

CHAPTER 7

Catalytic power of a pandemic: On enacting agency in professional higher education spaces through communities of practice

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Abstract

This chapter critically interrogates the agential metamorphosis the author experienced over an 18-month period during the Covid-19 pandemic, by means of numerous diverse communities of practice (CoPs). As a mid-career academic occupying a middle-management leadership position in a faculty, at a large, research-intensive public university in South Africa, the author first outlines the numerous professional tensions that characterise the dual roles he holds in the faculty. Underpinned by Social Realist principles and Archer's (1995, 2000, 2005) notions about morphogenesis, the chapter explores the temporal interplay between structures (in the form of CoPs) and agency (in the form of the author's agential metamorphosis). The chapter postulates that the Covid-19 pandemic served as a catalyst in this interplay, affording the author unique opportunities to become part of numerous diverse CoPs that evolved organically during this time. Synergistic with this evolution, was that of the author's awareness of his own agential potential and the intentionality with which he came to enact agency in the professional spaces he occupies. By linking the CoPs to four professional meta-identities, the chapter allows for critical reflections on how each CoP contributed in unique but interconnected ways to the author's agential metamorphosis, catalysed by the

pandemic. The chapter concludes by making recommendations on how higher education stakeholders can use CoPs and critical reflection about agential potential as ways of eliciting and enacting agency in their own professional spaces.

Keywords: agency, community of practice, critical reflection, morphogenesis, morphogenetic framework, morphogenetic cycle, social realism

Introduction and background

When South Africa first entered hard lockdown on the 27th of March 2020 because of the global Covid-19 health emergency, acute disruptions to normative ways of doing and being became a common characteristic of daily life. During those early days, there was great uncertainty about what the pandemic would mean for the world of work, for family and loved ones, and for the self. I recall religiously reviewing national and global infection rates, the ratio of death per capita per country, and news about global economic disruptions. For the South African (SA) higher education (HE) sector, as was the case globally, there was immense urgency to shift contact teaching and learning (T&L) to remote and online modalities. In time, this would become known as Emergency Remote Teaching and Learning (ERTL) (Hodges *et al.* 2020). At the large research-intensive public university where I work, less than a month was earmarked for this shift (teaching would resume on 20 April 2020), which would require: i) the upskilling of academics to use online modalities to teach; ii) adapting curricula to ensure the coverage of core content; iii) the orientation of students to study remotely to be able to continue learning; and iv) addressing a range of associated challenges (e.g. resolving mobile data issues for students and academics, ensuring students have adequate learning

devices, and grappling with remote/online assessment approaches, to name a few). In the end, the mandate to resume with the academic project on 20 April 2020 was realised. However, much would emerge in the subsequent literature about the way in which ERTL perpetuated the systemic inequities and inequalities entrenched in SA HE (Czerniewicz *et al.* 2020), the social impact of Covid-19 on youth enrolled at tertiary institutions in SA (Sifunda *et al.* 2021), and burnout among HE staff (Flaherty 2020). It is against this backdrop that I write this reflective practitioner account about my professional growth and agential metamorphosis during this time. By exploring the role of numerous communities of practice (CoPs) (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) in facilitating this process and the intentionality with which I sought out these CoPs (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) as spaces to engage, collaborate, be collegial, do research, and practice care, I hope other HE professionals will find my reflection useful as a guide for their own professional learning and growth.

Context

More about me

I would describe myself as a mid-career academic who occupies a middle-management leadership position in the Faculty of Commerce, Law, and Management (CLM). CLM is a large faculty, with approximately 5000 undergraduate (UG) and nearly 6000 postgraduate (PG) students, and more than 700 members of staff (academic, professional, and administrative). Within the faculty, I hold dual roles as CLM Assistant Dean for T&L (ADT&L), and Head of the CLM T&L Centre. Although there are parities between these roles, they are in essence quite different. The former sees me chairing the Faculty T&L Committee, representing the faculty on the institutional Senate T&L Committee, forming part of

the Faculty Executive Committee, taking ownership of T&L matters (broadly speaking) within the faculty, and advising across numerous levels on matters of assessment, curriculum design, pedagogy, and more¹. Regarding the latter, since my assumption of duties as Head: CLM T&L Centre, the Centre has grown from two staff members (myself included) in August 2019, to 11 by August 2021². I am responsible for the day-to-day management of the Centre, working closely with members of the three units in the Centre around strategy, operation, and matters related to learning and teaching.

Acutely disrupted socio-collegial realities

An intense sense of disequilibrium became a familiar part of daily life from the time SA first went into lockdown and continued for most of 2020 (Corbera *et al.* 2020; Flaherty 2020). Apart from the effect the pandemic had on my personal life and the way it disrupted my daily routine, the advent of the pandemic and subsequent rapid shift to ERTL resulted in immense pressures at work (Egan and Crotty 2020). As ADT&L I found myself included in numerous committees, task teams and working groups, dedicated to interrogating or resolving any one of the numerous challenges brought by the shift to ERTL. This took place in addition to my responsibilities within CLM, both as ADT&L and Head: CLM T&L Centre, where we were grappling with the rapid orientation of students for emergency remote learning (ERL) (de Klerk *et al.* 2021), the rapid preparation of academics for emergency remote teaching (ERT) (Krull and MacAlister 2022) and the myriad concomitant challenges that came with this shift. I often felt flustered, frustrated and exhausted,

¹I am not claiming sole responsibility for T&L matters in the faculty.

²This expansion is credited to the strategic vision, leadership and commitment from the Faculty Executive Committee and Dean, and efforts by the appointed staff members.

finding myself in a constant state of flux. I experienced an intense urgency to find answers or solutions to problems and challenges for which there were no exemplars or guidelines to draw on. From challenges related to remote assessment and stimulating engagement in online spaces, to learning device and mobile data constraints, every day and week seemed to perpetuate the intense sense of disequilibrium. What made this experience more challenging for me personally, was the loss of established socio-collegial support networks that had been in place prior to the pandemic, while on campus (see the study by Filho *et al.* (2021) which outlines the impact of the pandemic and social isolation on academic staff and students at numerous universities).

Looking back, I perceived those early days of the pandemic as particularly challenging because of the acute disruption to established socio-collegial networks. As someone prone to mood disorders who has struggled with mental-health challenges in the past, I consider myself particularly attuned to my own emotions and that of the people I work with. I deem this a strength and use it to my advantage to build and evolve support networks in the professional spaces I occupy, not only for the purpose of the work that needs to be done, but also for my own wellbeing and (hopefully) the wellbeing of those with whom I form these socio-collegial networks. I would describe most of these as nascent CoPs (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010); professional and collegial support networks within the workplace that had the potential of becoming more robust CoPs (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) (although that was not necessarily the intention). Nevertheless, they served their purpose as social spaces where I could engage with colleagues about personal and professional matters, take interest in the work and lives of others, and (when necessary) soundboard or

brainstorm problems that may arise in professional spaces. Seldom did they become more than spaces to engage and brainstorm though, and when they did, it was usually a coincidence.

Enabling structures and professional identities

I would describe my initial reaction to the acute disruption of socio-collegial support networks as an implicit sense of unease and disequilibrium. However, during those early days where home and work spaces became blurred (Pluut and Wonders 2020), it was challenging to reflect adequately on what was happening. In time though, I came to acknowledge the need for socio-collegial engagement (Davis 2006; Andrew *et al.* 2009), thus becoming more consciously aware of the disruption to my pre-pandemic collegial support structures. Consequently, I began to establish CoPs (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) in response to those needs and although this was at first more reactive than intentional, I became far more intentional about establishing these CoPs (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) as time passed. In the sections that follow I briefly define the notion of Community of Practice (CoP) (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) in the context of this chapter, before exploring 12 CoPs (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) I formed during the 18-month period discussed here. The latter is discussed in relation to four of my professional meta-identities.

Communities of Practice

Wenger (2010: 179) describes a CoP as a social learning system that “*...locates learning, not in the head or outside it, but in the relationship between the person and the world, which for human beings is a social person in a social world.*” This emphasis on the social dimensions of learning is important, as it speaks to my own philosophy about

teaching, the way I believe learning must be made to occur for students, and beliefs about my own learning. Lave's (2001) sentiments about these social dimensions of the learning that occurs through CoP also resonates with my own philosophies and views. As Edwards (2005: 57) explains, Lave's (2001) focus is on "*...the structuring environment and how it produces or allows certain ways of participating and the construction of particular identities.*"

As such, for the purpose of this chapter, the CoPs (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) referred to in the sections that follow should be viewed as professional structures with strong social elements. These CoPs (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) offer me opportunities to engage and learn with colleagues in professional spaces about a variety of matters, and participate in collaborative research activities, while contributing to the formation and evolution of the personal meta-identities that collectively constitute my professional identity (Davis 2006; Andrew *et al.* 2009).

Meta-identity: PhD student

The first CoP (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) (**CoP 1**) I established during ERTL is linked to *meta-identity: PhD student*. This CoP (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) consists of me and a colleague who, like me, is enrolled for a PhD. Initially, the pandemic and shift to ERTL had an immense impact on my PhD research and progress, especially during the first few months, as all my attention was focused on work commitments. This meant that PhD research and related tasks were often neglected. However, by June 2020 my colleague and I both acknowledged the need to make time for our PhD research and so we established a CoP (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) and agreed to meet weekly for an hour. The purpose of this CoP (Lave 2001;

Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) was to support one another, serve as a mutual yet collegial accountability measure, and encourage more intentional work on our respective PhDs through engagement with someone in the same position (Pilbeam *et al.* 2013; Berry 2017).

Meta-identity: T&L professional

ERTL posed unique and unprecedented challenges for T&L professionals working in the SA HE sector (Corbera *et al.* 2020; Egan and Crotty 2020; Filho *et al.* 2021). I deliberately use the broad descriptor *T&L professionals*, as the work done by myself and others involved in the CoPs (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) discussed in relation to *meta-identity: T&L professionals* differ quite significantly. Some are academics, while others are professional support staff. Some work in faculty T&L centres or units, while others are not affiliated with faculties and work for central institutional T&L entities. Some are involved in UG or PG teaching, while others work in academic development roles associated with more holistic staff and/or student development. Regardless, they can all be described as T&L professionals.

I became part of three CoPs (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) associated with *meta-identity: T&L professionals* during the 18-month period. The first (**CoP 2**) emerged during the latter part of 2020 and consists of seven individuals (myself included) from four faculties (Dzidic *et al.* 2017). Brought together by the immense challenges posed by ERTL for academics, students, assessment, teaching, and learning, we began meeting monthly. During these meetings we would grapple with the challenges imposed by ERTL on us, the academics we work with, and students. It was also a space to vent about frustrations, provide support to one another about professional and personal matters, and to have stimulating conversations about the future of SA

HE (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005). The second (**CoP 3**) grew from my involvement in the Higher Education Learning and Teaching Association of South Africa (HELTASA), where I am a member of the leadership and part of the Student Learning Scholarly Project (SLSP) team. This CoP (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) was established early in 2021 and is discussed in detail in Chapter 9. In short, it consists of four individuals (myself included) from four different SA universities, brought together by our shared interest in and passion for student learning, success, and support (Dzidic *et al.* 2017). The CoP (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) meets weekly for an hour (depending on members' availability) and provides an inter-institutional space to collaborate, innovate, support one another, and practice care. The final CoP (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) associated with *meta-identity: T&L professionals* (**CoP 4**) is still in its infancy, having only been established recently. It consists of two people (myself and a colleague from the institutional T&L centre) and has its roots in our shared interest in Critical Realism (CR) and Social Realism (SR) (Bhaskar 1975; Archer 1995, 2000, 2005). We meet once a month and during our engagements we check-in about one another's personal lives, discuss our individual research projects, and explore CR and SR in relation to our research and our practice.

Meta-identity: SoTL (Scholarship of Teaching and Learning)

I associate five CoPs (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) with *meta-identity: SoTL*, all of which has a focus on the scholarship of T&L. The first and fifth CoPs (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) associated with this meta-identity (**CoP 5** and **CoP 9** respectively) are linked to my research and work on student success and support (broadly), and academic advising for SA HE contexts. The first (**CoP 5**) is a long-

standing CoP (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) that was dormant prior to the pandemic. Consisting of three individuals (myself included), interactions had ceased in 2018 when one of the members immigrated. However, during the pandemic (and with the normalisation of remote working and virtual meetings) the CoP (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) was revived. During ERTL we met on an ad-hoc basis, while also engaging via the social media platform WhatsApp. This CoP (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) has always been characterised by a mutual interest in academic advising for SA HE contexts, a joint sense of care and support, and research collaborations. The fifth CoP (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) (**CoP 9**) is still quite new, having been established in August 2021, although we (three individuals) have been working together for some time in the academic advising space. Our engagements are rooted in the use of SR and CR (Archer 1995, 2000, 2005; Bhaskar 1975) and Tronto's (2005) work on Ethic of Care to guide, inform, and underpin the work of academic advisors within the SA HE context. The other three CoPs (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) (**CoP 6**, **CoP 7**, and **CoP 8**) are all linked to SoTL research projects at the university where I work. Funded through a University Capacity Development Grant (UCDG), each project focuses on investigating elements of T&L within the institution. **CoP 6** consists of three individuals, **CoP 7** of six individuals, and **CoP 8** of three individuals. My involvement in all these CoPs (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) stem from the work I do, my professional relationships with the respective project leaders, and the shared interest the members of each CoP (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) and I have in the SoTL topic being investigated.

Meta-identity: Head of CLM T&L Centre

For the purpose of this chapter, I will refer to the three professional networks linked to *meta-identity: Head CLM T&L Centre* as CoPs (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010). The CLM T&L Centre has three units: an online and digital T&L unit (**CoP 10**), a student success and support unit (**CoP 11**), and a PG writing unit (**CoP 12**). My discussion here separates the day-to-day operational, governance and other work-related interactions I have with the staff of the various units, from the CoP (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) elements that emerged during ERTL. I meet with the unit heads and members of each unit separately and together on a weekly basis. During the shift to ERTL and subsequently, this has been necessary to stay in touch with everyone, strategise, support, and provide guidance. More importantly though, it has necessitated regular meetings that have bestowed upon these engagements the social and caring elements (see for example Tronto's (2005) work on Ethic of Care) characteristic of the other CoPs (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) discussed in this chapter. Each of the meetings with the various unit members are characterised by a shared sense of purpose, collaboration, support, and care. Moreover, numerous research opportunities have arisen from these engagements, which has seen me co-author academic texts (see for example Chapter 5 of this book) and collaborate on conference papers with the various CoPs (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010).

Theoretical underpinnings

The morphogenetic framework

Margaret Archer's seminal contributions to the theories of CR and SR are extensively documented (see among many others: Archer 1995, 1996, 2000, 2003, 2005). Closer to home, the theoretical and analytical

opportunities afforded by Archer's theories and tools³ and the application thereof to the SA HE context, are exemplified by Boughey and McKenna (2021). They utilise these theories and tools to conduct a critical interrogation of the complexities that characterise the SA HE system over a period of three decades, in their book *Understanding Higher Education: Alternative Perspectives* (Boughey and McKenna 2021). Boughey and McKenna (2021) explain that Archer's (1995) morphogenetic approach "...allows for an analysis of the interplay of structure and agency and culture and agency over time" (Boughey and McKenna 2021: 25). The morphogenetic cycle consists of four parts, thus allowing for an analysis or interrogation of morphogenesis (change) or morphostasis (where the status quo is maintained) during a particular timeframe. Part one (T_1) denotes the prevailing conditions at the start of a cycle (Boughey and McKenna 2021: 26), parts two and three (T_2 and T_3) the interaction of agents with structures and/or cultures (Boughey and McKenna 2021: 26), and part 4 (T_4) the end of any given cycle, where it is possible to determine whether morphogenesis has occurred or not (Boughey and McKenna 2021: 26). In this chapter, I draw on Archer's morphogenetic framework to analyse my own agential metamorphosis over an 18-month period, by focusing on the temporal interplay of structures (in the form of CoPs (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010)) and agency (in the form of my agential metamorphosis).

³ These include: i) CR and SR; ii) Archer's work on structure, culture and agency; iii) her expansion of Bhaskar's (1975) theory of stratified layers of social reality; and iv) Archer's morphogenetic framework as an analytical tool with which to temporally examine structural, cultural and/or agential change (morphogenesis) or lack thereof (morphostasis).

Critical reflective analysis and discussion

A morphogenetic cycle exemplified

Prevailing conditions (T_1)

T_1 is described as the prevailing conditions at the start of the morphogenetic cycle (Boughey and McKenna 2021: 26). Prior to the pandemic, I had some established, yet nascent socio-collegial networks on campus. As mentioned, some of these structures may have had the potential to become more than what they were at the time, had the opportunity presented itself. However, they seldom did and in the few instances where these CoP (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) elements may have manifested, circumstances never seemed to allow these structures to be nurtured into the types of CoPs (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) I describe in the previous section. Thus, the prevailing conditions (T_1) prior to the pandemic.

Pandemic: The catalyst (T_2 and T_3)

Phase two (T_2 and T_3) of the morphogenetic cycle is described as the space where interactions occur (Boughey and McKenna 2021: 26). I consider the pandemic a catalyst that necessitated me to seek, establish, and participate in new socio-collegial networks in deliberate ways. This agential impulse saw me establish CoPs (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) tied to the four aforementioned meta-identities over an 18-month period. The associated agential metamorphosis I experienced during that time is the result of structural and cultural interaction in these socio-collegial support structures (i.e. CoPs) (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010), thus the interactions characteristic of T_2 and T_3 .

Morphogenesis: Current reality (T_4)

The final phase of the cycle, T_4 , is where either morphogenesis or morphostasis is observed (Boughey and McKenna 2021: 26). My assessment is that morphogenesis has occurred, evidenced by my agential metamorphosis, the evolution of my professional meta-identities, and the established and thriving CoPs (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) I remain part of. Consequently, the current reality at the end of the morphogenetic cycle described here, is very different from what it was in T_1 ; both in terms of my agential awareness and the intentionality with which I search for and participate in new and established CoPs (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010).

Agential metamorphosis

Agential awareness can be quite elusive. On the one hand, a person may be acutely aware of their agential potential (or even responsibility) in a particular space, while not being aware of it in another. My own agential metamorphosis, catalysed by the Covid-19 pandemic, was characterised by such an initial absence of awareness. Despite an implicit need for socio-collegial support and interaction shortly after the advent of the pandemic, and even after establishing the first CoP (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) with a colleague also enrolled for a PhD, I was not yet consciously aware of the intentionality with which I could be establishing CoPs (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) or their potential in relation to the evolution of my professional identity (Davis 2006; Andrew *et al.* 2009). Only after some time, having reflected on the perceived personal value gain, collegial support, stimulating dialogic interaction, and/or research possibilities offered by the early CoPs (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010), did I become more aware of their potential significance. More importantly, this is

when I began establishing CoPs (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) with greater intentionality, thus my assertions about agential intentionality and metamorphosis. I posit that without the pandemic as a catalyst, this agential intentionality and metamorphosis would either not have occurred or may have taken months or even years to manifest.

Furthermore, Archer (1995, 2000) explains that structures, cultures and agency are at once autonomous and interconnected. In observing the autonomous agential metamorphosis, I experienced during ERTL, I must also acknowledge the interconnected influence of my agency on the CoPs (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) of which I am part, and their influence on my agential metamorphosis in turn. As my agential awareness increased, I became more deliberate in establishing new CoPs (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) and the nurturing of existing CoPs (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010), which then allowed for further agential awareness and evolution. Similarly, as I became more agentially aware, my actions within these structures became more intentional (e.g. proposing co-authored writing projects or pursuing the submission and presentation of collaborative conference papers). Naturally, these actions influenced the evolution of the CoP (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) itself, thus exemplifying how the interconnection of my agency and the CoP (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) structures mutually influenced one another, while evolving autonomously, ultimately resulting in morphogenesis.

Conclusion

The agential metamorphosis I experienced during ERTL has had a profound and far-reaching effect on my professional identity, agential intentionality, and professional wellbeing and growth. Moreover, I

believe others could find the professional learning elements explored in this chapter useful for their own professional development. The catalytic influence of the pandemic in initiating the cyclical morphogenesis I experienced is hard to refute. Moreover, my conscientisation to the possibilities offered by CoPs (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) has seen me enacting agency by seeking opportunities for establishing CoPs (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) with relevant individuals in spaces that matter to me. This denotes a valuable lesson that I believe will continue to stand me in good stead in future and may also prove helpful to others who intend to adopt a more intentional approach to realising their professional growth in HE spaces. My hope is that by sharing this critical reflective account of the intentionality with which I sought out CoPs (Lave 2001; Edwards 2005; Wenger 2010) as spaces to engage, collaborate, be collegial, do research, and practice care, will encourage other HE professionals to do the same. Similarly, I would encourage readers to practice critical reflection about their own agential potential within professional spaces, both to extract lessons and to explore possible agential shifts that may have occurred since the advent of the pandemic. Gibbs (1988: 9) encourages us to remember that “...it is not sufficient to have an experience in order to learn. Without reflecting on this experience, it may quickly be forgotten, or its learning potential lost.”

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