher learning institutions.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

The use of IPA has certain conceptual and practical limitations. IPA relies on the representational validity of language – assuming that students' reflections (in the form of text) capture their experiences. This assumption discounts the possibility that language can never really give expression to experience. Rather language adds meaning to what is being said, making access to students' experience impossible (Willig, 2001)

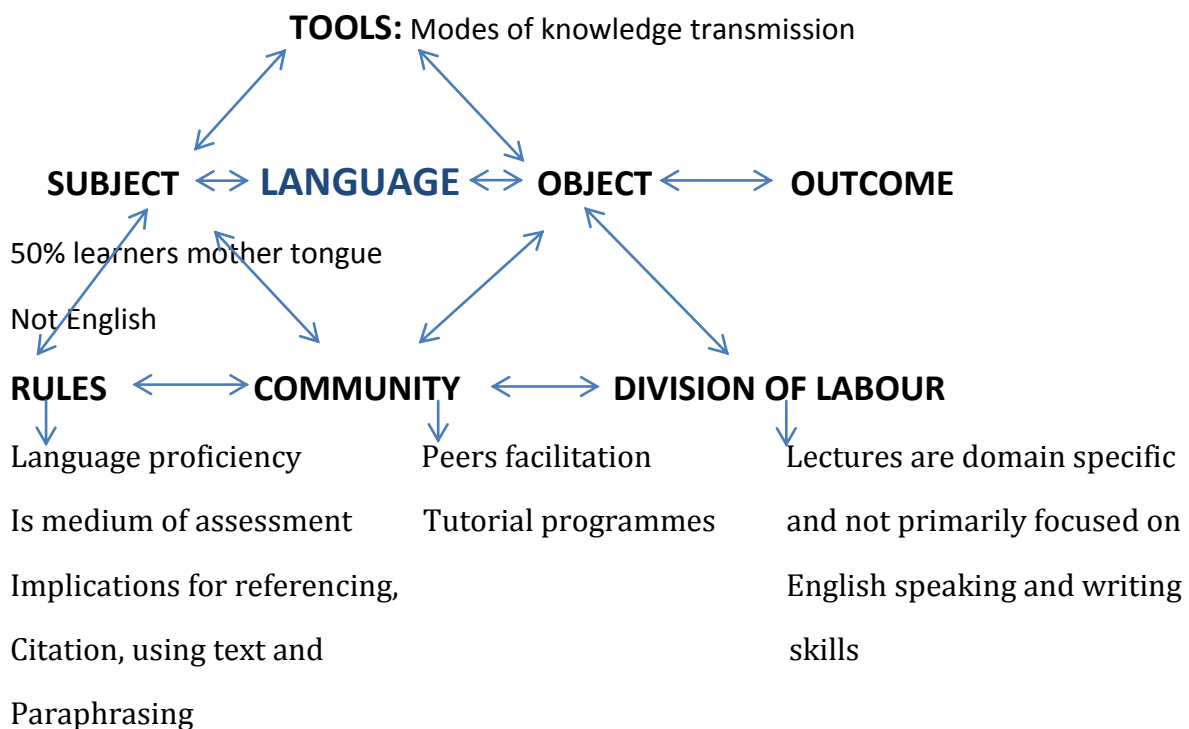
A second consideration is that much of what human beings perceive is not a direct reflection of the conditions that give rise to the perception. As such IPA describes and documents the lived experience of students' in higher learning institutions, but it does not explain such experiences, limiting the understanding of their phenomena (Willig, 2001).

This chapter provided an outline of the research design and methodology employed in this study. In the next chapter the results of the analysis are presented for discussion.

CHAPTER 5: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this chapter a discussion of the findings of the analysis of socio-cultural factors mediating student's personal and professional development in a higher learning context from an Activity Theory perspective is provided. This discussion is structured around a central theme: English language instruction. A number of related sub-themes are identified and introduced in the discussion. Selected verbatim extracts from student's reflections have been inserted in the discussion in order to substantiate analytic observations.

Figure 5: Engeström Activity System (1987) as applied to analysis



LANGUAGE OF INSTRUCTION

English is the official language of instruction at the institution in which this study is located. This is despite the fact that English is not the mother-tongue of the vast majority of the population living in the province in which the university is situated. This state of affairs is not unique to this institution. The English language has traditionally been the medium of instruction at tertiary institutions in South Africa. It has remained so, even after democratic change.

An analysis of the various debates on this issue is beyond the scope of this study. It is suffice to say that the issue is a controversial one, and far from resolved. However, as the implications of this state of affairs is a salient factor mediating students' personal and professional development within the context of this study, this issue is discussed with specific reference to the participants in this study.

English language proficiency

As was noted in the previous chapter detailing the research design and methodology, a subsample of 131 student reflections were analysed in order to identify which socio-cultural factors mediated students' personal and professional development within the context of a higher learning institution. The researcher started by reading and re-reading each reflection in order to become familiar with its content. This is an important first step because it allows the researcher to make observations about the data that can be used to inform the coding process.

One of the first observations, which came from an initial reading of the students' reflections, was that there were vast differences in students' English language proficiency. Informed by this observation, the researcher set about separating the students' reflections into two groups: those indicating high or low English language proficiency. There are, no doubt, formal criteria for determining an individual's English language proficiency. However, for the purposes of this study, I used: (a) spelling and grammatical accuracy, and (b) appropriate use of concepts and terminology.

An example of work that was categorized as 'high proficiency' appears in Extract 1 below. An example of work that was categorized as 'low proficiency' appears in Extract 2.

Extract 1: 'high proficiency'

According to Skinner, "Humans like any other organism, produce behaviour and are controlled by the outcome of their behaviour in that the environment determines what behaviour will be acquired and repeated" (WF Meyer, C Moore, HG Viljoen, 2008, pg. 269). The society, culture or environment that we come from can determine certain mind-sets and behaviour; contributing to who we are as people. For example, my parents raised me with certain values. My parents are the role models that have shaped me into the person I am today.

Extract 2: 'low proficiency'

The environment affect the way that I think and behave in to sense that I have to allow the environment to nature my being, because I cannot have my own space I have to be around my environment and do as other people do.

Both Extract 1 and Extract 2 indicate the students' understanding of the role of the environment in shaping their behaviour. However, Extract 2 shows grammatical errors not evident in Extract 1. In addition, in the second line of Extract 2, the student identified as having low English language proficiency uses the term 'nature'. However, 'nurture' is the appropriate psychological term for discussing the role of the environment. 'Nature' refers to innate, hereditary and biological factors. Arguably, it is easy to make this sort of error when one is not writing in one's home language. By comparison, in Extract 1, the student identified as having high English language proficiency accurately incorporates the concept of 'role model' into a discussion of the role of the environment in shaping human behaviour. Moreover the student is able to use direct quotations to substantiate the context as an influential factor on the development of the person.

The examples of English language proficiency which are presented in Extracts 1 and 2 (above) were selected for inclusion in this discussion because they are exemplary. There were instances where students' reflections displayed both high and low English language proficiency, which made it difficult to categorise those reflections. In those instances, I opted for leniency, and categorized the student's work as high English language proficiency.

The purpose of dividing the data according to these categories was to establish an approximate percentage of students for whom English language proficiency might be an important issue. From the sub-sample of 131 reflections, 66 students were identified as having high English language proficiency and 65 students were identified as having Low English language proficiency according to the criteria set

out by the research. Thus, at a conservative estimate, at least half of the students who submitted written reflections had low English language proficiency. This is an important observation about the 'subject' in the activity system.

The finding that the reflections of half of the students in this study show low English language proficiency is significant because, as Lindberg (2003) points out, language proficiency is closely tied to the ability to engage with knowledge and to communicate effectively with others. Thus, in an environment where English is the medium of instruction, low English language proficiency has real implications for students' development. As language is integral to communication and the ability to engage with new information, students who have low English language proficiency can be seen to be at a disadvantage in this regard.

Implications for assessment of student learning

Inasmuch as poor language proficiency can severely impede students' ability to communicate effectively and engage with knowledge, it may also contribute towards the construction of social presuppositions and stereotypes. Benzie (2010) argues that students who have low language proficiency are often assumed to be 'deficient' learners, not because of their learning styles, but because of their inability to adequately express and externalise their knowledge and understanding of the subject material. This has implications at the level of 'rules' in the activity system.

In the education context formal assessment is one form that 'rules' take. Formal assessment is a traditional characteristic of the education context; it is the means by

which students' understanding of course material is evaluated. Furthermore, students are unable to graduate and to enter into their chosen occupation without meeting the minimum educational requirements of their field of study. Thus, there are direct developmental implications for students with low language proficiency.

Implications for sociality

Interestingly, while half of the students in this study exhibited low English language proficiency, this was not a factor that the students identified as an obstacle in their academic endeavour. Rather, students' concerns centred on the fact that language presented a social barrier. This is evidenced by the student's statements in Extract 3 (below).

Extract 3: Language as a social barrier

Language can make it difficult for us...to understand each other as we are not speaking the same language.

The implication of this is that language is not only a factor that mediates professional development *vis a vis* students' engagement with new knowledge and their ability to communicate their understanding of course content, but it also impedes interpersonal relations. This is significant because it means that language proficiency affects even those students with high (English) language proficiency, but who are completely lacking proficiency in other languages such as isiXhosa.

Students' collaboration with each other to reach mutual goals is considered a prerequisite for operating in a complex society (which includes different race groups,

culture and gender) (Boud, Cohen & Sampson, 1999). As such, social connections in higher learning institutions aid in bridging the racial divide, foster professional development, and prepare students for corporate life.

Possibilities for peer-facilitated learning

The implications of language proficiency for interpersonal relations mean that it is an issue that is not contained at the level of the 'subject', but mediate personal and professional development at the level of 'community' too. At this level, language proficiency can be a barrier (as evident in Extract 3), but it can also facilitate development. Recognition of this has made peer-facilitated learning a viable strategy in educational contexts. At the university where this study is located, student tutors are employed to provide academic assistance to undergraduate students. Thus, students who are more advanced academically and who are more skilled language users provide oversight and direction to their peers. Much of this assistance is provided in the student's home language.

Boud, Cohen, and Sampson (1999) suggest that students who work in collaboration, who share responsibilities, and compare and discuss information, develop a richer understanding of the subject material. An example is provided in Extract 4 and 5 below.

Extract 4: Student writing on peer interaction

"The more you socialize and talk and interact with all people (black, white, indian, chinesse) the easier it is for a person to understand another person".

Extract 5: Benefits of working together

“To understand someone is difficult if you are not socializing with her/him...but easy if you are working together, studying and most important socializing together”.

The interplay between culture, community and the learning community is thus evident in the results of this study and supports the notion provided in the literature review that peer-facilitated learning and interaction contributes to the social and psychological needs of learners in the Activity System model (Engeström, 1987).

Reliance on summary texts

In the section on language proficiency, it was stated that a number of students' submissions evidenced both low and high English language proficiency. On closer inspection, it was discovered that 47 submissions contained verbatim and unreferenced extracts from the lecturers' PowerPoint slides, which had been made available to students on the Blackboard site. Extract 4 (below) is taken from a student submission. The extract is inserted here because it evidences a verbatim extract from a lecture slide. A copy of the lecture slide is inserted in Figure 3 (on page 41).

Extract 6: Student writing on embodiment

Our body is like a vehicle for exercising skill. Communicating and relating to others sensing and feeling.

Embodiment

The body is the vehicle for:

- Exercising of skills
- Acting in the world
- Communicating and relating to others
- Sensing and feeling

But is this all?

Figure 6: Lecture slide on embodiment

One observation to be made from this is that students are reliant on information that has already been condensed. Arguably, the lecturers' condensation of original texts into easily digestible chunks of information is a valuable resource for students at all levels of language proficiency, particularly when it serves as a guide for reading the original texts. This is why, Vaughn and Baker (2008) argue, instructors have such an immense effect on the way in which students engage with the learning material. However, one drawback is that students who rely on this information, to the exclusion of reading more comprehensive texts, will not acquire sufficient understanding of that domain of knowledge (Vaughn & Baker, 2008). From this perspective, language proficiency, when it results in an overreliance on condensed texts, stifles learning.

A second observation is that lecturers, by condensing the prescribed texts and making this information available to students in the form of PowerPoint slides or class notes, are taking over a task that has traditionally been assigned to students. This shift in the responsibility for making notes on the prescribed material evidences

a shift in the 'division of labour' in undergraduate teaching and learning practices. Thus, inadvertently, lecturers may be implicated in removing important learning experiences.

Related to this, lecturers are primarily tasked with teaching domain-specific knowledge. Training students to acquire reading and writing skills is not the main task of disciplines such as psychology. While discipline-specific practices such as citation and referencing styles are covered in undergraduate courses, students are expected to take responsibility for acquiring and exercising their reading and writing skills.

On the issue of referencing, only eighteen (18) students acknowledged authors in their reflections. Furthermore, only four (4) of these reflections used American Psychological Association (APA) referencing to acknowledge the source of their information. This not only serves to reinforce the observation that students rely too heavily on condensed information in the form of lecture slides rather than engaging with a wide range of informational resources, such as books and journal articles, and that they are not yet *au fait* with the citation and referencing 'rules' of the discipline.

The issue of 'voice' becomes apparent in the above discussion. Students' rely on the 'voice' of their teachers to articulate themselves academically. This connects to language proficiency in that the agency of voice becomes difficult for students' who are forced to express themselves and to communicate their knowledge in another language.

TECHNOLOGY

Technology is a tool mediating contemporary teaching and learning practice. The data collected for this study is in the form of typed reflections that have been electronically submitted via Blackboard. Students at the institution where this study is located are required to use technology as a means of communication between each other, with their tutors, lecturers, course coordinators and supervisors. Moreover, Erstad (2003) argues, as students' grow and develop academically, they are encouraged to engage with technology in their creation of knowledge and meaning, and not merely to engage with technology as a means of accessing knowledge that is already seen to exist.

Tertiary institutions, as mentioned in the literature review, are becoming increasingly reliant on technology. The institution where this study is located is no exception. University administrators, academics, and students rely on technology for, among other things, the availability of course learning material, course administration, communication, and access to electronic information. Students' are all given computer access and are required to communicate and submit much of their work electronically. As such, technology is offered to students as a means of enhancing their learning experience and is intended as a medium to create knowledge and meaning; to communicate and interact with others (Erstad, 2003).

The majority of students attending the institution where this study is located are from socio-economically disadvantaged communities. One implication of this is that students hail from communities where access to technology is perhaps more difficult than it is in other, more affluent, communities. Xu (2002) argues that students'

familiarity with, and ease with using technology, will directly influence their learning outcome. Hence, technology, which is becoming increasingly central to learning in tertiary institutions, as well as being a prominent mediating factor in students' personal and professional development.

Technology is operated by software that is available predominantly in English, thus for students who have poor English language proficiency, this is another barrier to tool use. It is a reflection on how tool use is mediated by personal/subject level capabilities. An additional reflection on technology is that while most students do not have their own computers, they do have cellular phones which are becoming increasingly sophisticated. The influence of cellular phones on students' language proficiency is indicated in the SMS speak in their reflections.

Extract 7: 'sms speak'

Seems im studying psychology they expect me to knw everything they facing psychological of which im not perfect and I don't knw abbt psychological I was jst introduced to psychology.

Extract 8: Language to fit the technology

When we are interacting with people using facebook, mxit and blackboard we learn to use a language that will fit that particular technology system

NEGOTIATING NORMS

In the literature review, community and culture are described as being intrinsically interconnected (Stears, 2009). In this study, students spoke of community and culture interchangeably to represent the fundamental elements making up their

identity. It evidences students belonging to multiple communities concurrently. It also highlights the fact that cultural and social aspects cannot be looked at in isolation but are intrinsically interwoven with notions of community (Stears, 2009).

In answer to one of the reflection questions, “What does it mean to be a person?” 56 students referred to culture as being an important factor in the construction of their identities. Arguably, this mitigates for the importance of focusing on the role of socio-cultural communities in their personal and professional development. As Vygotsky (1978) argued, development does not take place in a vacuum, but occurs within the context of activities and social interaction informed by cultural contexts. Extracts 9, 10 and 11 provide examples of students’ reflections on culture.

Extract 9: It shapes how we behave

Society and culture shapes how we behave as we get ...our morals from society and our culture.

Extract 10: A lot of people want a sense of belonging

A lot of people want a sense of belonging. Identifying with a culture and society fulfils this desire. As a result one’s feelings, thoughts and actions will be based on whatever or not they are acceptable in their culture or society.

Extract 11: Culture has its own rules

Culture has its own rules, norms and values that you as a person is supposed to obey.

In Extracts 9, 10 and 11 culture is positioned as a resource for providing individuals with a ‘sense of belonging’ as well as guiding (‘shaping’) values and behaviour. Arguably, these are all important factors for personal development. However, these

extracts also indicate that culture can also be overly prescriptive. As illustrated in the extract below.

Extract 12: Culture as prescriptive

Feelings, thoughts and actions will be based on whatever or not they are acceptable in their culture or society.

When human action is determined by its acceptability to socio-cultural norms this can be problematic, particularly in an academic context where particular kinds of knowledge, or methodologies for generating knowledge are unfamiliar or not culturally and socially sanctioned. Thus, Stears (2009) argues, a community's expectations of an individual can sometimes restrict that individual's personal and professional development.

Gilbert (1998) speaks about cultural knowledge as 'local knowledge' and ascertains that it is a powerful way of transmitting common sense understandings of a cultural system. The 'local knowledge' of students allows them to engage in everyday practices and is also closely tied to their identity and self-esteem. To take away the 'local knowledge' of students or the applicability of it would undermine their ability to function. Rather, the suggestion is that students transform their local knowledge to suite their academic environment, thus using cultural knowledge in a flexible and reflective way.

Interestingly, although culture was reflected on by the majority of students as being predominantly stable, in thirty (30) instances students made reference to the dynamic nature of culture. In these reflections, students gave cognisance to an

individual's ability to transform their cultural identity and to adapt to, and incorporate, diverse cultural influences. These students suggested that we can relate to people in different cultures by shifting our perceptions and behaviour to accommodate them.

Extract 13: You can adapt

You can move out of a society and go and adapt in another society.

Extract 14: I can choose not to

The township society expects you to be a gangster, a drunk, a thief but in my community where all these things are apparent and I see them everyday I chose not to partake in them so you can say that my environment has not influenced me in any way but it has encouraged me not to come another one of its negative 'products.

Extract 15: I portray different behaviour in different settings

A person cannot think and act the same way in all settings of the environment, for instance the behaviour that I portray at the township is not the same as that which I portray at campus and at the university residence. The environment has a huge influence on human behaviour.

For these students, community and culture are seen as somewhat flexible and for them it opens up the ability to acknowledge the multiplicity of communities to which they belong. In effect these students acknowledge how the multiple communities to which they belong influence who they are across contexts.

Fageeh (2011) connects community and culture to language, suggesting that they are inseparable. His belief is that culture and language are intricately interwoven and that language is, in fact, the basis of culture. Therefore, in relation to the Activity

System model, the acquisition of language is an inevitable means for learning that culture. In addition, this interplay consequently acts on the attainment of personal and professional development as students engage with the academic community and assimilate its culture.

In the analysis of participants' reflections, many factors are seen to influence students' personal and professional development. These include the interplay between the tools that they use. Students' are influenced by the community/ies and culture that they are from and in which they find themselves residing at present. They are subject to the rules and division of labour from both society and within the higher learning institution. They are also influenced quite predominately by their language use and proficiency. Language is a central factor that mediates the activity system. Language has implications for learning and assessment as well as mediating students' social engagement with the learning community.

The students' reflections show evidence that in particular settings certain influences within the Activity System are more prevalent than others. Within the higher learning institution the themes that were most prominent for students' as mediating factors were 'language', 'technology', and 'negotiating norms'. 'Language' was subdivided into 'English language proficiency', 'Implications for assessment of student learning', 'Implications for sociality', 'Possibilities for peer-facilitated learning' and 'Reliance on summary texts'.

Language was discussed as inextricably interconnected to all aspects of the Activity System. Language is fundamental in mediating 'Technology' and in considering the

'negotiation of norms' affecting students' personal and professional development. By virtue of the fact that communities (including tertiary institutions) are subject to division of labour and rules, language is thus also connected to power relations within and across contexts.

In conclusion, the research findings are synonymous with the Activity System. As subjects, the students' cultural and community influences, their engagement with technology and the role of language came across as significant not only in the way they mediate students' personal and professional development within higher learning institutions, but also in the way in which students are presented as flexible and adaptive in the attainment of personal and professional development.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

In this final chapter, the research findings are summarised and the limitations of this study are addressed. This is followed by a discussion on the value of this research, as well as noting considerations and recommendations for further research. The final conclusions to this study draw the research to an end.

The Aims of the Study Revisited

The primary aim of this study was to explore and describe the factors that mediate students' personal and professional development in higher learning institutions. The study was conducted by means of analysing students' reflections using the Activity System model. The purpose of such was to identify the mediating factors in the reflections and to analyse how these factors play out on students' personal and professional development.

SUMMARY OF THE RESEARCH FINDINGS

The research findings present the main themes found in the data analysis. Language is a seminal issue for personal and professional development in the study. A reflection of students' language proficiency indicates that non-English mother-tongue students' are significantly disadvantaged in academic pursuits. Language constitutes the learning process and is the medium through which students engage and acquire knowledge. Language is fundamental to the assessment of students and also facilitates their interpersonal relations.

Language is interconnected to all aspects of the learning process. It is tied to 'technology'. Technology, being a central component of academic study, is used at various levels in education institutions, facilitating administration and constituting active engagement with the learning process. E-learning also provides a new means for formal and informal discussions which enhances teaching and learning practices. However, since the medium of most technical software is English, students' are not only required to obtain technical efficiency but also need adequate language proficiency for successful engagement with learning material obtained through and with technology.

The findings intimate that as much as language is important to the learning process, it is connected to many other socio-cultural aspects. Students' context and social interactions are informed by their cultural contexts. These contexts not only shape and guide their values and behaviour but also the degree to which they are able to engage with academic pursuits. Peer assistance and peer collaboration is important, particularly with regard to language issues, since they offer vital learner support and assistance.

The interplay between language, technology and socio-cultural contexts of students determine to a large extent the outcome of the learning activity. Students' development is thus mediated by a diverse range of factors. These factors may contribute in both positive and negative ways, depending on the students' mother-tongue, ability to engage with technology and the resources and support provided by their socio-cultural context.

LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A synopsis of the limitations and recommendation for the study was provided in the Methodology section of the study. Reference was made to the limitations in generalising research conducted in a single higher learning institution to represent higher learning institutions at large. A recommendation was offered inviting further research to expand the study to include a broader array of higher learning institutions. The sample could also be expanded to include a wider sector within each university setting.

Reflection exercises were subject to particular topics and were required for academic purposes. This could restrict and impair data in that questions determined, to some degree, what students wrote about and consequently restricted the incorporation of other important issues that may have been salient factors for mediating personal and professional development.

The study recommends that its findings could be used as a basis for further research. It would be possible to replicate this study or to conduct similar studies in order to strengthen and expand on this study. A possible consideration would be to include focus groups into the study and also to reflect on and expand the range of questions posed to students.

The aim to investigate factors mediating students' personal and professional development was achieved through this study. The Activity System provided a

holistic and comprehensive framework that elicited a deeper understanding of the mediating factors for personal and professional development. The hope is that this study has added value to research in the area of students' personal and professional development in South Africa by providing a rich account and description of the socio-cultural factors that mediate students' personal and professional development.

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