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Where Have All the Teachers Gone: A Case Study in Transitioning

Abstract

This paper reports the autobiographical narrative of Mr. L, as case-in-point example of the thresholding moment and the process of transitioning into Academia. The role of the lecturer-mentor and the multi-logic space that facilitates the process are clarified. I use hermeneutic phenomenology and interpretivism as methodological tools. This *ex post facto* qualitative study was done to elucidate the concepts and iterative processes involved in transitioning. I conclude that the novice student needs a lecturer-mentor guiding him through this life-changing event.

Keywords: thresholding, transitioning, mentor, dialogue, multi-logic, multivoicing

Introduction

Thresholding and transitioning can be conceptualized as an event or point of orientation where a change of relationships as well as change with regard to practices and roles in a person's life are evident. Novice students in the position of thresholding and transitioning into Academia are perceived as adults in transit (Schlossberg, 1984, pp. 5-13). These students find themselves in an anticipated liminal situation where they will experience the impact of the thresholding and transitioning into Academia (Evans *et al*, 1998, p. 3).

In this brief report on a qualitative *ex post facto* case study report I will relate the thresholding and transitioning process of Mr. L, a novice academic, towards becoming a confident citizen of Academia. During a semi-structured interview (Tracy, 2013) Mr. L told his own story of this journey as a novice and the lecturer who guided him from the threshold of Academia through his own, personal transitioning process. His narrative is one of 25 student narratives forming part of a project on novice student thresholding and transitioning.

In this paper I will, therefore elucidate the process of thresholding and the transitioning process, the role of the lecturer-mentor in this process and the sanctuary in which the process takes place. As a clarifying example of this process I will relate the case of Mr. L.

Thresholding versus transitioning: Where have all the familiar beacons gone?

Thresholding refers to a static process, almost a moment frozen in time; a reflective pause or a contemplative plateau. Transitioning, *per se*, refers to an active process, based on a clear decision to proceed, resulting from the thresholding moment of reflection and contemplation. Transitioning is, however, a life changing event spanning time and emotional space with an identifiable end point and a definite, acknowledged and recognized moment of transcending.

One of the defining characteristics of transitioning is a person's awareness of the process of transitioning (Meleis, 2010, p. 19). Although the novice student (i.e. first year Higher Education Institution [HEI] students) might not consciously be aware of his/her level of engagement with academic transitioning, s/he is mostly aware of the change and differences with which s/he is confronted with within the new environment. Transitioning could not only be described as the result of change, but it is important to realize that it also results in change (Meleis, 2010, p. 19).

Students in transition, given the fact that levels of transitioning are individually perceived, are captured in a time continuum where they might feel different than they did before. These time-dependent episodes can be referred to as liminal moments where the student negotiates meaning framed within this process of transitioning (Meleis, 2010, p. 20).

The concept of liminality, as used in the social sciences, refers to a process of inevitable transitioning that is always characterized by a certain amount of insecurity and yet provides the potential for creative innovation as ontic feature (Thomassen, 2014, p. 10). In its core, experiences of transitioning contain autonomy and *angst*. These moments of transitioning, the living through the in-between, constitutes part of the spatial dimensions of the authenticity of transcendence (Potgieter, 2015, p. 54). This is especially true for the novice student entering Academia for the first time and for whom many of the social and academic constants they have encountered up to this particular juncture have fallen away. For them, transitioning can be life-altering although it often might swing towards crisis (Thomassen, 2014, p. 10). Liminality presents a challenge to the novice student who should learn how to cope with his/her changing academic environment.

It is against this backdrop that the role of the lecturer-mentor becomes increasingly significant as creator of academic sanctuaries for students from where they can safely transcend into Academia.

The lecturer-mentor: “Where have all the teachers gone? Oh, when will they ever learn?”

The primary goal of universities and therefore of lecturers regarding learning and teaching is more often than not the facilitation of knowledge and skills acquisition, together with the paracletic accompaniment of the students towards academic prowess (Haggard *et al.*, 2011, p. 286). The results of these goals are assessed and evaluated through a myriad of assignments, tests and examinations. For this reason, novice students often experience fear of failure during the process of thresholding into Academia, because they feel judged rather than guided by their lecturers. In order for novices to be immersed into the environment of Academia they should be accompanied on their journey by a lecturer who is also a mentor. These lecturer-mentors should be academic examples of scholarliness and they should be accessible and approachable, as well as non-judgemental, intuitive and empathetic to the needs of students (Haggard *et al.*, 2011, p. 287).

The academic lecturer-mentor has to guide his/her students from novice students through the transitioning process by being a *paraclete* to them (cf. Medieval Latin: *paracletus*; cf. also: mid-15c., *Paraclit*, a title of the Holy Spirit, from Old French *paraclet* (13c.), from Medieval Latin *paracletus*, from Greek *parakletos* “advocate, intercessor, legal assistant”, noun use of adjective meaning “called to one’s aid”,

from *parakalein* “to call to one’s aid”, in later use “to comfort, to console”, from *para* “alongside” + *kalein* “to call”, *paraklētōs* (Greek) or *paraclete* (English) to them (Collins dictionary, 2016).

A lecturer-mentor becomes a *paraclete* to her students when she takes on the role of advocate or helper; when she becomes an intercessor to them on their journey into Academia for which they receive no roadmap or GPS co-ordinates. *Paraklētōs* in Greek means to call someone (*kalein* / *klētōs*) alongside (*para*) in aid of a person in need of assistance (Collins dictionary, 2016). Therefore the lecturer-mentor who guides the novice towards transitioning fulfils more than the role of a mere teacher. Instead she becomes a counsellor who escorts her students through the transitioning period into Academia. The lecturer-mentor is not walking in front of her novice-students or pushing them from behind; she walks alongside them (i.e. she accompanies, or “is alongside” them) on their journey of transitioning.

The liminal experience of thresholding and transitioning into the academic environment is enhanced by multi-logic spaces where curiosity about and focus on the academic challenges of Academia are key attributes of the academic literacy classroom. In this educative nurturing space the lecturer-mentor and her students engage meaningfully and with academic curiosity with socially rich experiential, conceptual and reflective learning. Monological teaching disregards the voices that should be heard in the multi-logical classroom where the lecturer-mentor encourages constructivist interaction between herself, her students as well as with reading texts and subsequent student-generated writing (Rule, 2007, p. 320).

Academic sanctuaries: “Where have all the students gone? Gone to classrooms every one.”

In this section I outline the dialogical situation between the lecturer-mentor and the novice student in the multi-logic educational context in an attempt to try and demonstrate where and how dialogue becomes important in the liminal thresholding and transitioning process.

Scholarly understanding of the concept of dialogue has become conceptually progressively limiting and pedagogically contentious over the past five years or so. Expanding on the work done by Leganger-Krogstad (2014, pp. 104-128), I therefore wish to introduce the concept of pedagogic multi-logic into this particular context. Authentic teaching-learning environments should make available and facilitate the foundation and preservation of pedagogic spaces of security and safety for multi-logic rendezvous and collaboration between lecturer-mentors, students and academic content (Potgieter, 2015, p. 57).

The notion of pedagogic spaces (pedagogic sanctuaries) that seek to provide safety for multi-logic engagement and interaction can, possibly, best be enlightened using Rule’s definition (2007, p. 319) of dialogic space as an intellectual and socio-conventional space where role-players can intermediate within a non-threatening environment. A sanctuary in this context refers to a place or space where a student may feel safe to express personal views and opinions and to make mistakes without fear of being ridiculed. However, a sanctuary always includes opportunity for both silence and for authentic dialogue. Creating pedagogic sanctuaries and safe spaces for open, yet focused and validated multi-logic, built on mutual trust, support, respect, honesty, critical thinking and open, vibrant communication will provide

both lecturer-mentors and novice students with a practice ground for classroom-based discussions where they can experience authentic and pedagogically justifiable conversational safety from pursuit, persecution, disrespect, ridicule or any other danger or form of personal awkwardness or embarrassment (Potgieter, 2015, pp. 57-59).

Multi-logueing, as an evolving hybrid of educational dialogue, intentionally endeavours to extend the conventional notion of classroom-based dialogue between lecturer-mentor and novice students by introducing additional 'voices' (besides that of the lecturer-mentor and her novice students) for the length of any teaching-learning contact session. These voices might take the form of a variety of pedagogic tools and strategies of, and for conciliation between the lecturer-mentor and her students. They might, for example, include (depending on the class-size itself, as well as on the nature and choice of the relevant academic curriculum and related themes) objects, theoretical themes, political, traditional, lifestyle as well as shared and socially relevant themes, values-driven texts for discussion, or even practical oral and written assignments (Potgieter, 2015, pp. 57-59).

The lecturer-mentor remains responsible for the interaction in her classroom. The lecturer-mentor designs and creates pedagogical spaces of safety, and chooses what educational material to pay attention to (Leganger-Krogstad, 2014, p. 104); she is the one who sets up the rules for the multi-logues in her classroom in order to facilitate pedagogically successful interactions with her students and all other voices, as exemplified above (Rule, 2007; Potgieter, 2015, p. 57).

Within a pedagogically safe multi-logic space, it is the lecturer-mentor's pedagogic duty to use her classroom-specific linguistic skills to journey together with her students and to scaffold activities in order for the students to eventually be able to progress towards the next step in the process of learning and thresholding. The pedagogic tools and strategies provided in pedagogic sanctuaries are expected to help mediate the process of learning and teaching, assisting all role-players to interpret and construct appropriate sets of mutually beneficial understanding. This requires the lecturer-mentor to choose the tools and strategies that might be needed on the basis of didactical considerations to enhance the multi-logue and to engage with, explore explain and understand academic skills (Leganger-Krogstad, 2014, pp. 106, 123). The tools and strategies should, therefore, be designed, selected and operationalised in such a way as to provide enough learning scaffolding – through information provided and mutually collected – eventually to become authentic – yet additional – voices in a particular, contextualised pedagogic multi-logueing sanctuary (Leganger-Krogstad, 2014, p. 113).

A case in transitioning: When will I ever learn?

As a researcher I have a phronetic approach to research which, according to Tracy (2013, p. 4), suggests that qualitative data can be systematically gathered, organized, interpreted and analyzed in order to address real world concerns. I started this project spanning three years by identifying a particular issue in Academia and then proceeded to systematically interpret the data in order to provide an analysis that explain the issue. Although this reflection or case study refers to the transcript of one participant's journey, his is only one of many other transcriptions of similar

interviews. The full transcript will be made available to scholars who are interested in this particular case study.

During a semi-structured interview with a student (for ethical purposes I will refer to him as Mr. L in this paper) doing his dissertation part of his bachelor's degree in the faculty of Law at a tertiary institution he allowed me an insight into his own, personal academic transitioning into Academia. His journey had been a multi-faceted one spanning six years. It represents the journey of many students I have so far interviewed as part of this research project.

Mr. L entered the academic sphere as a novice student after a gap year spent travelling in various countries in Europe, working at part-time jobs to finance his trip. He kept a journal of his experiences and his *coming of age* as he referred to this part of his transitioning and decided that he would study journalism on his return to South Africa. Mr. L enrolled at a tertiary institution and started his academic journey.

During the interview Mr. L indicated to me that he enjoyed some of his studies but found most of the courses unchallenging. Academic writing seemed very distant from his own style and the voice he used in his creative writing pursuits. Another aspect he found daunting was that he did not seem to be able to find a mentor among his lecturers who would listen to him and guide him academically. At the end of his first year he decided to change from a degree in journalism to law as he had become interested in the constitutional rights of men in same sex marriages as part of gender studies in the South African context. It is during his lectures in the Faculty of Law that he encountered a teacher and mentor who not only inspired him but who "alongside" him by linking up with him on his academic journey.

He pinpointed his transitioning into Academia, which was a life changing event for him both academically and emotionally, as a specific moment in his second year of studies. His narrative states:

Mr. L: "It seems I have been at the brink for more than a year, sometimes hovering close to the edge at other times retreating. But one day I was listening to this professor and I suddenly got it, ...what I had to do you know, and from then on there was no stopping me! There was no more fear, I knew she would help me if I got lost..."

It seems that the novice's transcendence into Academia, required from the academic lecturer-mentor and her novice student to undertake a reciprocal internal voyage of meaning-making and meaning-decoding (Marshall, 2009, p. 27); the ultimate destination of which is a deeper personal response to the liminality of Academia – irrespective of the specific outcomes of academic subjects or modules as such (Jones, 2005, p. 4). If education, amongst others, implies learning to see life from a different perspective, the multi-logueing sanctuary should provide both lecturer-mentor and novice student such a space which is grounded in a collective sense of belonging, as well as determination from both for the student to transcend effortlessly across the first threshold into Academia (Jones, 2005, p. 4; Marshall, 2009, p. 27; Potgieter, 2015, pp. 56-59).

Conclusion

Where have all the teachers gone? From what I learnt from the narratives of the novice students, the narrative of Mr. L used in this paper as example, there is a great need for mentor-lecturers in tertiary institutions. We should not talk to our students,

we should listen to them. Novices want and need us to teach about life, not only knowledge and skills. Mentor-lecturers are not bound by curriculums and syllabi. They connect the material at hand, in a way that feels spacious and free, connecting it to experience, and so they shed light on students' experience. Students in transitioning need prototypes (paracletes), freedom of speech (sanctuaries) and guiding beacons that will lead them over the threshold of Academia.

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