

GETTING BY WITH A LITTLE HELP FROM MY FRIENDS: THE CONTRIBUTION OF MENTORSHIP PRACTICES TO THE SOCIAL LEARNING OF THE NOVICE LECTURER IN THE CAPACITY OF BEING AN ACADEMIC

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ABSTRACT

The challenges novice lecturers experience when integrating into the South African Higher Education (HE) landscape are well documented. This article reports on the novice lecturers' experiences of mentorship practices in their first year of teaching at a Higher Education (HE) institution in Johannesburg, South Africa. An Interpretivist paradigm was used to gain insight into their experiences of assimilating into academic life. The theories, which offered good purchase on the social learning of novice lecturers and therefore underpin this article, are social constructivism as a scaffold to mentoring theory and communities of practice. Data was generated through discursive oriented interviews and analysed using Thematic analysis in conjunction with Discourse Analysis. Using a purposeful sampling strategy, the participants in the study were ten novice lecturers, who were drawn from various disciplines. The study found that although novice lecturers' passage into academia was initially problematic in the sense of being alienating and lonely, they created invisible networks of resourceful relationships which served as ways to survive and ultimately manage their new roles and responsibilities.

Key words: mentorship practice, community of practice, social learning, social constructivism, novice lecturers, informal learning

INTRODUCTION

The problem under investigation in this article is the challenge novice lecturers experience when integrating into the South African Higher Education (HE) landscape. At many institutions of higher education, novice lecturers are generally introduced to academia primarily through an induction session conducted over a few days. In certain cases, novice lecturers are required to

teach immediately on appointment, with very little or no experience of the organisational climate or the culture of the institution that appointed them. In addition, once employed, novice lecturers are required to adapt, integrate and become part of HE.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Many studies acknowledge that although induction initiatives are set up to assist novice lecturers in their integration into academia, they are often done in a generic manner with the assumption that all novice lecturers have the same needs (Knight, Tait, and Yorke 2006, 336). Such writers allude to the conspicuous differences in teaching different courses at academia, pointing out disparities in practice in various workgroups or department. Boice (1991, 219) argues that induction initiatives are a postscript of recruitment – suggesting that often inductions are short and brief and do not satisfy the needs of all of the lecturers because of their “one-size-fits-all” character. It is also often presumed by institutional leaders that novice lecturers have received the necessary training in their various academic fields to seamlessly orientate themselves into this context. Researchers who have explored this terrain argue that this is not the case. They posit that possessing an academic qualification does not necessarily mean that a novice lecturer would be sufficiently equipped to meet the challenges of teaching at a university. They have to “sink or swim” or, in the words of Huberman (1989, 31–38), novices go through the gamut of “survival and discovery”. Reports indicate that novices find that their preconceived ideas or expectations of teaching in HE clashes with the reality of practice, producing “reality shock” (Kramer 1974). Indeed, the transition to the role of lecturer into HE could be a challenging one (Gourlay 2011); (Schrodt, Cawyer, and Sanders 2003); (Bathmaker and Avis 2007, 509). They explain that the assumption of a new position within an organisation relies heavily on the adaptation skills of the novice lecturer: there are new colleagues to meet, new processes to become familiar with, new offices and buildings to navigate, new software to master, employment conditions to understand and most importantly, a job to learn. This notion is reaffirmed by other researchers. The early career years can be isolating and lonely, especially for underrepresented members of the professoriate (Driscoll, Parkes, Tilley-Lubbs, Brill and Pitts Bannister 2009). Yet other researchers posit that “... the start of a professorial career may be stressful” (Holmes, Land, and Hinton-Hudson 2007).

Researchers who have explored the transition into university by novice lecturers, have predominantly documented this as a negative experience, which includes, among other descriptions: anxiety, disillusionment, failure, loneliness, and insecurity (Britzman, 1992); (Cole and Knowles 1993); (Rust 1994); (Hargreaves and Jacka 1995, cited in Ronfeldt and Grossman 2008, 43). Novices claim that in addition to experiencing feelings of “isolation,

separation, fragmentation, competition, and sometimes incivility” at their own institutions, they are often forced to seek support from an external community of scholars (Lave and Wenger, 1991). These perceived incongruities between individual and university efforts in novice and new staff integration, point strongly to novices being denied legitimate participation.

A variety of negative experiences of new lecturers have been documented by Menges (1999, 204–205). These experiences include amongst others, anxiety about surviving in the job and pressure from feeling obligated to complete tasks that consume their time and energy. Some researchers are more direct in their criticism. They posit that novices are abandoned both by the department and institutional itself in the first two or three years of their career (Leon 1997 in Savage, Karp, and Logue 2004, 22). Writers also speak of gradual wearing away of mentoring itself (Kuo 2000) which has fostered “barriers of isolation” for neophytes (Hulig-Austin 1990 in Savage et al. 2004, 22). Within the schooling context, Johnston and Ryan (1980, 6, in Barkhuizen 2002) describe first year teachers as “aliens in a strange world”. Trowler (1998) argues that the same applies to lecturers starting their professional careers at universities. Little (1990) explains why lecturers remain locked in their worlds of isolation. She argues that mentoring relationships commonly fail to materialise because the idea of asking a question is generally considered to be a cry for help. It would seem that novices are likely to avoid imitating or copying the effective practices of more experienced colleagues because of it being viewed as an indictment of their professional credibility. There is a sense that the novice lecturers’ increasing withdrawal from academia may lead to contemplations of seeking employment elsewhere. Darling-Hammond (1985, 214) argues that teacher isolation is not only directly responsible for teacher attrition but is also, “deadening for professional growth and for the evolution and transmittal of professional knowledge”.

It has been posited that successful induction experiences can lead to fewer teachers leaving the profession, which is counter-productive in the sense of “wasting talent” (Wright and Wright 1987, in Penner 2001). Bearing testimony to this argument, Smith and Ingersoll (2004) study posits that novices who participated in structured and planned induction and mentoring in their first year of teaching, were unlikely to leave the profession. This idea is supported by research where “... protégés need mentors who can guide them in their research and teaching, help them find jobs, introduce them to important others in their field, and advise them on how to handle the demands of the profession” (Clark, Harden, and Johnson 2000).

There are compelling arguments that pairing the novice with an experienced lecturer in a formal arrangement could go a long way in countering “loneliness” and promoting “survival” in terms of life-long learning for academic staff. Wenger maintains that participation “... in a playground clique or in a work team are both a kind of action and a form of belonging” Wenger

(1998, 4). It is further argued that the pairing should be made with a mentor figure that is skilled enough to offer guidance and support in a non-threatening, non-judgemental fashion. Evidently, there are latent benefits for the institution as well: "... there is an increase in productivity, more effective management and faster induction of new colleagues" (Freeman and Johnson 1998; Spuhler and Zetler 1994; and Solis 2004 in Aladejana, Aladejana, and Ehindero 2006, 21). Furthermore, various researchers in academia attributed mentoring to various benefits, inter alia, advancement in careers (Burke and McKeen 1997); (Higgins and Kram 2001); "... increased self-confidence" (De Vries 2005) and "... personal satisfaction and growth" (Ehrich, Hansford, and Tennent 2004, in Darwin and Palmer 2009, 125).

It is clear that the implications of not receiving support and the associated loneliness that frame these novice lives, could be dire in the long term for both neophyte and for the institution. To address this potentially damaging scenario for both parties, campus/district administrators and university educators need to examine the elements of a successful mentoring programs (Kajs et al. 2001). Researchers caution that learning is achieved through the interaction of both parties: "it is the communal context that develops and frames the understanding and interpretation of learners and practitioners" (Lave and Wenger 1991). The implication is that where interaction is limited or even avoided then learning too will not take place.

The literature highlights further compelling arguments to address the problem of effectively assimilating novices into the ethos of university life. For example, Sfard (1998, 5) usefully highlights two leading metaphors that can inform our thinking about learning in the context of novice lecturers in HE. Sfard (1998, 5) "... distinguishes between an '*acquisition*' metaphor and an emergent '*participatory*' metaphor". The *acquisition* perspective conveys a conventional meaning of learning, which involves "... the conscious construction of personal knowledge. These processes might occur socially through a co-worker providing on-the-job instruction, mediation, guidance or support as in traditional apprenticeship arrangements" Warhurst (2008, 457). The *participatory* view of learning offers a social constructivist perspective of knowledge as "... a human product, which is socially and culturally constructed ..." – where individuals interact with one another and with their environment to make sense of their world Kim (2001, 3). Perhaps meaningful learning is best articulated by the assertion that it is not confined to individual appropriation of knowledge but rather, an active process when individuals are engaged in a community of practice (McMahon 1997).

The usefulness of Sfard's (1998) theory for this study is that in addition to *acquiring* knowledge through formal orientation programmes, etc. novice lecturers' induction into university could be additionally supported by learning in collaboration with peers and more experienced colleagues. Mentoring theory, as propounded by Kram (1985), embraces both

metaphors and highlights the important role of a more experienced person (an experienced lecturer) who serves as a mentor to a novice (lecturer) by offering career-related and psychosocial support. Much support has been given to how a mentoring relationship at a university could support novice lecturers. For example, Parsloe (1992) argues that it helps novice lecturers to “manage their own learning in order to maximize their professional potential, develop their skills, improve their performance, and become the person they want to be”. The basis of many similar arguments is that the transition to the new workplace, which is a highly stressful phase, can be “... made easier and more effective for both the employee and employer if there is an effective formal and informal socialisation into academia” (Savage et al. 2004, 21). A convincing argument is thus presented for learning via social means: (from peers *in situ*) as a means to a legitimate participation for novice lecturers in HE.

Wenger (1998) explains that through social participation within a workplace community, identity and meaning can be created. Such practices and relationships serve as a way of complementing formal learning. Lave and Wenger (1991, 52) go on to argue that when learning happens through “... incidental social interactions, practice is culturally sustained and possibly extended”. Other researchers add that it is through participation in such communities of practice that novices develop an elaborate cognitive structure (Stanulis, Fallona, and Pearson 2002, 71). Lave and Wenger (1991) in expounding their notion of a “Community of practice” (CoP) make an inextricable link to learning, practice and identity development. Their argument, which emerges from a constructivist view of learning and development, proposes the theory of “Legitimate peripheral participation” (LPP) as form of learning in a community (Lave and Wenger 1991, 29). According to this theory, people learn when they become an “insider” within a community. Once inside they adopt or take on the language and viewpoints of that particular group. These communities of practice are loose arrangements and as such, not formulated in departmental / faculty policy. The social context wherein informal learning takes place accordingly varies from within the university environs (lecture’s offices and staffroom) itself, to external physical contexts, like restaurants. Thus, a novice lecturer learns to become an academic by adopting the prevailing symbols and actions commonly accepted by other lecturers. Further, an informal mentoring relationship emerges from a freely chosen mutual attraction that involves friendship where guidance and nurturing are provided with regard to personal and professional dimensions (Kronik, cited in Menges 1999, 119). The essence of the argument is that novice participation in a community could help move them smoothly and quickly “... from legitimate peripheral participation to into full participation within a university” (*ibid*). This view also dovetails with another salient point: the expectation that novice lecturers are or should be part of the wider discourse of academia and *de facto* members of that

community of practice. To explain how newcomers become participants in communities of practice, Bathmaker and Avis (2007, 518) propose a new way to view apprenticeship. They argue "... that apprenticeship does not so much involve learning through formal instruction or processes of observation and imitation. Rather it involves learning through engagement with practice and absorbing a general idea of what being part of the community involves" (ibid). As Lave and Wenger (1991, 95) elaborate, "... it involves how experienced members talk, walk, work, conduct their lives, how outsiders interact with it, how and when and about what old-timers collaborate, and what they enjoy, dislike and respect".

Evidently, the absence of such support structures of a community, it makes it difficult for the novice to learn to cope with learning Wenger (1998); Lave and Wenger (1991). Writers who support this argument, make it clear that they do not discount formal learning. They argue that while formal learning does have its place in professional development of lecturers, informal or social learning (interacting with more experienced peers) is an equally important trajectory in the development of professional development of novice lecturers. They note particularly that although informal learning is seen as valuable, it is however notably absent from policy making (Coffield 2000, 2, in McNally, Blake, and Reid 2009, 323).

While there is a compelling theoretical argument for the use of mentoring practices in HE, there is very little empirical evidence to support this idea. As indicated above, the literature shows a burgeoning of support for informal teaching development for new lecturers in HE, yet very little research energy has been channelled into such practices. The study reported in this article is located in this gap in the literature and focuses on examining the social learning experiences of novice lecturers with a particular focus on the influence of mentorship practices. The key research question driving the research project: *How do mentorship practices contribute to the social learning of novice lecturers in a university context?* A study such as this will potentially provide other lecturers, line managers and senior staff of universities insight into the multi-faceted experiences and social relationships lecturers are subject to at university.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The main aim in this study was to examine the learning of novice lecturers *via* social means. Two Social Constructivist theories were employed as lenses to explore how novice lecturers' experiences of mentorship practices in a university in Johannesburg could contribute to their social learning as academics. The first is Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory (1978), which serves as a broad framework to scaffold mentoring theory. The second is Lave and Wenger's (1991) model of learning, which is based on the principle that learning, involves a process of engagement in a "*community of practice*" (CoP).

The major idea drawn from Vygotsky's (1978) theory is that social interaction plays a central role in the development of cognition. Vygotsky elaborated on this idea through his concept of the *Zone of Proximal Development* (ZPD). The basis of his concept is that, what children can do with the assistance of others is "even more indicative of their mental development than what they can do alone" (Vygotsky 1978, cited in Brown and Campion 1996, 146). The ZPD, is defined as the distance between the learner's "... actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under (adult) guidance" (ibid). Adapting Vygotsky's (1978) concept of ZPD broadly to the HE context provides the study with a platform to examine the dynamic social interactions between lecturers (the novice and the experienced).

The second theoretical lens involves the use of Lave and Wenger's (1991) model of "*Communities of Practice*". This model, which is informed by the theory of Situated learning, argues that learning is social and comes largely from our experience of participating in daily life with others – a broader community. Nuances of the theory (CoP) showed increasing alignment to my inquiry particularly in its suggestions that novices' learning could be "... enhanced if they are able to experience *legitimate peripheral participation* (LPP) into a community's practice" (Lave and Wenger 1991, 40). The basis of this idea is that communities of practice afford novice lecturers the opportunity "... to talk and interpret their experiences as to how they come to see themselves as lecturers" (Maynard 2000, 18). This goal, it argues, can only be achieved if the following conditions are met – firstly, the newcomer needs to experience "... a progressive trajectory of participation from the periphery of practice towards full engagement; secondly, the newcomer has legitimacy through access to the genuine work of the community and from being accepted by the community" (ibid).

In view of the good purchase given by Situated learning theory (Lave and Wenger 1991) as to how novice lecturers "... interpret their experiences and come to see themselves as lecturers in the workplace, this theory was used additionally to guide the investigation" (Maynard 2000, 18). Using CoP as an underpinning theoretical framework created a platform to analyse the kinds of opportunities presented to novice lecturers to "... collaboratively examine, question, experiment and implement, evaluate, reflect and change" (Calderón 1999, 95).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a qualitative research design because it aligned well to the goals of this inquiry: a qualitative strategy is underpinned by a constructivist philosophy, which sees reality as a multiple layered, interactive social construction (Merriam 1998). For the purposes

of this study, such a strategy facilitated a deep analysis of the novice lecturers' social life-worlds. Although in-depth involvement was facilitated, as a qualitative researcher, due cognizance and awareness of becoming overly engaged in the phenomena under investigation (Henning, Van Rensburg, and Smit 2004); (Cole and Wertsch 1996) were observed. Following the advice of McMillan and Schumacher (2010, 411), the researcher adopted a stance of *disciplined subjectivity* which involved our "self-questioning and use of personal experimental empathy in data collection". This translated to developing trust, being non-judgmental and showing sensitivity regarding issues of an ethical nature.

In order to gain a deep understanding of novice lecturers' perceptions and meanings, data was collected via individual face-to-face interviews. Participants were selected by means of purposive sampling, which enabled the researcher "... to identify and target individuals" who were "typical of the population being studied ..." (Davies and Hughes 2014, 57). Following the ideas of Creswell (2002), a group of twenty novice lecturers were intentionally selected so that different faculties, departments and campuses, which made up the university population, were represented.

Discourse Analysis in conjunction with thematic analysis was adopted as the key analytical tool because its underpinning principles gelled strongly with the theoretical framework of this study. Discourse analysis was seen as a favorable tool because it "... emphasizes the role of language in the construction of social reality, making visible the perspectives and starting points on the basis of which knowledge and meanings are produced in a particular historical moment" (Talja 1999, 452). In line with the aims of this study, it facilitated giving focus to the way in which discourses produce and transform social reality in the social setting of a university environment (Henning et al. 2004). Thematic analysis (TA) involves the process of identifying patterns or themes within qualitative data. Thematic analysis (TA) has been defined as "a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" Boyatzis (1998) cited in Braun and Clark (2006, 79). Further, "... it minimally organizes and describes your data set in (rich) detail. However, frequently it goes further than this, and interprets various aspects of the research topic" (ibid). Although there is a certain amount of uncertainty about what thematic analysis is, there is widespread consensus/agreement that it is a useful method to identify, analyse, interpret, and report patterns that occur within data (Braun and Clark 2006; Clarke and Braun 2013).

Following the ideas of Henning et al. (2004) concerning discourse analysis (DA), the "communicative event" between the researcher and the participants in this study was analysed through a process of coding and categorising semantically related units of the transcribed discursive interviews. The twenty interviews were transcribed as per the suggestions offered by

Creswell (2002, 266) and Braun and Clarke (2006). The “object of the coding process” according to Creswell (2002, 266; 2012, 243) is “to make sense of the text data, divide it into text or image segments, label the segments, examine the codes for overlap and redundancy, and collapse these codes into themes”. The researcher also took cognizance of Creswell’s (2002) advice and direction that the process involved the act of splitting and labeling text to form broad descriptions and themes in the data. Accordingly, the data from the interviews were analysed using Thematic analysis (TA) and Discourse analysis (DA), which unearthed a number of themes. The codes of meaning or *discourse markers* – “specific instances of the use of words or phrases that exemplify the discourse” (Henning et al. 2004, 119), were subsequently coalesced into main categories. From these codes of meaning certain discourse themes were then identified. Through a process of refinement – a gradual process of refining themes, resulted in the formulation of broad categories – aligned to the overall focus of the study, which served as its salient findings.

FINDINGS

A clear dichotomy characterized all lecturers’ accounts of their experiences of being new to university life: a discourse of *struggle* seemed to give way to a discourse of *survival*. Although there was a sense of negativity, there was a much stronger feeling of positivity.

A sense of struggle

An undercurrent of an inner struggle characterized the participants initial experiences as new lecturers. Eighty percent (18/20) of the respondents initially expressed feelings of isolation, inordinate stress and the lack of support (emotional and physical) from their respective faculties and/or departments. The following response from a participant exemplifies respondents’ views of being stressed and feeling that’s they were unjustifiably left to their own devices: “I found this experience to be quite daunting ... as far as mentoring is concerned, it we – I did not receive any formal mentoring – I don’t think our department has a programme for ... for ... ah ... rookie lecturers that involves mentoring.” In the case of two participants, feelings of frustration, fear and intimidation were extreme, to the point of their wanting to seek other employment. Tom’s response below reflects these sentiments: “... of course ... you know my ... first ... two terms of the semester – first semester – you know it was characterised by ... scepticism (mm hmm) ... destructive criticism ... frustration ... and all I had in my mind was just to quit and go ...”. Other’s feelings of negativity were related to the formal scheduling of the induction program. For example, Tom indicated that he was unable to attend the formal induction programme offered by the institution as it clashed with his lecturing and he was afraid to be left behind his

colleagues – in terms of syllabus coverage, “I was ... I eh ... unfortunately I did not attend that induction because during the time in which I had to attend the induction I was having my classes and there was no way I could miss class for that, because, as I said I was new, I had to always be on the same level as my colleagues. Seeing myself left behind would also create problems ...”.

Novice lecturers negative experience of anxiety, loneliness, and insecurity resonate with the findings of other studies, such as Menges (1999, 204–205) and Britzman (1990); Cole and Knowles (1993); Rust (1994); Hargreaves and Jacka (1995), all cited in Ronfeldt and Grossman, (2008, 43). As with the above studies, the incongruities between individual and university efforts in novice and new staff integration, give weight to Lave and Wenger’s (1991) suggestion that novices who find themselves in such circumstances are denied legitimate participation in HE.

However, while there was a very clear sense of a struggle being experienced by novices, they were evidently exploring various useful coping mechanisms. One of these strategies that was particularly highlighted was the practice of “leaning on friends”. Learning from colleagues and peers took place in both overt and covert forms. Overt forms of learning seemed to be happening through loose arrangements not formulated in the various departments the novices were drawn from. The social context wherein informal learning took place seemingly varied from within lecturer’s offices and the staffroom itself, to external physical contexts, like restaurants. For example, Sim stated: “You know, such things which we discussed, you know, informally, you know over a cup of coffee in the staffroom ... over a beer in a restaurant ... during free periods in my room, we share a lot, strategies to teach, how best to assess a section and so forth ... of ... but you know which had ... you know ... long term benefits ... you know ... in terms of my actual career.”

Social media seemed to feature prominently as an additional resource in the coping mechanism of “leaning on friends”. Most of the respondents (18/20) spoke of a form of informal mentorship mediated via the medium of electronic mail and WhatsApp. As Nads explains: “... I was in regular email contact with the HoD of the English Department (mm hmm) and she sent me ... ah ... through the various course coordinators ... she sent me all the lecture notes, the tutorial activities ... um ... she discussed with me ... you know, basically on a weekly basis, what was happening in the course. Because it was a new course for me ...”. A participant suggested that strong social skills are necessary to enlist the help of a colleague(s). Jhembra elaborates this point: “Help from colleagues, it wasn’t like a voluntary offer, you know? (mm hmm) ... I had to develop strong social skills ... Oh I had to send multiple smileys and hugs (emoticons) to get people to help me ...”. There was further evidence which suggested that these supportive

relationships seemed to occur spontaneously and were not managed or structured by the organisation. Sim explains, "... you know ... I like set up my own WhatsApp group and also my own e-mail group ... some lecturers ... of course they removed themselves ... but people were mostly helpful ...". Jhemba particularly liked the idea that there was "no waiting period" for the answers: "... most people are online a lot ... which is fantastic ...".

It was apparent that novice lecturers made "useful associations" with "old timers" or the "more experienced" and with fellow neophytes. Respondents questioned other lecturers discreetly in conversation about their negative experiences. As Romy stated: "I found out ... Er in a very quiet – let's call it unnoticeable way from more experienced lecturers about mistakes they had made ... my plan was to get to know about these ... so that ... so that they could help me in turn ... to avoid them ...". Sim spoke of how he "quizzed" a person she "trusted" stating, in actual fact, "he became my advisor". Jhemba raised the point about socializing with other novice lecturers who were positive instead of those who were "overwhelmed" and "openly negative" in their new positions. It was apparent that, although invisible, powerful networks of communication were clearly at play.

The trend of "leaning on friends" found in this study finds resonance in other studies. Knight et al. (2006) found similar evidence of informal learning which had significant benefits for the new academics in their study. Aladejana et al. (2006) similarly found evidence of an invisible yet powerful process of peer professional support. As in this study, Maynard's (2000, 18) study also found that the "... covert communities of practice afforded novice lecturers with interesting opportunities to talk and interpret their experiences and how they came to see themselves as lecturers – in other words, their identities as academics". This study found further agreement with Calderón (1999, 95) who posited that the network of informal relationships novice lecturers created provide "... significant opportunities for novice lecturers to collaboratively examine, question, study, experiment and implement, evaluate, reflect and change".

A sense of survival

For the overwhelming majority of novice lecturers, at some stage, in learning to successfully discharge their duties as academics, the discourse of survival, was apparent. Romy's response aptly captures the essence of being able to cope by navigating the turbulent waters of academia: "And ... so ... it was ... it was nice to be able to still go do the research behind it and actually be able to put my own stamp on it, in a way, rather than be given the direct guidelines of how to ... how to do it." The novice here decidedly chose to "swim" rather than "sink". Sim's point below offers an epitome of his survival and a proactive coping strategy: "And I suppose my experience, you know, as a ... as a lecturer in the department and my just my overall experience

in education may have, you know, assisted me with easing into this new, into this new job”. Romy vocalised a similar common coping strategy of being proactive in taking responsibility for her own learning by using a combination of nous and available resources: “But, I was ... at that stage pretty much on my own with the file and with the textbook and figuring out, you know ... how to go forward and ... it was nice to be able to still go do the research behind it and actually be able to put my own stamp on it, in a way, than be given the direct guidelines of how to ... how to do it. So, for me it wasn’t a big thing but there was some intimidation.”

War imagery and the congruent image of survival epitomises this contested ground of academia. Novices portrayed it as a battle for survival. Jhemba’s response is particularly exemplary of this idea: “So, basically I had to spearhead everything myself. You know, get to know where printing is done ... um ... venues are booked and what have you. But I suppose it was my experience that was on my side. But I – but then, obviously, somebody not having the same advantages I had of experience (mm hmm) then I know it was pretty hard. (yes) You know, so, I knew what to do and how to do it.” In the face of adversity, these novice lecturers display a steely resolve to survive. Mags also reflected a similar strategy of survival, stating: “Also, I then – coming from ... ah ... a background as Deputy Director – I then sought a lot of intrinsic confidence, and I developed my confidence through that as I’ve always done throughout my life. And I came back, and I think I’ve – to a large extent – won that battle.” It was apparent that a definitive willingness to take up a challenge featured prominently amongst these novices’ experience. This novice was able to adapt and transform himself, using his nous and experiences of previous employment in other higher institutions. Mag’s description particularly evokes a rather powerful image of having won a battle or war.

Strong social skills were highlighted by all respondents as necessary for survival in academia. Respondents repeatedly raised the idea of being creative in navigating a distinctively personal yet “fit to purpose” approach to steer a course to traverse through the social practices of the often-contested grounds of academic community. Nads explains below how she found novel ways of coping, driven by fear: “... it’s a fear of being perceived as incompetent ... I suppose ... (mm) ... but it’s good that you then get on with it in that ... it forces you to become self-reliant and independent et cetera et cetera.” The study indicated that novices’ determination, steely resolve, good interpersonal skills, taking responsibility for their own learning and nous combined to ensure their survival. Thus, novice lecturers’ integration into HE was made possible by learning from friends in an informal arrangement, taking the initiative and deciding to learn by their own volition, using a combination of survival strategies and nous. Thus, although novices entered academia from a daunting platform, their creative coping strategies, self-directed learning and willingness to take up a challenge drove their survival. In

an ironic twist, the absence of mentoring programmes contributed or motivated novice lecturers to learn. It would be safe to vouch that the survival instinct of these novices appears to be a valuable weapon in their armoury – in their battle to survive.

Significantly, in the absence of any discernible mentoring programme, *learning* did take place among the novice lecturers. Novice lecturers proactively sought out information when needed and took the necessary steps to master it. All of these lecturers eventually integrated themselves successfully into academia. These novices were able to adapt and transform themselves, using their experiences of previous employment in other higher institutions or as temporary staff at the university to the benefit. Novices evidently decided to “*swim*” rather than to “*sink*”. They took responsibility for their learning and were able to immerse themselves successfully into academia. Respondents’ coping strategies of taking responsibility for their own learning finds antecedents in the idea of Self-Regulated Learning (Zimmerman 2002). This writer claims that “... self-regulation is not a mental ability or an academic performance skill; rather it is the self-directive process by which learners transform their mental abilities into academic skills” (Zimmerman 2002, 65). Novices in this study undoubtedly approached their educational tasks with diligence, and resourcefulness. Indeed, “... self-regulated learners view acquisition as a systematic and controllable process, and they accept greater responsibility for their achievement outcomes” (Zimmerman and Martinez-Pons 1986, 1990; in Weimer 2010; Bramucci 2013, 3). This theory not only gives good purchase to the learning of novice lecturers, but in fact, underscores their learning in this study.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to explore the learning of novice lecturers *via* social means. Consequently, the study illuminated the plight of novice lecturers in academia and with concomitant revealing insights when they set upon the academic careers, viz., novice lecturers experienced isolation and loneliness with very little to no support from the institution itself, which hindered their ability to perform their academic functions effectively. Alarming, these frustrations, anxiety and sometimes fear spurred to action at least one novice to contemplate leaving the profession. Further, and perhaps most significantly, social learning by means of informal mentoring and coupled with covert or an almost “invisible” communities of practice, served as pathways to learning.

Further, in this study, we found that while some neophytes were able to experience induction as prescribed by the institution and its policy, their development as competent lecturers over time is not systematic and continuous, at least as reported by the sample surveyed. While driven by intrinsic motivation to do their best at their chosen profession, they reported

the harsh reality of heavy teaching workloads and lack of support, which are a source of demotivation. This is consistent with Rice, Sorcinelli, and Austin's (2000) conclusion that there is a pronounced dissonance between novices' expectations and the extant reality prevailing in the academe. The lack of support for teaching was compounded by the absence of formal mentoring opportunities, which suggested that novices relied on informal social networks mediated by friendship bonds to get by in their quest for academic membership. The implication here is that novices at this institution, experience a period without any pedagogical training or formal mentoring practices.

Perhaps most notably, novices made strategic connections with friends and more experienced colleagues. This took the form of informally arranged mentorships and loose affiliations of novice and experienced colleagues in a community of practice (Cop). These combined in assimilating these novices successfully into academia. Gravett, (2004) convey a salient point that the academic arena constitutes a specific community of practice, which operates with certain cultural values, rules and discourse. For novices, gaining membership into this community is the "Holy Grail" where acceptance as a peer is highly sought. True to Lave and Wenger's (1991) theory on how new members integrate themselves into an organisation, these novices were able to appropriate these informal structures and integrate as fully-fledged members of this community of practice.

This study has shown that in most instances, acceptance into a community is largely achieved through informal arrangements: a subtle combination of informal mentorships and engaging in loose affiliations in a community of practice, an almost invisible layer in the fabric of the academe. More significantly, informal learning via mentorships lies at the nexus of successful integration of novice lecturers into academia. The implication for the novice lecturer entering this community of practice, is that due respect be given to these assumptions, cultural values, rules and discourse in order to become full members of it. In Lave and Wenger's (1991) terms, it would require a movement from "peripheral participation" to "fuller participation" in this specific community of practice. The findings in this study have conveyed the sense that there are a number of obstacles, enumerated above, which may make such movement to greater participation difficult for novice lecturers. It is in this university's best interest to recognize these difficulties by amending existing policy to include recognition of informal mentorship practices. Systems need to be put into place to ensure mentorships are given its due regard in the informal learning of novice lecturers.

Multiple mentors, in dyads or triads, (particularly among friends and colleagues) in an informal arrangement, seem to pave the way to successful integration into the academe. It is worth noting the observations of Garrick (1999, in Boud and Middleton 2003) who suggests

that informal interactions with peers are predominant ways of learning. The importance of mentoring cannot be ignored any longer as researchers, campus/district administrators and university educators need to examine the elements of a successful mentoring program (Kajs et al. 2001).

The social setting where novices learn to *become* is also interesting to note. The findings of this research suggest that social learning is not bound to the workplace only: learning from mentors for some novices took place in disparate social contexts – not only in lecturer’ rooms and staffrooms, but also in public domains like restaurants. It is suggestive that novice lecturers’, in their quest to learn, appropriated whatever social occasion that presented itself to learn from mentors – such is their need to integrate.

The value of mentoring and the importance of novices engaged in communities of practice – an informal almost invisible layer in the social fabric of a university cannot be over – emphasized: informal learning experiences in a university context has and will continue to play a significant role in assimilating new staff into the institution. These experiences are flagged by support or a lack of support from “old-timers” – more experienced and knowledgeable lecturers or whether the lecturer enters the university with already well – developed social skills. It seemed that possessing strong social skills is an equally important trajectory in the path of successful integration of novice lecturers into academia.

Mentoring relationships and communities of practice are the almost invisible support structures necessary to scaffold collegial relationships, which is vital to successful assimilation of novice lecturers into the academe. Through informal learning with others in a situated context, novice lecturers are empowered to take more responsibility for the fruits of their work. We argue that if these informal mechanisms that serve as a conduit to successful integration of novices into academia is supported by the university’s management, such an initiative would lead to benefits for both novice and institution alike. In age of constant change with new challenges being thrown up by the Fourth Industrial Revolution, (4IR) coupled with radical and sometimes forced upon changes brought to bear on the university, complicated by a thirst for academics to be at their cutting edge in their respective spheres in higher education, faculty heads can help expedite this process. They need to accord due acknowledgement to informal mentorship practices and its contribution to successful integration of novice lecturers into the academe and thereby create conditions for it to thrive.

This study highlights the importance of the establishment of communities of practice, where the neophyte could socialise, share resources, and most importantly, to learn to adopt best practices. It recommends, as reported by Austin (2002) that establishing mentoring programs with faculty assistance and input – where recognition is provided to those who

participate, and support is provided through institutional resources.

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