

Academic Development and its Practitioners

A View from the Inside



Editor
Gert Young

Abbreviations

APQ	Academic planning and Quality Assurance
BLC	Blended learning coordinator
CHE	Council for Higher Education
CHEC	Cape Higher Education Consortium
CLT	Centre for Learning Technologies
CoP	Community of practice
CTL	Centre for Teaching and Learning
DHET	Department of Higher Education and Training
DLTE	Division for Learning and Teaching Enhancement
DRD	Division for Research Development
ECAs	Early Career Academics
FIGs	Focused Interest Groups
FIRLT	Fund for Innovation and Research in Learning and Teaching
FMF	Fees Must Fall
FYA	First-Year Academy
GAs	Graduate Attributes
HE	Higher Education
HEIs	Higher Education Institutions
HELTASA	Higher Education Learning and Teaching Association of Southern Africa
HEQC	Higher Education Quality Committee
HoD	Head of Department
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
LC	Language Centre
LCT	Legitimation Code Theory
NAA	Newly appointed academics
NRF	National Research Foundation
PASS	Professional and Administrative Support Services

PGDip	Postgraduate Diploma in Higher Education
PL	Professional learning
PREDAC	Professional Educational Development for Academics
REEP	Recommended Engineering Education Practices
SAHEI	South African Higher Education Institution
SAS	Student Academic Support Services
SoEL	Scholarship of Educational Leadership
SOTL	Scholarship of Teaching and Learning
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering & Mathematics
SU	Stellenbosch University
T&L	Teaching and Learning
UBC	University of British Columbia
UniEd	Division of University Education

CAN A PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME ENHANCE THE WORK OF A TEACHING AND LEARNING CENTRE?

AHM Jacobs

1 Introduction/background

The idea for this chapter originated from my reflections on how to translate the philosophical research methodology of hermeneutics, which I employed during my doctoral studies, to my work as academic staff developer in the field of higher education at the Stellenbosch University (SU) Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL). I found this task of translation very challenging. Perhaps this was because I was a 'disciplinary migrant' with an 'unhomely' scholarly identity at the time (Manathunga, 2007:25). I gathered from literature that the application of hermeneutics as research methodology in the field of academic staff development is indeed "a site of doubt and contestation" (Rowland, 2007:9) and in the words of Webb (1996:123), "hidden in the academic discourse". This is further qualified by Van Dijk (2011), who refers to "slight encounters" with hermeneutics in the field of academic staff development, citing a possible reason as discourse studies having progressed beyond the interpretation of texts traditionally associated with hermeneutics. Yet hermeneutics may provide insights that may be used in future developments of more explicit theories of discourse understanding. Hermeneutics, and more specifically the notion of the hermeneutic circle, also has the potential to offer interpretive insights for the process of academic staff development.

Back to my role as academic staff developer at the CTL. The CTL forms part of the University's Division for Learning and Teaching Enhancement. The Division aims to contribute to the professional learning of lecturers and other academics and focuses on activities related to enriching the learning environment of students, and to share what other academics are doing in this regard. At the CTL, we work in collaboration with faculties to produce and share context-specific research-based responses to teaching and learning related questions. We encourage conversations about, amongst others:

- ▶ The enhancement of the learning and teaching experience for students and academics;
- ▶ The professional learning of academics;
- ▶ The scholarship of teaching and learning;
- ▶ The development, establishment and sharing of innovative learning and teaching practice; and
- ▶ An awareness of the importance of teaching and learning policies and guidelines.

We offer a variety of professional learning opportunities. These include but are not limited to Auxin sessions (more about this later), Cape Higher Education Consortium (CHEC) short courses, a Postgraduate Diploma in Higher Education in Teaching and Learning (PGDip (HE) (T&L)), the Professional Educational Development for Academics (PREDAC) short course, the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) Conference, workshops, seminars and writing retreats (CTL, n.d.).

Like many other divisions or centres that wish to flourish, the CTL has both a vision statement and a mission statement, to define the direction the Centre is moving in, set the stage for plans and projects and to illustrate what the Centre “stand(s) for”. The CTL Vision states that it wishes to be a knowledge partner that advances the teaching and learning culture at SU in a way that promotes a just society in South Africa. The CTL Mission is to create professional learning opportunities for academic staff in faculties and to be thought leaders in the areas of responsive, innovative and scholarly teaching and learning (CTL, n.d.).

The question arises: Can a professional development programme, such as the CTL Auxin Project, contribute to the realisation of its Vision and Mission, and therefore enhance the work done in the centre? I am singling out the Auxin Project because I am the coordinator of this project. My analysis has a philosophical underpinning. I think it is important to state this upfront to prepare the reader for the philosophical argument that will follow. One of the tasks of philosophy, according to Brennen (1999), is to pose questions, which cannot be answered by observation, by experimental procedures, or by formal or linguistic determinations. Such is the research question stated above. It requires careful thought, imagination and reflection (Noddings, 2007:3). I concur with Gadamer that we cannot have experiences without asking questions (Gadamer, 1975:325-326). We therefore will not gain new insights if we do not ask questions about, in this case, the relationship between the CTL Vision and Mission and the Auxin Project.

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the research question by analysing the CTL Self-Evaluation Report: Auxin Project for the period 2014-2016 (specific), supplemented by the more detailed CTL Self-Evaluation Report (2016), by applying hermeneutics and hermeneutic phenomenology as research methodology.

In the next section, I provide some background of the CTL Auxin Project, followed by a brief unpacking of the research methodology employed in this analysis.

2 The CTL Auxin Project

The name ‘Auxin’ comes from the Greek *auxano*, which means, “to grow” (CTL, n.d.). Auxin is the growth-regulatory hormone produced by the plant that governs all growing activity within the plant. CTL started this project to support and contribute to the growth of SU academics in their teaching responsibilities through opportunities to engage in courageous conversations based on scholarship of teaching and learning on campus. Further qualification for initiating this project stems from evidence from literature that there is a significant connection between professional growth and engaging in difficult conversations (Ehrich, et al., 2001).

Auxins take place monthly during lunchtime (12:45-13:45) on every last Tuesday of the month. A faculty-based approach is followed whereby CTL advisors invite a teaching and learning champion from his/her faculty to share his/her best practices with colleagues. At SU, a teaching and learning champion is regarded as someone who exemplifies good teaching and learning. He/she is aware of his/her context and reflects on the ways in which his/her discipline, institution, own history and students' lived experiences affect teaching and learning. A teaching champion has good knowledge of teaching and learning and a clearly articulated teaching philosophy, informed by educational theory (SU, 2016).

The Auxin Project is based on two fundamental aspects, namely (1) the opportunity to engage in teaching and learning related conversations, and (2) the advancement of the scholarship of teaching and learning. Through the Auxin Project, the CTL shows its commitment to creating the opportunity for teaching and learning related conversations. The following quotation captures the reason behind the SU CTL Auxin Project:

One of the most important moves a campus can make is to create occasions for educators to talk, to find colleagues, to be part of a community of practice. Good things happen when teachers talk. (Hutchings, 2008)

The Auxin Project aims to create professional learning opportunities for academics by providing windows for innovative teaching and assessment practices on campus, as they journey towards becoming scholarly teachers. It also provides opportunities for academics to link draw links between theory and research and examine and deepen their knowledge about topics of own interest in the arena of T&L at SU. In other words, they are encouraged to take a scholarly approach to teaching and learning and reflect on their teaching, use classroom assessment techniques, discuss teaching issues with colleagues, and read and apply the literature on teaching and learning (McKinney, 2007:38). In addition, it offers a growth journey towards becoming reflective practitioners, scholarly teachers and eventually scholars of teaching. The Auxins are evaluated through the feedback received from participants. The feedback is filed and feeds into management reports or other CTL evaluation documents, such as the CTL Self-Evaluation Report: Auxin Project for the period 2014-2016, employed in this analysis. This report is useful because it describes and evaluates the effectiveness of activities and projects such as the Auxin Project.

In my experience, the Auxin sessions are mostly well received by academics, but the question remains about the nature of the relationship between these sessions and the CTL Vision and Mission, if any.

To explore this question, a key consideration is to identify an appropriate research methodology that will enable me to provide some answers. The next session will be devoted to the research methodology employed for this analysis.

3 Research methodology

I start this section by giving a brief description of the concept 'research methodology'. Drawing on the work of Harvey (1990), research methodology may be described as the interface between methodical practice, theory and epistemological underpinnings. Methodology is thus

the point at which method, theory and epistemology come together in the process of directly investigating specific instances within the social world. In the process of grounding empirical enquiry, methodology thus reveals the presuppositions that inform the knowledge that is generated by the inquiry (Harvey, 1990:1-2). I regard methodology as a broad theoretical framework or paradigm of study.

It is important for the research methodology to be stipulated because, as Mackenzie and Knipe (2006:2) state, the research methodology influences the way knowledge is studied and interpreted. It is the choice of research methodology that determines the intent, motivation and expectations for the research.

This analysis is grounded in the hermeneutic methodology, which is a philosophical approach. Byrne (2001:1) describes 'hermeneutics' as textual interpretation or finding meaning in the hidden word. A hermeneutic approach can enrich, substantiate and make explicit assumptions about the relationship between theory and practice, which is central to this analysis.

4 Hermeneutics and hermeneutic phenomenology

Hermeneutics as methodology for this analysis is particularly useful because it is identified in literature as a framework for the analysis of the work, especially conceptual work, done by institutions, departments and centres (like the CTL) (Bryman, in Harvey & Myers, 1995:20). The value of hermeneutics as research methodology for this analysis stems from its interpretive nature, which requires an understanding of how meaning is arrived at. This understanding, in turn, depends on understanding the context in which a given situation takes place. This context-specific element suits this analysis, which deals with an exploration of the relationship between the SU CTL Vision and Mission and the Auxin Project.

The development or evolution of hermeneutics has been marked by the emergence of several distinct forms of hermeneutics, such as contemporary hermeneutics. As a philosophy of interpretation, contemporary hermeneutics has expanded the scope of the term 'text' to include not only documents in the conventional sense but also organisational (or institutional) practices (such as the SU CTL Auxin Project) and structures. In methodological terms, this implies that scholars may legitimately adopt hermeneutics as a research approach for interpreting both institutional practices (Auxins) and policy documents and/or annual reports (Prasad, 2002:29), and might I add, self-evaluation reports. Herein lies the value of hermeneutics as research methodology for my analysis. But because my interest extends to a human perspective instead of mere practices and texts, I more specifically employ hermeneutic phenomenology (Sloan & Bowe, 2014), which was developed as a human science which studies persons and uses language (such as the language of reports) as a source of data. Hermeneutic phenomenology and one of its tenants, the 'hermeneutic circle', is especially relevant to researchers in education.

5 The hermeneutic circle as exploratory framework

The question arises: What is an exploratory or theoretical framework? Since it is difficult to work with a large set of constitutive meanings, and since no researcher can investigate a problem from all perspectives simultaneously, a theoretical or exploratory framework becomes useful. It

establishes a vantage point, a perspective, or a set of lenses through which to view the research problem. As such, it can be regarded as a clarifying step in the research process. It sharpens the focus and consequently increases the clarity brought to the research problem.

I will focus on the 'hermeneutic circle' as exploratory or theoretical framework, which has close ties with hermeneutic phenomenology. The idea of the circle is that of the whole and its parts: We can only understand the parts of a text, or any body of meaning, out of a general idea of its whole, yet we can only gain this understanding of the whole by understanding its parts (Grondin, 2017). When employing the hermeneutic circle as exploratory framework, the researcher moves between parts of the texts (quotations from the CTL Self-Evaluation Report: Auxin Project for the period 2014-2016) and the whole of the text (or the bigger picture represented by the CTL Vision and Mission), trying to identify phenomena and interpreting them. This is a circular process of understanding a text. It is essentially about interpreting things by going from specific to general and back again. Understanding specific, concrete details can be helpful to understand general, theoretical issues. In addition, since it is a circle, understanding general, theoretical issues can also help us understand specific, concrete details. Mantzavinos (2009:302) posits that the application of the hermeneutic circle is not limited to theory but can also be used to describe phenomena through practice or experience.

Applied to the CTL Auxin Project, the hermeneutic circle can be presented like this:

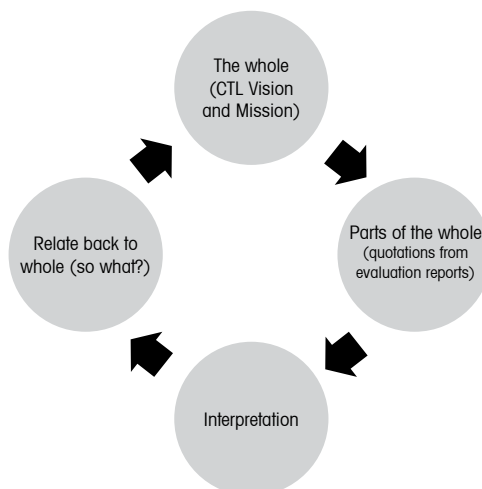


Figure 5.1 The hermeneutic circle applied to the CTL Auxin Project

6 Analysis of the CTL self-evaluation report: Auxin Project

In this section, I analyse the CTL Self-Evaluation Report: Auxin Project for the period 2014-2016. This report is useful because it provides information on its strategic goals and objectives, as well as its distinctive characteristics. It also describes and evaluates the effectiveness of activities and projects. It is useful for my analysis, because it sheds light on the Auxin Project, amongst others. A working group within the CTL prepared the CTL Self-Evaluation Report: Auxin Project for the period 2014-2016.

In my analysis, using the hermeneutic circle, I regard the 'whole' as the CTL Vision and Mission,¹ while the 'parts of the whole' refer to the quotations taken from the CTL Self-Evaluation Report: Auxin Project for the period 2014-2016. The relationship between the CTL Vision and Mission and the Auxin Project is characterised by successful and less successful aspects. In line with my exploratory framework of the hermeneutic circle, I argue that identifying these aspects has interpretive value. Let us call them specific, concrete details. Understanding these specific, concrete details can be helpful to understand general, theoretical issues. In turn, understanding general, theoretical issues can also help to understand specific, concrete details.

One of the successful aspects of the Auxin Project (CTL, 2016:27-28) is that it has endeavoured to focus on broadening the community of scholarly teachers by, amongst others, linking theory with practice. Participants, through quotations such as "contact with colleagues... one can learn/exchange ideas";² "practical advice and tips"; "new information"; "very insightful"; "forum to learn from others", have reported that it has been a good opportunity to learn. Participants furthermore regard the Auxin Project as an opportunity to network with colleagues and share experiences, knowledge and information: "network with colleagues"; "hearing how others implement it"; "to see that I do not necessarily know/do less than others"; "seeing what my colleagues in my own department do".

Learning from and networking with others and gaining new information speak of positive experiences of learning through attending the Auxins. The phenomena I am trying to bring to the fore are the notions of a 'community of scholars' and 'opportunity to learn'. In trying to uncover what relations these have to the 'whole' (CTL Vision and Mission), I argue that it can be associated with 'knowledge partner' and 'teaching and learning culture'. This is encouraging, because it places the focus on the implied intent to learn and develop, one of the primary foci of what the CTL is trying to achieve. When participants in a professional development activity can establish 'knowledge partners' and share experiences with colleagues, their professional development becomes more relevant (Mizell, 2010). This, in turn, can have a positive impact on the teaching and learning endeavour. In this way, the Auxin Project enhances the work we do at the CTL.

Being exposed to perspectives other than their own were also valued by participants: "the opportunity to hear about... approach to teaching and learning"; "new perspective... got me thinking again"; "to hear about how others try to implement... to enhance the learning experience of students"; "three different perspectives". Similarly, participants value the introduction of new literature on specific topics: "introduced me to a few papers and I hope to read more about it"; "exposure to alternative frameworks"; "the theoretical grounding was very interesting"; "thank you for the excellent readings". Even more valued is the structured format of the sessions, with an opportunity for questions and engagement at the end of each session: "well structured"; "(good) question and answer session"; "thanks for meaningful discussion".

1 The CTL Vision states that it wishes to be a knowledge partner that advances the teaching and learning culture at SU in a way that promotes a just society in South Africa.

The CTL Mission is to create professional learning opportunities for academic staff in faculties and to be thought leaders in the areas of responsive, innovative and scholarly teaching and learning.

2 All quotations marked with an asterisk (*) are translated from Afrikaans to English.

The phenomena I am uncovering here are the notions of 'literature', engaging with 'new perspectives' and 'scholarship'. As was the case previously, it can be associated with 'knowledge partner' in the CTL Vision, but with the added notion of 'scholarly teaching and learning'. This creates a sense of richness and depth added to the work we do in the centre, as we draw on combined knowledge and experience (Van Schalkwyk, et al., 2013) (academic developers and academics) through the Auxins.

Auxin practices that have been reported as less successful (CTL, 2016:28) include that some participants feel that the theory presented during sessions is not always applicable to all departments or faculties and that information shared is too context-specific: "application of theory to (other) departments"; "too context-specific"; "I wonder about implementation in my own field..."

The phenomenon I am highlighting here is 'application in disciplinary context'. It relates to the tension that exists in the overlap between the domains of expertise of different academic fields in higher education. Even though we claim to be knowledge partners, a notion which was previously highlighted as a successful spin-off of the Auxins, this tension is rather contradictory. Perhaps the CTL should re-consider how it could strengthen the vision of being a 'knowledge partner', and what it means.

Following these analyses and returning to my research question of whether a professional development programme such as the Auxin Project can enhance the work of a teaching and learning centre, I argue, as Huet (2012) does, that lecturers who participate in professional development opportunities reflect more meaningfully on their teaching practice than those who do not participate. Ultimately, the hope is for them to become good university teachers who demonstrate, amongst others, expert subject knowledge (Van Schalkwyk, et al., 2013:140). However, even though academic development can have a positive impact on lecturers' teaching and learning journey, it does not work by itself. It should also be strengthened by the institutional culture of promoting the scholarship of teaching and learning.

7 Discussion

In terms of the hermeneutic circle, there is a positive relationship between the CTL Vision (to be a knowledge partner that advances the teaching and learning culture at SU) and Mission (to create professional learning opportunities for academic staff and to be thought leaders), and the Auxin Project. However, I have two main concerns: (1) the apparent gap between the social justice intension expressed in the CTL Vision, and the way it plays out in practice; (2) regarding the CTL Mission of being responsive, innovative, and scholarly in teaching and learning, the question is: In our approach to the Auxin Project, how responsive are we towards transformation? Is it not perhaps time for a paradigm shift? Let me first address the latter concern. I concur with Hendricks and Leibowitz (2016) that we need to be considering new sets of questions about the nature of society and the kind of students we want to produce. These considerations should, in my opinion, be reflected in the formulation of the CTL Vision and Mission. Against the current background of our higher education system being at a crossroads in its history because of increasing calls for decolonisation and pressure to increase access, perhaps now is an opportune time to do so. During this fluid state, institutional (including the

CTL) reflections could very well yield the required paradigm shift. I acknowledge that such a paradigm shift is no easy task, as Morrow (2009:50) cautions, because it involves changing sets of practices together with the self-understandings that hold them in place. However, it must happen.

As for the apparent gap between the social justice intention expressed in the CTL Vision, and the way it plays out in practice, I posit that, regardless of this concern, my analysis of the more detailed CTL Self-Evaluation Report (2016) shows a few promising Auxin practices (CTL, 2016:28-29). One such promising practice relates to the Focused Interest Groups (FIGs), which extend beyond an initial Auxin and where further conversations or follow-up discussions on a specific topic take place. In 2016, two Auxins were followed up by FIGs and these two FIGs are now well established. One FIG has been on the topic of *Decolonising the Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) Curriculum*, and the other on the topic of *Academic Leadership*. Both these FIGs address several topics, including social justice and transformation. There are therefore opportunities to engage in discussions on the topics related to both my concerns previously mentioned, but it should be kept in mind that not all CTL staff are involved in these FIGs. The challenge within CTL is to create an internal platform for deepening knowledge and understanding of these topics so that it may more effectively realise the CTL Vision and Mission. Another promising practice has been the inclusion of the SU Tygerberg satellite campus in the lunchtime Auxins via livestreaming, as well as podcasting the sessions, to ensure that an even wider audience can be reached. Through this kind of inclusive strategy, a social justice intention is addressed, because a platform is created for a wider audience to participate in the Auxin discussions. This bears a reminder of what Fraser (2008) calls 'participatory parity', where a large group of people can participate as peers in a (social) activity such as the Auxin discussions. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to delve into 'participatory parity' in more detail. I regard this as an area for further investigation.

8 Usefulness of analysis for higher education teaching and learning

To illustrate the usefulness of this analysis for the field of Higher Education Academic Development, I draw on Elliot (2006:169), who posits that educational research focusses on addressing practical questions and in so doing inevitably touches on evaluating the aims of education, and might I add, Academic Development. Elaborating on this view, it is a form of enquiry aimed at formulating practical insights and judgements. Since these insights and judgements are rooted in the everyday experiences of educators, Elliot describes educational research as a form of common-sense inquiry. As educational research, my analysis of the CTL Self-Evaluation Report: Auxin Project for the period 2014-2016 offers a few insights. The findings of the analysis could potentially provide information that can be used by higher education practitioners, specifically in the field of Academic Development. Academic development units, such as the CTL, could use the findings to think about ways of how best to become scholars of teaching and learning. The latter is highlighted by Geertsema (2016:130) as an important consideration in his unpacking of the relationship between academic development, SoTL and educational research. The findings can also enhance continuous professional growth and the development of critical reflection, with the potential to benefit the Auxin Project. I agree with Harvey and Taylor (1996:175) that continuous professional growth of higher education practitioners (including academic developers) is important for transformation in an ever-changing world.

Further usefulness of this analysis relates to the use of the hermeneutic circle as exploratory framework. I illustrated how the CTL and its Vision and Mission, taken as a whole, can be understood in terms of its various parts (in this case, data from the CTL Self-Evaluation Report: Auxin Project). I illuminated the Auxin Project, bringing some clarity to the whole. The CTL Vision and Mission and the Auxin Project are therefore bound together in a relationship of mutual clarification. The circular structure of the hermeneutic circle and the notion of mutual clarification does not mean that such clarity is final. The process of interpretation and clarification never ends but is always open to revision (Malpas, 2015). As mentioned earlier, continuous reflections and considering new sets of ideas are important for bringing about a paradigm shift and ultimately, transformation.

9 Conclusion

This analysis revealed that the relationship between the SU CTL Auxin Project and its Vision and Mission is characterised by successful aspects and less successful aspects. Successful aspects include endeavours such as a focus on broadening the community of scholarly teachers by, amongst others, linking theory with practice. Less successful aspects include feedback from participants that sessions are sometimes too theory-heavy and context-specific. After reading Boughey and McKenna's (2017:963) observation about the stagnation of sets of ideas about teaching and learning in higher education, I cannot help to further wonder about how this relationship might be strengthened. The authors argue that the continuing dominance of the same sets of ideas might mean that transformation in teaching and learning is less likely to be achieved, and that those working in the field of academic development, for example, are more likely to continue existing approaches as a basis for their work. As stated in the more detailed CTL Self-Evaluation Report (CTL, 2016:40), this remains a challenge confronting the work of the CTL at this SU. It also confirms the concern raised earlier, when I questioned how responsive our work is in terms of transformation.

In answer to my research question of whether a professional development programme such as the Auxins can enhance the work of a teaching and learning centre, the answer is "yes". In the case of the CTL and the Auxin Project, I would however suggest that the project be reconsidered through the lens of a practice perspective for even further enhancement of the work of the CTL. My suggestion is based on the less successful aspect of the Auxin Project identified through my analysis, namely that participants sometimes feel that the sessions presented do not relate to their faculty context. Linked to this is the need for targeted professional development opportunities, expressed in the more detailed CTL Self-Evaluation Report (2016:39). Here I am reminded of the work of Boud & Brew (2013:219), who refer to similar academic development challenges. They propose academic development activities located in the everyday practice and sites (classrooms or laboratories) of academics. This kind of practice perspective should be grounded in the theory of practice, while also paying attention to the own practice and development of academic development scholarship. This implies efforts to connect the sites of academic development to the sites of practice and certainly has implications for the current in-faculty work of academic developers at the CTL.

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