THE AUXIN PROJECT THROUGH THE HERMENEUTIC LENS: DOES IT CONTRIBUTE TO THE VISION AND MISSION OF A CENTRE FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING?

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Abstract
The Stellenbosch University (SU) Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL) offers professional learning opportunities for academics, such as Auxin sessions, to engage in courageous conversations about teaching and learning. Like many other centres that wish to flourish, the CTL has a vision and mission statement, to define the direction the Centre is moving in. The Centre’s Vision states that it strives 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 academics and to be thought leaders for scholarly teaching and learning.

Against this background, the research question is: does the CTL Auxin Project contribute to the realisation of this Vision and Mission? The question is explored by analysing self-evaluation documents. The analysis is grounded in the philosophical hermeneutic methodology, which is associated with textual interpretation. I employ the hermeneutic circle in combination with the notion of ‘rhythmic action’ as exploratory framework.

The hermeneutic circle is described by Bontekoe (in Kinsella, 2006:5) as a circle with two poles: one being the object of comprehension and the other, the various parts thereof. Through this analysis, I show how the two poles, represented by the CTL Vision and Mission on the one hand and the Auxin project on the other, are bound together in a relationship of mutual clarification.

In addition, I employ ‘rhythmic action’ (Agamben 1999) as a lens through which to understand the nexus between educational theory and practice. When there is an interruption in the rhythmic flow, it reveals a particular status of the practice. The interruption, in this case, is the CTL Self-Evaluation Reports. It opens up the rhythm, thereby offering a lens through which to understand the nexus.

Findings suggest that there seems to be an interplay between the CTL Vision and the Auxin Project, characterised by successful and less successful aspects. The SU CTL Self-Evaluation Reports, as ‘interruption’, give more insight into the ‘rhythmic action’ between theory and practice, and presents an opportunity for implementing possible change. Regardless of the seeming interplay, there are two main concerns:

1. there is an apparent gap between the social justice intension expressed in the CTL Vision, and the way it plays out in practice;
2. the extent to which the activities of the Centre are responsive to transformation.

The analysis can be regarded as meaningful educational research because it adds value on both theoretical and practical levels. On a theoretical level I demonstrated the use of the hermeneutic circle as exploratory framework to illuminate an academic development project. I also show cased how Agamben’s ‘rhythmic action’ can be used as a lens to understand the nexus between educational theory and practice. On a practical level I suggest that academic development units should find ways to encourage the scholarship of teaching and learning amongst academics. It can therefore be argued that the findings could enhance the professional growth of academic developers.

Keywords: academic development, teaching and learning, scholarship, hermeneutics, rhythmic action.

1. INTRODUCTION

The idea for this analysis 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. To crown it all, I gathered from literature that the application of hermeneutics as research methodology in the field of academic staff
development is limited, not very popular and in the words of Webb (1996), “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 SU 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.

The professional learning opportunities we offer, include Auxin sessions (more about this later), Cape Higher Education Consortium (CHEC) short courses, Postgraduate Diploma in Higher Education in Teaching and Learning (PG Dip (HE) (T&L)), Professional Educational Development for Academics (PREDAC), 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: how does the CTL Auxin Project contribute to the realisation of its Vision and Mission? I am singling out the Auxin Project because I am the coordinator of this project. The purpose of this analysis is to explore this question by analysing the (1) SU CTL Self-Evaluation Draft Report (Internal) for the Period 2014 – 2016 (CTL, 2016a), and the (2) CTL Self-Evaluation Report (CTL, 2016b) by applying a combination of hermeneutics or textual analysis and ‘rhythmic action’ as research methodology.

My analysis has a philosophical underpinning. 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 won’t gain new insights if we don’t ask questions about, in this case, the relationship between the CTL Vision and Mission and the Auxin Project.

In the next section, I provide a brief unpacking of the research methodology employed in this analysis.

2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This analysis is grounded in the hermeneutic methodology, which is a philosophical approach, and not so easy to understand. Because of its complexity, I had numerous reservations for embarking on this analysis, because I am not a philosopher and do not have a specialised philosophical vocabulary. However, after reading about overcoming similar reservations by Shklar (2004), I was motivated to take up the challenge.

The hermeneutic methodology grew out of the work of Jürgen Habermas, who gave a new direction to both hermeneutic theory and praxis when he insisted on the necessity of hermeneutics. This insistence
was necessary because (in his view) knowledge is a product of society which is often mystified and reified. Through critical reflection such mystifications and reifications could be overcome (Demeterio, 2001). A hermeneutic approach to research therefore emphasises practical human interest, and makes use of hermeneutics to yield practical knowledge.

Next I discuss the origins of hermeneutics and I show how it has developed from traditional hermeneutics, classical hermeneutic theory and twentieth-century hermeneutics, to contemporary hermeneutics. This attention to the tradition of hermeneutic scholarship can enrich, substantiate and make explicit assumptions about the relationship between theory and practice, which is central to this analysis.

Hermeneutics is said to be as old as ancient Greece (Prasad, 2002). Since its emergence, the word ‘hermeneutics’ has referred to the science or art of interpretation (Grondin, 1994:1). Byrne (2001:1) describes ‘hermeneutics’ as having to do with textual interpretation or finding meaning in the hidden word. Berger and Luckmann (in Harvey & Myers, 1995:20) refer to the purpose of hermeneutics as being to explore the socially constructed contexts of both institutions and organisations. Hermeneutics as methodology for this analysis is particularly useful because it is identified in literature as a recognised framework for the analysis of the work done by institutions, departments and centres (like the CTL) (Bryman, in Harvey & Myers, 1995:20).

With Greek antiquity as its origin, the evolution of hermeneutics has been marked by the emergence of distinct forms of hermeneutics, such as (1) traditional hermeneutics, (2) classical hermeneutic theory and (3) contemporary hermeneutics.

1 Traditional hermeneuticists were concerned with interpretation of biblical texts. They sought to identify the literal or authentic meanings of religious texts so that they could explain how to live a Christian life (Birch, 1993:238).

2 Whereas traditional hermeneutics emerged as a historical and critical methodology for analysing texts, classical hermeneutic theory represents a movement away from medieval methods of interpretation to explaining the correct analysis of biblical texts. Among the key figures in the area of classical hermeneutic theory are Friedrich Schleiermacher, who was concerned with the construction of methods to aid successful interpretation of texts (Rasmussen, 2002:1) and Wilhelm Dilthey (Makkreel, 2016), who added a social perspective.

3 Next came contemporary hermeneutics, which is primarily described as a theory of radical interpretation, known as radical hermeneutics. In contrast to classical hermeneutic theory, the school of radical hermeneutics claims that reading is more a case of playing or dancing than a puritanical application of method (Gallagher, 1992:10). Interpretation requires playing with the words of the text rather than using them to find truth in or beyond the text. The text is played off against itself through the use of deconstructionist techniques. For radical hermeneutics, original meaning is unattainable and the best that can be done is to stretch the limits of language to reveal fresh insights.

To summarise the historical development of hermeneutics: hermeneutics clearly is a progressive discipline. Through its conceptual work and the ensuing debates, it has developed into a collection of methodologies of interpretation suitable not only for religion and humanism, but also for the social sciences.

The potential 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.

Let me now briefly return to contemporary hermeneutics. As an epistemology and 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 documents such as policy documents and annual reports (Prasad, 2002:29), and might I add, self-evaluation reports. Herein lies the value of hermeneutics as research methodology for my analysis.

Following contemporary hermeneutics, Prasad (2002) continues to describe the evolution of hermeneutics, stating that after certain major theoretical innovations by hermeneutic scholars such as
Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, Gadamer and Habermas, contemporary hermeneutics no longer defines itself as a method (narrowly understood). Rather, it defines itself as a comprehensive epistemology and philosophy of interpretation, which is informed by important concepts such as the hermeneutic circle, the hermeneutic horizon, understanding as dialogue and fusion of horizons, the non-author-intentional view of meaning, and interpretation as critique. These concepts and accompanying debates originated from the nature of hermeneutics as a progressive discipline. In this analysis, I focus on the notion of the ‘hermeneutic circle’ as exploratory framework. 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).

For the purposes of this analysis I employ the hermeneutic circle in combination with the notion of ‘rhythmic action’ as exploratory framework. Originally, hermeneutics was focused on how we philosophically interpret written texts, but in the social sciences it is often applied to the way we interpret experiences (Study.com, 2019). Put simply, the hermeneutic circle essentially says that we interpret things by going from specific to general and back again. Understanding specific, concrete details can be helpful to understand general, theoretical issues. And, since it's a circle, understanding general, theoretical issues can also help us understand specific, concrete details. Further qualification for employing the hermeneutic circle in this analysis, to alleviate any concern stemming from its philosophical nature, comes from Mantzavinos (2009), who argues that the application of the hermeneutic circle is not limited to theory or pure logic only, but can be used to describe phenomena through practice or experience.

Bontekoe (in Kinsella, 2006:5) describes the traditional hermeneutic circle as a circle with two poles. On the one hand, the object of comprehension, to be understood as a whole, and, on the other, the various parts of which the object of comprehension is composed. The object of comprehension, taken as a whole, is understood in terms of its parts, and this understanding involves the recognition of how these parts are integrated into the whole. The parts, once integrated, constitute the whole. Each part is what it is by virtue of its location and function with respect to the whole. In a process of contextualisation, each of the parts is illuminated, which clarifies the whole. The two poles of the hermeneutic circle are therefore bound together in a relationship of mutual clarification.

Applied to the CTL Auxin Project, I see it schematically presented like this:

![Diagram of the Hermeneutic Circle applied to the CTL Auxin Project](image)

At this stage I pause to reflect on Agamben’s idea of ‘rhythmic action’ or the ‘theory/practice nexus’ and his ‘opening of rhythm’ (Agamben, 1999), because I see a few similarities between his theory and the
herneneutic circle. Agamben offers a lens through which to understand the nexus between educational theory and practice, almost like the interaction between the two ‘poles’ in the hermeneutic circle. To Agamben (1999:44), the notion of work (doing) is so intimately tied with human nature, that it is difficult to separate the two. He explains that “everything is rhythm: the entire destiny of man is one heavenly rhythm” (ibid:58), suggesting a constant interplay between theory and practice.

Against the background of the research question, and building on the argument posited by Davids and Waghid that there exists a link or nexus between educational theory and practice, the next question that needs to be explored is whether the CTL Vision and Mission Statements can be regarded as (educational) theory. According to Davids and Waghid (2017:2), the formulation of (educational) theory involves a particular kind of action related to thinking, writing and producing. Since vision and mission statements are born of, amongst others, thinking and writing, I therefore contend that the formulation of mission and vision statements can be regarded as theorising. They are theories that give direction to practice. This directive quality further enhances the idea of a ‘nexus’ between theory and practice, meaning that not only is the one informed by the other, but neither can exist without the other. This is where Agamben’s notion of ‘rhythmic action’ comes into play. It offers a lens through which to understand the nexus between educational theory and practice. When there is a stop or pause of the action, or an interruption in the rhythmic flow, it reveals a particular status of the practice (the CTL Auxin Project). This interruption, in the case of this analysis, is the CTL Self-Evaluation Reports. The interruption opens up the rhythm, thereby offering a lens through which to understand the nexus, and possibly change it.

Applied to the CTL Auxin Project, I offer the following schematic representation:

To summarise this section: I discussed the ‘hermeneutic circle’ as exploratory framework and I showed how the two poles of the hermeneutic circle, represented by the CTL Vision and Mission on the one hand and the Auxin project on the other hand, are bound together in a relationship of mutual clarification. In addition, I explored the notion that there exists a link or nexus between educational theory and practice, building on Agamben’s ‘rhythmic action’. It offers a lens through which to understand the nexus between educational theory and practice. The CTL Self-Evaluation Reports represent an ‘interruption’, opening up the rhythmic interplay between theory and practice.

3 RESULTS

In terms of the hermeneutic circle, there is definitely an interplay 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.
This interplay is characterised by successful and less successful aspects. Both the SU CTL Self-Evaluation Draft Report (Internal) for the Period 2014 – 2016 (CTL, 2016a) and the CTL Self-Evaluation Report (CTL, 2016b) offer the ideal ‘interruption’, or lens through which to gain more insight into the interplay or rhythmic action between theory (CTL Vision and Mission) and practice (Auxin Project).

My analysis has shown that one of the successful aspects of the Auxin Project (CTL, 2016:27-28) is that it has endeavored to focus on broadening the community of scholarly teachers by, amongst others, linking theory with practice. Participants have reported that it has been a good opportunity to learn and be exposed to perspectives other than their own:

- 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

Not only is a platform provided to introduce participants to literature on a specific topic and provide food for thought, but participants also feel comfortable because presenters are from campus and familiar:

- that the presenter was a practicing lecturer… made it accessible and practical
- presenter is a lecturer… realistic – could relate to what was being said

Even more valued is that readings are distributed before the time, so that participants can familiarise themselves with the topic. Participants also appreciate the structured format of the sessions, with an opportunity for questions at the end of each session:

- well structured
- (good) question and answer session
- thanks for meaningful discussion

Participants furthermore regard the Auxin Project as an opportunity to network with colleagues and share experiences, knowledge and information:

- seeing what my colleagues in my own department do

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…

Even though there seems to be interplay between the CTL Vision and Mission, and the Auxin Project, 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) with regard to 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 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 incorporated 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 of affairs, 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 has to happen.

As for the apparent gap between the social justice intension expressed in the CTL Vision, and the way it plays out in practice, I posit that, regardless of this concern, my analysis of the SU CTL Self-Evaluation Draft Report (Internal) (CTL, 2016a) and the CTL Self-Evaluation Report (CTL, 2016b) nonetheless shows a number of 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 be more effectively translated to 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 an (social) activity such as the Auxin discussions.

4 CONCLUSIONS

To illustrate the usefulness of this analysis for the field of Higher Education Teaching and Learning, I draw on Elliot (2006:169), who posits that educational research includes the intention to realise educational values in action. It focusses on addressing practical questions and in so doing inevitably touches on evaluating the aims of education. 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. My analysis of the SU CTL Self-Evaluation Draft Report (Internal) (CTL, 2016a) and the CTL Self-Evaluation Report (CTL, 2016b) can be regarded as educational research for the following reasons:

(1) 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 to encourage the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) amongst academics. 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. (2) The findings can enhance continuous professional growth and the development of a critical outlook of all role players in the CTL, with the potential to benefit the Auxin Project. I posit that these issues are relevant to higher education, as well as part of educational research.

Further usefulness of this analysis relates to the use of the hermeneutic circle as exploratory framework. I illustrated how the object of comprehension (the CTL and its Vision and Mission), taken as a whole, is understood in terms of its various parts (the example in this case being the Auxin Project), and this understanding involves the recognition of how the parts could integrate into the whole. I illuminated the Auxin Project, bringing some clarity to the whole. The two poles of the hermeneutic circle (the CTL Vision and Mission and the Auxin Project) are therefore bound together in a relationship of mutual clarification.

I am also excited about, what I believe, is a humble contribution to the notion of Agamben’s ‘rhythmic action’. I showed how it can be used as a lens through which to understand the nexus between educational theory (the CTL Vision and Mission) and practice (the Auxin Project). The two are intimately tied, and the CTL Self-Evaluation Reports represent the ‘interruption’ for increased understanding of the interplay between theory and practice. I also showed how this ‘interruption’ can offer insight into the status of the Auxin Project and present an opportunity for change.

Interestingly, the issue of change, more specifically the process of change management in the professional learning of academics at SU, is referred to in the CTL Self-Evaluation Report (2016:39). It states that “a process of change management needs to be undertaken at the university”. This relates to my suggestion for a paradigm shift. Furthermore, ongoing research at SU has found that, according to academics, there are enough opportunities for enhancing teaching practice at the University, but concerns have been raised about the relevance thereof. This suggests the need for more targeted, relevant development opportunities, which is an important observation to be kept in mind by the CTL. My reference to the ‘interruption’ being an opportunity to consider change, is another useful spin-off from this analysis.

In answer to the research question, there does seem to be an interplay between the SU CTL Auxin Project and its Vision and Mission. However, after reading Boughey and McKenna’s (2017:963) observation about the stagnation of sets of ideas about teaching and learning in higher education, I posit that there is room for strengthening of this interplay. 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 SU CTL Self-Evaluation Report (CTL, 2016b:40), clinging to historical institutional ways of thinking remains a challenge confronting the work of the CTL at SU. It also confirms the concern raised earlier, when I questioned how responsive our work is in terms of transformation. Perhaps this warrants the basis for further investigation.

REFERENCES


