

BUILDING RESEARCH CAPACITY AT CUT (PROFESSIONAL GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT)

D. SELALEDI

ABSTRACT

This paper intends to argue that there are two inherent challenges and dilemmas that may incapacitate rising calls to develop a distinguished cohort of researchers at universities, including CUT. Firstly, it seems the episteme knowledge-base in research of the current cohort of staff members does invite a look in askance as to its depth and breadth. Do we sufficiently exude competence to develop budding researchers of note? Secondly, and deducing from my informal interviews and discussions with B.Ed Honours students since 2006; we somewhat fall short as lecturers to model the quintessential research expertise necessary to develop the students' phronetic research experiences - the success of which would reconcile with their practical reality in their diverse teaching and learning situations and circumstances.

How then do we build a research capacity that catapults us from this somewhat research doldrums in the School of Teacher Education at CUT to become a School of Teacher Education recognised nationally and internationally as a School of Teacher Education which is enveloped in the validity and reliability of generating quality research?

This paper explores various "givens" and "Intellectual needs." And, quite academically, may rumble about conceptual and perceptual impediments and hurdles which under-gird the laborious exercise of undertaking research; though fulfilling to academic autarkical pride when done excellently.

Keywords: capacity-building, research

1. PREAMBLE

With the advent of democracy and the concomitant new educational perspective in South Africa, the air is everywhere becoming increasingly astir with exhortations of profound change in the political, economical, social, and educational spheres of our lives. Today, business and corporate leaders, government legislators and public officials, and; of course, "educators" are drawn together by a common goal that emphasises the importance of and simultaneous questioning of the ability of universities, including CUT, to anticipate hurdles in the direction of change and to formulate proactive stratagems through research that will deepen and broaden positive quality of change in South Africa.

It is a “given,” therefore; that building research capacity by universities is a panacea for the ills of contemporary South Africa. In a more specific context that conveys this view, Prof. Asmal, the former Minister of Education and his successor, Minister Naledi Pandor have, *inter-alia*, vociferously lamented the lack of research capacity building and hard data relating to teaching and learning by and from the universities. The consequential impact of this quandary being that the potential value of research to the education system was not being realised.

At CUT, the exhortations for change cascade from the Vice-Chancellor, Prof. Mthembu's inaugural Speech (25/05/07), in which he explicitly expressed his vision that, *inter-alia*, CUT were to carve its niche as one of the prominent research units in the country. And still, to compound this challenge; Prof. Le Roux's (Dean of the Management sciences) gauntlet thrown at the Faculty of Management Science research “imbizo” (23/05/08) that faculty members churn out quality research projects befitting national and international consumption.

Given the significance of this initiative and commitment by the top management and academic echelons at CUT; the most apt effort to internalise and own this vision at this juncture would be to agree on the question: What is Research Capacity?

2. WHAT IS RESEARCH CAPACITY?

The term “Research Capacity” is defined in a variety of different ways by researchers, policy-makers, and funding agencies. In the context of this paper, the term embodies technical considerations relating to the strategies and techniques to conduct empirical research. There is, however a distinction between *research capacity building* and *building research capacity*.

a) Research Capacity Building

Research capacity building embodies a particular conception of what is involved in developing the capabilities of students in respect of issues such as the selection of a problem to study, extensive review of related literature to the problem, a design of the study, the collection and analysis of data pertinent to the study, and a scientific discussion and recommendations on the outcomes of the study (Fraenkel & Wallen, 1996).

Selaledi (1999) upon observation and a conviction to determine the probable cause to why many a postgraduate student tended to psychologically as well as physically withdrawal from the rigours of learning about research; noted that:

- Not only were the students' foreboding proclivity to "things research" exacerbated by the first glimpse of the prescribed book, replete with strange and incomprehensible hieroglyphics and ponderous verbiage; but that,
- The withdrawal is also precipitated by the statistical and mathematical logic, concepts and perceptions that under-gird research processes and procedures; both of which,
- Consequently, drives many a postgraduate student to easily develop low self-efficacy with regard to research (i.e. in both naturalistic and positivistic paradigms). Furthermore, the low self-efficacy seems to create a block that prevents the students from mastering studies on research. Notwithstanding these findings which were not exactly the aetiology of the study but a qualitative determination; the focus of this paper is on building research capacity.

b) Building Research Capacity

In the context of this paper, building research capacity involves developing the capabilities of lecturers in respect of issues such as the design of studies, the collection and analysis of data, and so forth. It should be established to facilitate the sharing of research skills, knowledge and providing and brokering needs-directed research in capacity-building activities on a career-development basis (Darling-Hammond & Branford, 2005). An environment conducive to the development of such capabilities can and should be facilitated by the school of teacher education.

3. THE SCHOOL OF TEACHER EDUCATION

Devising the practical means by which the School of Teacher Education can build research capacity will be by no means unproblematic and fraught with practical challenges. As a prerequisite to establishing an effective programme of action; the following are some of the "givens" the school needs to acknowledge and to heed their essential significance:

a) Striving for professional growth and development

According to Guskey (2000) professional growth is possible when individuals add to their personal knowledge. Deducing from Guskey's (2000) view, it is perhaps essential to bring to the awareness of the School of Teacher Education, *inter-alia*, the following comment often made by lecturers after attending workshops and/or seminars:

Comment: "Just once I wish these seminars aimed at staff development could be used to meet some of *my* needs; there are so many areas where I need help such as in research"

If, and only if, all of us as educators could be able to emerge from the trees long enough to see the forest, we won't call for the *status quo*, but rather recognise the need for improvement aimed at meeting individual needs such as in the area of building research capacity.

According to Villegas-Reimers (2003) the two types of developmental alternatives in research would be one that is prescribed by the individual educator, a growth plan unique to personal needs. On the other hand, an alternative designed for the whole school aimed at institutional growth. Both are part of the same whole. Both can take place in the same manner, and equally important, both require an initial assessment and a plan for action. Not creating opportunities to carry out the plan for action could have colleagues experience anxiety, guilt, and concomitant avoidance behaviour from all matters pertaining to research.

Villegas-Reimers (2003), furthermore, suggests that for a developmental alternative or programme aimed at institutional development (i.e. the individual lecturer and the whole members of the school); there should be a ***catalytic, change-team*** that both identifies problems and implements constructive action; the people on the change-team should work together as a collegial team.

b) Rationale and Conceptual Framework
(for building research capacity)

The catalytic change-team should take cognizance of the fact that research capacity building takes into account the whole spectrum of lecturer professional development, that is, opportunities to learn from the beginning of their tenure and throughout their careers. Villegas-Reimers (2003) asserts that this perspective has become known as the *Continuum of teacher learning*. Furthermore, it should be noted that development should take place through many phases, with each phase being unique in terms of learning. Opportunity to learn and develop in any one phase refers to an experience with the anticipated or inferred learning outcomes. Such an experience may be carefully planned and purposefully structured (Darling-Hammond and Branford, 2005).

For the school of teacher education; the opportunities to learn would be the anticipated learning outcomes envisaged by the School of Teacher Education's prescribed professional developmental programme for all lecturers and agreed upon with the individual lecturers. The unanimous purpose of this agreement would be to carve the individual lecturer's professional growth and development which, if strategically planned, will culminate in the empowerment with research knowledge-base to the whole school.

Nevertheless, problems and challenges abound.

4. PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES

The manifestation of problems and challenges can be deduced from the following question statements:

1. How is the School of Education going to facilitate the organising and brokering of a wide range of activities meant to extend and develop research expertise across the educational research community? For example, activities such as building a research career, building on research expertise, research design issues, developing the use of in-depth data sets, and so forth.
2. There will be genuine concerns within the educational research community about what the purpose of inquiry can and ought to be. In other words, there will be differences in perspectives both about what sorts of knowledge is possible to produce, and about the kinds of product at which educational research ought to aim.
3. An element of fascination and challenge will stem from the common knowledge that there are a great many perspectives and traditions in educational research, which in their own terms have strengths, weaknesses, and integrity. Plenipotentiaries of the qualitative approach and those of the quantitative approach will be jostling at one another for the preference of one approach over the other. They will be accusing one another as ethically, professionally, and even politically beyond the pale because they do not believe that mutual understanding is possible or desirable.
4. At any given time, there will be ideas that are competing for attention. There will be a lack of capacity to find, understand and use research effectively. There may be no one to assign to do such work. There may be no one assigned to sort out different qualities of research. There may be lack of good internal communication processes for letting researchers know about interesting work.

These and other issues too numerous to mention may constitute probable problems and challenges of enormous proportions. How then, can the School of Teacher Education build research capacity in an effort to cultivate an academic culture in which educational research is generally valued and subject specialists are encouraged to spend time on learning, teaching, and research?

Lefton (2000) alludes to the fact that these problems and challenges manifest as both *affective and cognitive* constraints. These constraints will have to be overcome and they can be overcome.

The constraints are: dealing with attitudes, dealing with self-fulfilling prophecy, and the fact that lecturers will be learning adults and not traditional learners. These and other issues too numerous to mention may constitute probable problems and challenges of enormous proportions.

a) Dealing with Attitudes

The change-team must first, grapple with its attitudes. Lefton (2000) defines an attitude as a *long-lasting pattern of feelings and beliefs, or ideas, which are based in a person's past experiences and shape his/her future behaviour*. It will, therefore, be a delicate balancing act by the change-team as, while on the one hand advocates and expounds on the virtues of undertaking and publishing quality research; on the other hand, permit the right of educators to think and say, "I don't know" this particular research methodology. The change-team would have to help educators realise it is legitimate to continue learning; there is nothing wrong in admitting "I don't know how" to design a research study requiring say, *multivariate analysis*.

b) Dealing with Self-fulfilling Prophecy

The second major cognitive problem which change-teams or administrators must deal with is performance expectations. Robins (1996) defines performance expectations as an attempt by people to validate their perceptions of reality, even when these perceptions are faulty. The terms self-fulfilling prophecy or Pygmalion effect are indicative of this phenomenon as they explain how people's expectations explain their behaviour. For example, if a manager expects big things from a team, they are not likely to let him down. Similarly, if a manager expects people to perform minimally, they will tend to behave so as to meet these low expectations. Thus the expectation becomes reality a self-fulfilling prophesy.

In the main, therefore, those responsible for building the lecturer's research capacity should be cautious not to view lecturers as disliking research and trying to avoid involvement in their own professional growth; needing to be persuaded, rewarded, controlled, and preferring to be directed and wishing to avoid responsibility. Minimal or lack of participation and involvement could stem from the latter expectation.

How then, can the School of Teacher Education build research capacity in an effort to cultivate an academic culture in which educational research is generally valued and subject specialists are encouraged to spend time on learning, teaching, and research thereby churning out practical research that reconciles theory and practice?

c) The basis for designing a research capacity programme

Both Robins (1996) and Lefton (2000) tell us that whatever professional growth programme is designed for adults (lecturers); the makers of the programme should be well aware that adults, like lecturers, learn best through concrete experiences where they apply what is being learned and in informal situations where social interactions take place. In other words, both latter authors assert that to plan and conduct an effective professional growth programme on research capacity building, the School of Teacher Education change-team and or top-echelons need to be aware of the following facts related to adults (lecturers) learning:

- Lecturers (as adults) will commit to learning something when the goals and objectives of the programme are considered realistic and important to them, that is, job related and perceived as being immediately useful.
- Lecturers will learn, retain, and use what they perceive is relevant to their personal and professional growth such as a comment made by a lecturer earlier regarding his need for assistance in research being primary.
- When building research capacity, lecturers need to see the results of their efforts and have accurate feedback about progress toward their goal.
- Lecturer learning is ego-involved. Learning a new skill or technique may promote a positive or negative view of self. There may be fear of external judgement that lecturers may be less adequate, which produces anxiety during new learning.
- Lecturers come to any learning experience with a wide range of previous experiences, knowledge, skill, self-direction, interests, and competence. An individualised programme of growth in research will, therefore, be appropriate.
- Lecturers will resist learning situations which they believe are an attack on their competence, thus the resistance to imposed activities such as workshops, seminars etc.
- Closely related, lecturers reject prescriptions by others for their learning, especially when what is prescribed is viewed as an attack on what they are presently doing.

- Literature is abundant purporting motivation as a powerful determinant of behaviour, including learning. Putnam and Borko (2000) state that adult motivation for learning has two levels. One is to participate and do an adequate job. The second level is to become deeply involved, going beyond the minimum or norm.

The first level of motivation comes as a result of good salary, fringe benefits, and fair treatment. The second builds on the first, but comes from recognition, achievement, and increased responsibility.

- Motivation is produced by the individual learning the behaviour (Woolfolk, 1990). All the change-team or upper echelons can do is to encourage and create conditions which will nurture what already exist in the lecturers. If respect, trust, and concern are demonstrated, lecturers' developmental level in research capacity can and will be enhanced.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, suffice to say that successful completion and execution of a programme on building research capacity in the School of Teacher Education will be borne and executed out of a sense of a mission. This is a challenge to all of us as a cohort of budding researchers. We should embrace this challenge because it will make our work more effective and more convincing. Most importantly, the programme will produce researchers of note whose contribution in research will influence policy makers for the betterment of our education system. Of course, we will have a few misunderstandings and disagreements along the way due to autarchic pride, but these must not be allowed to get out of proportion, for the goals that we are working towards will be far more significant.

6. REFERENCES

Darling-Hammond, L., and Branford, J. 2005. *Preparing Teachers for a Changing World* [Electronic Version]. San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass

Fraenkel, J. R., and Wallen, N. E. 1996. *How to Design and Evaluate Research in Education* (3/e). New York: McGraw-Hill.

Guskey, T.R. 2002. Professional Development and Teacher Change [Electronic Version]. Published in *Teachers and Teaching*, 8, 381-391.

Lefton, L.A. 2000. *Psychology* (7th Ed.). Boston: Ally and Bacon.

Putnam, R., and Borko, H. 2000. What do new views on knowledge and thinking have to say about research on teacher learning? [Electronic Version]. Published in *Educational Researcher*, 29 (1), 4-15.

Robins, S.P. 1996. *Organisational Behaviour: Concepts. Controversies. Applications. (6th Ed.)*. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc.

Selaledi, D.K. 1999. Developing Research Capacity at Post-Graduate Level. *Vista University Research Journal*. 1, 13-19.

Villegas-Reimers, E. 2003. *Teacher Professional Development; an International Review of the Literature* [Electronic Version]. Paris: International Institute for Educational Planning.

Woolfolk, A. E. 1990. *Educational Psychology (4th Ed.)*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc.