Negotiating research journeys of mentors and graduate student trainees of a South African research organization

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Abstract

The nature of postgraduate study and training in South Africa is changing. Senior graduate students are increasingly exposed to more than one kind of training (Knowles, 2007; Lee & Danby, 2011) in the context of multi-disciplinary study, and the context of seeking out "practical" research experience and earning opportunities in the professional research environment. In these contexts often external to, but connected with the university environment, post-graduate students are all students, mentees and employees. Herein, these students are exposed to different disciplines, methodologies, and research questions. During this time, the trainees are supervised by their academic supervisors based at the university (with which they are affiliated), and mentored by senior researchers (based at the organisation at which they are employed). Thus, both the mentee and the mentors negotiate between two identities: The post-graduate student and the employee; and the employer and the mentor. Each of these identities is associated with different, sometimes conflicting, demands and responsibilities. This paper is a collaboration between four senior graduate students and two senior researchers – their mentors at the research organisation at which they are all employed.

The context of the paper is the research organization for which the contributors work. The organization employs as trainees post-graduate students, who enter as masters or doctoral students. Trainees are required to complete their studies while working on research projects and activities undertaken by the organisation. This takes place under the guidance of senior researchers, including their mentors. This role as mentor is in addition to their role in research activities. The organisation thus places different expectations on the trainees (than their university) and in essence does not refer to them as students at all.

How employees function as mentors and mentees takes place within an organization with established ideologies, values, and well-defined boundaries. We argue that how we shape and interpret these boundaries within interpersonal space in the mentor-mentee relationship is crucial to the training outcomes. This is vital in terms of how our interpersonal working styles interact with the bureaucratic structures of the organization and our own, individual journeys as researchers. The manner in which this differs between each mentor-mentee pair is the construct for how we learn and develop: how one negotiates one's identity (professional, academic and personal) with that of one's mentor/mentee. Probing our personal experiences we use critical reflexivity to demonstrate the manner in which we have negotiated both collectively and as individuals our 'journeys' within the research organization. We explore the bidirectional learning of the mentor-mentee relationship from both perspectives, confident that by decomposing the nature of this relationship one can describe how learning and development happens within a research organization. We also explore what implications that learning may have on the training outcomes, graduate studies and mentors' responsibilities.

Drawing on Whitehead (1999), Ellis & Bochner (2000), and Taylor & Wallace (2007) we use data obtained from our personal narratives to examine the mentor-mentee relationship, cognizant that these relationships are embedded in a power differential. In our reflection we are equally conscious of the need to which Pillow (2003:175) refers, i.e. that of researchers demonstrably confessing their self-recognition. Responding to Pillow's call and the call of 'pushing postgraduate boundaries and paradigms', we employ our varied research journeys by:

- acknowledging that our myriad differences are in themselves a learning laboratory;
- presenting and interpreting our experiences of living in two worlds of academia;
- taking into consideration the demands of the research organization that is our employer and of the universities in which the trainees are registered; and discussing implications of our responsibilities and varied identities on our learning.

Introduction

This paper subscribes to the notion that there is richness and depth in research that is "looking inward" (Mitchell, Weber & O'Reilly-Scanlon, 2005, p.4). Equally informed by Strauss and Corbin's (1990, p.11) assertion that qualitative research is "about persons' lives, lived experiences, behaviors, emotions, and feelings as well as about organizational functioning ... and interactions", we reflect on our role and identities within our research organization. The reflection looks into how as mentors and senior researchers on one hand; and research

trainees and postgraduate students on the other hand, we have conducted ourselves in relation to the research organisation's expectations. We reflect as individuals and a collective, on what our research journeys mean to us and how we have negotiated them; cognizant that our experiences are steeped within each other's learnings. Acknowledging that our myriad differences are in themselves a learning laboratory and that the learnings are bidirectional, we equally explore the manner in which the learnings while working within an academic research environment affect the progression of the research trainees' studies. In turn, the reflection also looks into how the trainees engage with the joys as well as limitations they have to face as part of their postgraduate experience whilst on the job. Implications and the effect that the relationship has on both the job and the studies is finally reflected upon.

We embarked on the task of "developing and producing" this paper, reflecting in different series, as individuals and as a collective. These reflexive processes happened in a face-to-face mode through audio-recording. Written structured reflections were produced by each author and conversations were held in the virtual space via email. In addition, subsequent to this form of structured data collection, the lead author had unstructured conversations with the contributors and recorded this data in a hand-written format. The varied exercise of reflecting on our experiences was done over a period of 5 months. Hence, this paper is a product that is a bit different from the first version, derived from initial reflections. While this is an indication that people and circumstances change, this process demonstrates reflexive research engagements that should be understood as a means of generating knowledge from researchers' experiences. Whitehead (1989) holds that it is through such practice of self-evaluation and through this kind of reflection that research processes may be enhanced

Taking cues from Whitehead (1999), Ellis and Bochner (2000), and Wallace & Taylor (2007) we argue that such processes are an essential form of social sciences qualitative research. We embarked on this process with the intention of drawing on our experiences, acknowledging that personal experiences are in themselves research findings and form datasets of our learning. Thus, "connections between researchers' personal biographies and their scholarly work are, therefore, established phenomena and there are a number of qualitative research traditions, such as self-study, which emphasize the importance of the individual in academic inquiry" (Skerrett, 2008, p. 13).

We found that as we were collecting data for this paper, many issues kept pointing to the nature of business at our research organisation, an element that is central to how one learns in an environment. The nature and context of our organisation is heavily corporate and employs a business model. This model could be found to be less than ideal for an academic institution, where in so many ways it appears to be in conflict with the aims and values which employees are expected to aspire to, i.e. of working for the benefit of South African Society (?). On examining the research organization for which we work we recognise it as the context of our experiences, although acknowledging that our experiences are unique to each person. Hence we begin by reflecting on who we are.

The contributors

We were in consensus that although this task was hard to undertake and the reflections a challenge to put on paper due to the fact that the "personal" that has to be shared with many people beyond us, and that, as we are all easily identifiable we need to tread with care in order to preserve relationships given our uneven positions within the organisation. In retrospect, we acknowledge that, in an attempt to "preserve relationships" we may have

concealed some of the "truths" that we could have shared in a different forum. We were equally cognizant of the dynamics of mentor-mentees power relations.

As authors, we comprise two senior researchers and four senior graduate students. Our research subject fields range from economics, gender studies, linguistics, maths and science, to sociology, and political science. The research trainees are from two different universities while the two senior researchers who are their mentors, are neither directly connected to the two universities nor are their graduate studies' supervisors. The connecting thread amongst the authors is the research organisation where we spend most of our time. While the research organization trains postgraduate students, it places different expectations on them and in essence does not refer to them as students as it is the case within a university context

Our experience with the organisation is varied so is the experience we brought as we came to the organisation at different times. Vijay Reddy, having joined the organisation in 2002 says that "at that time there was no formal programme for research trainees and I believed in the concept of 'on the job training' and that the only way for a research trainee to learn about the craft of research was to do research". She appointed junior researchers on an ad-hoc basis and without any framework of the length of appointments, roles and responsibilities regarding their role and on how to organise their work. However, later, when a set of policies and procedures were established around the position of research trainees, trainees like Tebello Letsekha were appointed on longer contracts. Unlike Reddy, Letsekha joined the organisation three months after completing her Master of Arts degree and was two months into her doctoral studies. She credits a month long experience of fieldwork in Maputo while conducting research for her master's degree for convincing her that a career in qualitative research was something she could enjoy. Hence she says that "after completing my M.A degree I began the pursuit for a research internship, because my M.A supervisor persuaded me that one month of field work was not enough to base a career choice".

Given the varied discipline paths from which researchers come to join this work place, Andrea Juan rightly observes that "the most important issue that is dealt with in this organisation is that of academic identity". Expressing what many trainees could relate to and sharing Vijay's sentiments she notes; "my field of study is very different to the focus of this research programme. The assumption is that I can transfer basic research skills to a variety of research areas ... as an intern I have been exposed to every element of the research process mainly due to the 'sink or swim' philosophy of my mentor". This situation is exacerbated by the nature of the organisation and the fact that, though it is academic in its intent it equally employs a funding model that requires research outputs which are less academic and more client-driven. Hence, the researchers' contractual obligation is multiple as it goes beyond just advancing what may be regarded as credible research and publishing in academic journals. Thus, our identities straddle amongst being scholarly researchers, consultant researchers, research trainees' employers, graduate students; as well as being employees. These identity strands and multiple roles are an on-going process and form part of the organisation's brand. They are a reality that many of us often take some time to negotiate and come to terms with learning best forms of switching between them without putting either one in jeopardy.

Organisational conventions, expectations and context

In an *e-Journal of Organizational Learning and Leadership*, Uzoechi Nwagbara (2011), argues that in contemporary times, while organizations function within anxious modes of advancing the ideal and reality, and that all systems are affected by change; the organizations continue to maintain some conventions. Equally, our research organization determines

boundaries for its researchers, including the way in which they should ideally produces knowledge. In this section while we acknowledge these organizational realities we present how, through the development of this paper, we embarked on a novel process of pushing our paradigms and boundaries — and in turn produced knowledge from a kind of research that is not necessarily client driven. The fact that the research organisation follows a business model implies that the organisation puts money allocation at the heart of decision making. Whereas this invokes some positive stringency, especially in properly managing the use of one's time, but it can also contribute towards detracting from the spirit of the work.

The research organization's culture and process has come with some ambivalence on our part as articulated by Thenjiwe Meyiwa's reference to the fact that "as an employee and manager it becomes hard to work against an organisation that has, on one hand put you in a position of being a manager and on the other hand having to, at times question its inherent value system of blatantly exposing research trainees to a highly corporatized academic research". However, while cognizant of such ambivalences, the question that ought to be asked timeand-again is: what is our organisation's policy and expectations on all of us as mentors and mentees. This question is more important for anyone joining a new organisation, despite that dwelling too much on this question may alter an employee's creativity, learning and innovation. Notwithstanding these concerns, to its credit some of the organisation's standing philosophies in this regard have either inducted and/or propelled some research trainees to conduct research of high levels, drawn from client-driven projects. For instance, Dean Janse van Rensburg reflects on how the organisation's conventions benefited him; "I began working here in 2008, while still completing the fourth year of a Business Science degree in economics. I had already electively entered into masters level modules, but had not yet decided whether or not I would pursue a masters degree. Soon I became more involved with research work, I found that I enjoyed the environment and the organisation sought to secure me on a longer term basis. In order to do so, the organisation required that I be registered for a masters degree. I had been ambivalent about furthering my studies, but acquiesced to this condition as I saw this as an opportunity both for employment and studying in a supportive environment". Also, the organisation's culture of firmly attaching trainees to a senior researcher is often beneficial as young researches get exposed to a range of research projects, ranging from large-scale studies to short ad hoc presentations. Alongside, opportunities to actively participate in research processes and contributing to study design, implementation, project management, fieldwork, capturing and cleaning of data, analysis and reporting- all form invaluable composite exposure for research trainees. Furthermore, as Lisa Wiebesiek-Pienaar notes, "The practical research experience that working for the HSRC provides for an intern ensures that when they graduate from an internship to a researcher position, they are able to more effectively carry out their responsibilities as a researcher".

Mentors subscribe to the fact that as trainee positions are a form of an employment and not just a fellowship, it becomes incumbent that organizational responsibilities are given adequate space. However, equally, there is an appreciation that a negotiation of the two roles does not always work best for all parties as project responsibilities and studies commitments. To mitigate the challenge, Lisa shares her strategy of planning for "blocks of time to work on my own research rather than having to steal bits and pieces of time around my work schedule. It is not ideal, perhaps, but it certainly is possible, she concludes. Accordingly, aware of these demands and compounding responsibility of research trainees, Vijay affirms and point out that; "initially I asked the research trainee to undertake discrete tasks —a literature review, or an analysis of a dataset or data collection. The 'model' of the research training is to work with the trainee to provide 'a real life experience of research.' They might have research

methodology text book knowledge, but in real life the research process is messy and far more complex and complicated. The organisation undertakes research that is large in scale – this is unlike the kind of research that is undertaken at a university or would have been part of the Masters experience. These big research projects require the skill of constant problem solving and using innovative approaches to ensure that we deliver on the science with integrity. Much of the work is has contractual obligations and set timelines". Trainees may find these work conditions "a deep end dive that need them *to constantly problem solve*." The positive side of such a story, Vijay concedes, is that "if they survive they learn a lot while the downside could be a sense of uncertainty and anxiety at being placed in this deep end". The doctoral trainees, Lisa Wiebesiek-Pienaar and Andrea Juan, while concurring with this sentiment express concerns that "being employed in the research organisation has as many positives as it does negatives" (Andrea) ...and that equally "the challenge is that in order to progress well with projects work and graduate studies, the trainee ought to finding a balance between both similar but competing worlds" (Lisa).

For Tebello Letsekha, one form of ensuring that there is a healthy balance in relation to what Andrea and Lisa point out above, is to ensure that at the onset of a traineeship honesty prevails at the time when "the organisation expects each mentor and mentee to sign a mentorship agreement, which is an agreed work plan that outlines Key Performance Areas (KPAs), competencies and expected outputs. It is through this work plan that all parties should carefully incorporate the organisational work and one's university studies". The research organisation's current legal/ formal mentorship agreement process has some weakness. While it provides what is expected of the mentee it does not give much guidance nor does it provide details about the role of the mentor in assisting the mentee to achieve the expected outcomes. Vijay offers her philosophy and approach, i.e.;

"In my role as a mentor, I spend time discussing the underlying theory for the research. In these discussions, I did not know if these theories were appreciated or not or was it me talking to myself. I was disappointed that the trainees were not reading into the literature as much as I wanted them to. I wanted researchers to share the same passion for the research as I did. I had expected in the relationship between myself and the research trainee, they would be leading me and feeding me with the latest literature and thinking around education. I envisaged journal clubs, which research trainees did start, but I was unable to attend. I expected trainees to go to libraries and read and form discussion groups discussing ideas. I expected them to go a number of seminars and keep up with the latest debates in their fields and then inform/ teach me about this".

Contextualising experiences: looking back and making sense of the present

Without the human resource, organisations would not be able to function effectively (Thurley, 1979; Paglis & Green, 2002). However, with human resource come personal experiences, preferences and identities within which organisational work is contextualised and understood. These elements have an effect on the manner in which work is carried out as pointed out by Dean's reference to the fact that one of the most difficult aspects of working within the organisation is the diverse scope of expertise and experiences of its employees. While this in itself is a primary strength of our organisation, given its fast paced nature research communication and design becomes complex to navigate, as team members grapple with varying perspectives, theoretical paradigms, approaches and skills. Hence, it becomes impossible not to be impacted by these boundaries and personal motives for doing research which include having a preferred way of doing research and engaging with people in a particular way. The tendency, at most, becomes default by falling back on what one knows

best, i.e. previous experience and research methodological processes that have proven to work in the past (van Manen, 1990). This tendency and reliance may have both negative and positive outcomes but it is crucial to reflect and identify such effect (?). In our reflection exercises we were conscious of this need, which Pillow (2003:175) argues is essential, i.e. that of researchers demonstrably confessing their self-recognition.

However, there is often not enough time to reflect at the workplace. According to Vijay, who holds a senior position in the organisation, "this is partly due to having to negotiate between mentoring the trainees about research skills, supporting them to finish their studies and to deliver on tight timelines of the research tasks required". At times with limited staff complements and not enough human resource to provide support, the demands on research trainees can be onerous. Prior experience of being provided minimal guidance or support, for some trainees like Tebello, was expected on joining the organisation. She confides; "Although I had a rather positive experience with the research component of one of my senior degrees, the supervision aspect left a rather "bitter taste in my mouth". My supervisor was an excellent supervisor when available, but was hardly available. I learned early not to rely too much on the supervisor. While I perceive myself as someone who is able to work well with others and often enjoy doing so, that supervision experience left me preferring to work alone, only seeking help when it was absolutely necessary. So the idea of having a doctoral supervisor at university and a mentor/ supervisor at work was quite unnerving for me".

Evidently, the manner in which each mentor-mentee pair negotiates their relationship is different, including having silent/ non-pronounced negotiations that reflect one's identity (professional, academic and personal) with that of one's mentor/mentee. In keeping with this nuance, Lisa acknowledges it as part of what she appreciates about the research organisation, and commends "the approach that senior researchers and staff members take to the mentoring role I have not had to work with individuals who have been disrespectful because of my lack of experience in a particular subject area or aspect of the research process. Instead, ignorance is taken as a teaching and learning opportunity in such a way that one feels that there is a bi-directional exchange of knowledge and skills rather than the more experienced researcher 'off-loading' information onto an individual who is perceived as a 'blank slate'". These sentiments were expressed by all research trainees, highlighting the fact that their mentors are not conventional, where the mentor is someone who imparts wisdom and shares knowledge with a less experienced colleague.

Our collective experience is that mentor-mentee relationships also benefit from mentoring processes that are not rigid. In retrospect, data collection processes and the collective reflection exercise that gave birth to this paper, in retrospect has made us realise that we have learnt from each other immensely.

Research as work vs. research for postgraduate studies

Research trainees who enter the organisation are generally young and at most would be in their first work-experience. The work pace is fast, especially if the trainee is working with a senior researcher who is also the primary investigator on many research projects. The subtle expectation is that the research trainee also produces the work at this fast pace which may be at the expense of the trainees' graduate studies. Certain expectations come with the organisation's traineeship. Technically there is what trainees refer to "as a 60/40 split, which means 60% of your time is dedicated to project work while 40% is dedicated to doctoral

studies and writing of journal articles" (Tebello). Practically this should translate into trainees getting two days to work on their studies and publications. As part of the employment contract trainees are expected to have a certain number of publications each year, while actively participating in project work and successfully completing graduate studies. Although our organisation in not-for-profit, we operate on a funding model whereat each research programme is tasked with generating a specific amount of funds every year which adds another dimension to the demands placed on trainees. Decrying instances where outputs for clients have to be delivered on stringent deadlines and impacts on trainee time, Andrea says "time gets taken away from my allotted 40% for my studies to work on projects but I understand that there is an obligation to the organisation that pays my salary, to deliver on those outputs". In agreement, Tebello concedes that "while I do not think that this split works for everyone, particularly when it comes to doctoral studies. There are trainees who have successfully completed their doctoral studies under these circumstances, so while I doubt it will be possible in my case the success of those before me proves that it is not impossible. I often doubt that it is possible because the deadlines related to one's doctoral work always seem to fall off because as an employee "it is expected" that project work will always come first". Hence, trainees express the fact that at most, instead of following the 60/40 split they tend to focus on the closest deadlines, a strategy that may derail their studies and through which they may be reprimanded for failing to make adequate progress on their dissertation. Finding the balance is a challenge.

The people employed at our institution, beyond the contributors' programme can also be used as a resource. In instances where trainees work in a field that is different from that of their studies, they can rely on other senior researchers, including sourcing assistance from their mentor. However, expertise availed to trainees can prove to be a challenge as with a mentor at the organisation, and a number of senior researchers that trainees can go to for advice and support, it is sometimes difficult to filter information coming from them and the information and guidance coming from ones university supervisor. Lisa remarks on how she has mitigated this challenge; "I got some advice from my PhD cohort at university which was, listen to the advice you get, appreciate it and consider it, but do not let it derail you, and most importantly, your supervisor's word is final. I have found this piece of advice invaluable". Andrea concurs, noting; "the problem I have experienced is that I cannot use "people resources" to aid my studies. In fact it took a long period of time for my mentor to grasp the nature of my PhD".

We have come to realise that, besides the formal mentor-mentee relationships it is of benefit being associated with the research organisations. Dean remarks; "as an intern, the obvious benefits are such that there are resources made available to you which as a student you would have to secure such resources yourself or on your own". Further reasoning along this line, he recollects the effect that the mentor-mentee relationship he had with his mentor led him to change his maiden research interests, and consequently settled for "a topic which brought the two worlds of work and university together – my world". The change was partly "because I thought it would be beneficial to bring the two together, and partly because I felt an obligation to the organisation", he concludes. Later, due to a collaborated paper with his mentor, he accessed more suitable data for his studies and reckons his mentor propelled him to explore "the somewhat fledgling field of the economics of education".

While our organisation is a research environment that offers many resources from which research trainee graduate student can draw, we acknowledge that the varied research experiences expressed in this paper may not apply to the other employees of the organisation.

Research experiences and relationships could be predetermined the research areas engaged with, the mentor-mentee's personal disposition, the geographical locale of the office, the seniority of the mentor, as well as the academic background of either party. In addition, we acknowledge that as this paper is a conglomeration of only six employees of the research organisation we are cognizant of the fact that the self-reflexive experiences relayed in this paper do not in essence reflect those of the entire organisations or of any other mentormentee groupings.

Bidirectional learning and complexities of multidisciplinary environment

Contemporary work environments present researchers with complex problems that often demand collaborative inquiry in order to extend the existing knowledge boundaries (Clandinin & Conelly, 2000; Kirk, 2005). In these contexts disciplines across the spectrum are required to reconsider their schools of thought (Harrison et al., 2012) and form alliances with different research paradigms. In turn academic discipline, or research boundaries, may be challenged - leading to a series of intentional and unconscious learnings. In consonance with these trends Lisa submits that "working at the our organisation provides one with the opportunity to work with a number of established academics and researchers within and across multidisciplinary units which affords research trainees with the opportunity to be involved in various aspects of a broad range of research projects under the guidance of senior members of staff". Being exposed to so many different methodologies, approaches, and subject areas provides both mentors and interns with invaluable exposure and learning opportunities which could be used to strengthen our own research as post-graduate students and senior researchers.

Acknowledging the importance of working within one's own research niche, with a research focus and approach that neatly coincides with intended career trajectories, the nature of our organisation demands that researchers forge innovative synergies between their own research, their colleagues' research and projects research on which they spend much of their time. While this juxtaposition may reflect unusual match of mentor and mentee, it forces bidirectional learning. In retrospect, Dean, who has the longest traineeship with the organisation says over the years, "the mentoring process was not as simple as tradition would dictate, and that learnings flowed in both directions as my mentor and I engaged over projects we would both grapple with the each other's discipline perspective in addition to the one required by the client". Further, challenges may set in within this context. Reflecting on being led to his dissertation focus by work that he read within the organisation, Dean notes that "this all seemed rather "easy" until I began writing my dissertation. I struggled to find support from my university and my mentor at work was not versed in economics to provide guidance. Our differing approaches to research meant that occasionally when my mentor intervened (trying to help) it would often derail my progress. Furthermore by studying an area which was closer to project work I became confused and I could not properly put boundaries to my dissertation so the scope began to overwhelm me."

It is worth noting that the bidirectional learning and support that has been of great value is mostly received from fellow research trainees which are further supported by the collegial environment of the workplace. Reiterating the existence of this support system, trainees concur that other doctoral and masters level interns are instrumental in the progression of their studies, "whether actively peer-mentoring, motivating or just giving moral support"

(Dean). Andrea concurs that "from a social support point of view, they "have been a useful resource as they have many of the same experiences as I do, they are often more accessible to bounce ideas off of and provide input for my studies as well as my work".

This kind of support is invaluable in instances where mentors have competing demands and in turn limited time to engage and provide constant guidance. The inevitable flipside of this situation for novice trainees is when mentors assume they would know what was required and expected of them and left to having to "learn most strokes on their own in the deep end".

Implications and effects of collaborative learning from both mentors and mentees go beyond the boundaries of scholarly and/or research work, but has been expressed as being relational as well. The relationship between a mentor and a mentee is vitally important. As a mentee, declares Lisa; "you really feel like you need to be able to respect and learn from your mentor". It is necessary to be approachable for an enhanced value of the teaching and learning opportunities inherent in a mentor-mentee relationship. Over time the benefit extends back to improved skills of writing and conducting. As time progresses analytical and writing skills get sharpened, a kind of development that is encouraging to observe.

Concluding remarks

For many years, practitioners within varied fields have been conducting processes related to reflecting on their work, mainly to find ways of improving the results of their jobs. Not much has been done, for instance, by researchers of conventional research institutions to ascertain how their research approaches, philosophies, values and beliefs interact with each other's learning. This paper highlights the manner in which researchers could, using reflexive approaches, engage with boundaries of their organisation. We are of the view that there ought to be an incessant search for novel and innovative forms in which researchers, as mentors and mentees, evaluate and engage with their mentor-mentees relations and journeys. On reflecting on our self-reflexive exercises over the past six months, we realize how this process has propelled us to take a step back and engage with our relationships. We have found that while we struggle to balance the demands of our research and postgraduate studies and the inherent power imbalance amongst us, working collaboratively in developing this paper was an invaluable exercise.

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