

## Chapter 1: Introduction to the study

The thing is this, it may look as if the research is done and nothing happened from that research. For me it is just great that some people out there know what's going on here – like the students come here and experience what's going on here; [they] go home and tell their families, wherever they come from, 'We've been in Valhalla Park, and this is the way the people [are] living'. I'm not in a hurry. Sometime or the other, something will come out of the research – from there something will happen, but for me ... look the students [are] from different places.... Maybe in ten years time or twenty years time, but something will, at the end of the day, come – and it will come if something must happen because of the research ... *our lifestyle will travel...*(Valhalla Park United Civic Front, interview 20.06.04; emphasis added).

### Part 1: Background Context

Globally, universities are being challenged to play an increasing role in the development of civil society, in contributing to social and economic growth and in developing students as 'civically-minded' citizens. The quote above attests to this importance through the words and experiences of a community activist who is urging universities to continue to engage communities. Ernest Boyer (1996) spoke of 'a new model of excellence' where the university celebrates teaching and research while also taking pride in becoming

a more vigorous partner in the search for answers to our most pressing social, civic, economic, and moral problems, and ... affirm[ing] its commitment to what I call the scholarship of engagement (ibid:11).

In clarifying what he means by this, Boyer argues that while at one level such a scholarship of engagement means 'connecting the rich resources of the university to our most pressing problems', at a deeper level

I have this growing conviction that what is also needed is not just more programmes, but a larger purpose, a larger sense of mission, a larger clarity of direction ... a scholarship of engagement also means creating a special climate in which the academic and civic cultures communicate more continuously and more creatively with each other, helping to enlarge what anthropologist Clifford Geertz describes as the universe of human discourse and enriching the quality of life for all of us (ibid: 20).

These calls and arguments are being re-iterated and supported across many different contexts. In a recent statement by university principals and leaders in different countries, the following call was made:

The university should use the process of education and research to respond to, serve and strengthen its communities for local and global citizenship. The university has a responsibility to participate actively in the democratic process and to empower those who are less privileged. Our institutions must strive to build a culture of reflection and action ... that infuses all learning and inquiry (Talloires Declaration on Civic Roles and Responsibilities of Higher Education, September 17, 2005).

Others have taken a slightly different angle. Bawden (2000) for instance has argued that we have an imperative to better understand the nature of the *boundaries* that separate the university and the 'world out there' and that it is the strength of the differences that can enable new kinds of partnerships:

Engagement does not mean dissolution of identity and the search for homogeneity but the preservation and utilisation of difference as the source of energy. It is this synergy, this emergence of surprising outcomes through interactions of difference, that lies at the heart of the argument for engagement for communal discourse; for a communicative ethic that not only allows us to cross boundaries in our search for what might be termed 'inclusive well-being' but impels us to do so (Bawden 2000: 6).

In South Africa, the site for this thesis research, similar arguments are being heard. The following statements are from a senior leader at the University of Cape Town (UCT), the institutional site for this research:

The status of a 'world university' and an intense engagement with local community are complimentary policies, both essential to the health of the institution, rather than as competing priorities (Hall 2001: 2).

The traditions of high-quality teaching, and of basic research available in the public domain, can be combined with the opportunities of access and public responsiveness to strengthen the publicly funded university as a more distinct kind of organisation (Hall 2003: 5).

Students too are recognising the importance and value of interacting with communities off campus in more non-traditional learning contexts:

Interacting with the community helps us to develop our own knowledge, maybe in the future one may help another community in a similar way ... it's [also] my own development as a student as well. It was a nice *nexus of needs* (EGS student, interview 12.05.05; emphasis added).

Yet in many countries, including South Africa, universities are under increasing criticism for not undertaking this role through the work they do. This is particularly the case with strong research-based universities, such as UCT. While it is clear that many universities might have a strong commitment to community service, this has not been the key business of the university sector. Their engagement in broader development issues has traditionally been indirectly through research and publications or extension work.

This engagement between universities and 'the world out there' is the focus of this thesis. It sets out to look at university-community engagement via the specific practice of 'service learning' as one form of this. In particular, I am focussing on better understanding the nature of the *service learning activities* that take place *at the interface* between university students and community members. My research question is:

What happens when the university – through service learning curriculum and pedagogy – meets the community?

Related questions:

- What is the nature of the interaction between the university and the community in service learning?
- How can we 'map' this educational practice?
- In particular, how are the practices of service learning negotiated and experienced, in particular by the students?
- What are the discourses that are evident in this interaction?
- What role do tools of mediation play in this?
- What are the roles, identities and power relations that come into play?

In order to answer these questions, I have undertaken qualitative case study research of two service learning courses at the University of Cape Town (UCT) during the 2004-

2005 academic years. By describing and analysing these practices this thesis aims to answer the research questions identified above. Exploring these questions by developing a set of conceptual and theoretical tools can enable us to examine these activities in new and different ways. This thesis does not set out to provide guidelines for improving practice however; rather, it sets out to develop a set of theoretical tools and ways of analysing practice that might assist in changing and ultimately improving practice.

Building socially responsive projects into student learning, whether through undergraduate-level case studies, community-based projects or graduate-level research, strengthens the connection between knowledge in the abstract and application in the specific. In addition, a curriculum that is engaged with the broader society in ways such as these will play a role in social and economic development and transformation.

It is against this background that this study is located. The remainder of this chapter provides an introduction to the study in two ways. Part 2 provides an introduction to the field of service learning and outlines some of the key historical and philosophical influences on the field internationally. What must be stated from the outset is that this field is a broad, contentious and emergent one; I cannot hope to cover all aspects of its history and present practices. These can be further explored in various publications listed in the bibliography. What I have endeavoured to do however, is to provide an account of the main historical influences, both theoretical and practical, shaping the field that speak particularly to my concerns. Part 3 of the chapter focuses on gaps in researching the field of service learning and how this thesis attempts to address some of these. This provides the rationale for the study and serves to support my particular question and approach to the research. To conclude, the chapter provides an outline of the thesis.

## **Part 2: Service learning: history, philosophy and influences**

This section examines both the practice of service learning as well as key historical, theoretical and philosophical influences on the field.

## Defining the field and looking at history

In order to understand definitions and their origins, it is useful to look historically at the field and some of the key influences. Stanton, Giles and Cruz (1999) provide an interesting overview of the service learning field in the US<sup>1</sup> and some of its key influences by looking at the work of what they term the ‘movement’s pioneers’. By looking at the experiences of 33 pioneers, they trace the origins of the field as well as some of the key philosophical, political and theoretical influences. Service learning joins two complex concepts: community action, the ‘service’ part of the definition, and ‘learning’, in an attempt to learn from that action and to connect what is learned to existing knowledge. They argue that although the ‘genealogy’ of existing practice can be tracked back to the 1960s, one needs, in the US at least, to go back to the 1860s and the land grant movement, to progressive education and to settlement house activities early in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, as well as civil rights organising efforts in the 1950s and 1960s (Pollack in Stanton et al 1999).

In terms of the practice itself, Stanton (1998) and Moore (2000), locate service learning as a branch of experiential education. This is a form of experiential learning which includes not only service learning but other forms of learning as well. These include internships, field studies, co-operative education, practicals, action research and apprenticeships. Drawing from research into the history of the field Stanton argues that

the pioneers made their pedagogical home in the field of experiential education. To ensure that service promoted substantive learning, they sought to connect students’ experience to reflection and analysis in the curriculum ... they pointed to the importance of contact with complex, contemporary social problems and efforts to solve them as an important element of a complete education ... [T]hey saw service learning, when it combined action *with* critical reflection, conceptualisation, and abstract experimentation with analyses, as standing very much within the liberal arts tradition (Stanton 1998: 2-3; emphasis in the original).

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<sup>1</sup> United States [of America]

In terms of the actual practice therefore, service learning has been defined in various ways, each definition emphasising different aspects of it. Some definitions include the following:

Meaningful community service that is linked to students' academic experience through related course materials and reflective activities (Zlotkowsky 1998).

A form of experiential education, deeply rooted in cognitive and developmental psychology, pragmatic philosophy, and democratic theory (Morton & Troppe 1996).

A credit-bearing educational experience in which students participate in an organised service activity that meets identified community needs and reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of the course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility. Unlike extracurricular voluntary service, service-learning is a course-based service experience that produces the best outcomes when meaningful service activities are related to the course material through reflection activities such as directed writings, small group discussions, and class presentations. Unlike practica and internships, the experiential activity in the service-learning course is not necessarily skill-based within the context of professional education (Bringle & Hatcher 1996).

Waterman (1997) argues that it is more useful to outline the major defining features of this form of educational practice than to pin the practice down to an exact definition. For Waterman, these features include the following:

- Students learn and develop through actively participating in organised service experiences ('community action') that meet actual community needs.
- Experiences are 'integrated into the students' academic curriculum' and provide opportunities for students to write, talk, and think critically and actively about the meaning and the learning from that experience.
- Opportunities are provided for students to use acquired skills (from the university) in real life contexts.
- Learning is enhanced by extension beyond the classroom.

While these definitions vary, they all encompass two components: student learning and student engagement in projects with a community service orientation. However as we

shall see, it is a complex field. Butin (2003) has questioned definitions of the practice in important ways. In looking at the multiple conceptualisations of service learning, he argues that there is ‘a troubling ambiguity’ concerning even basic principles and goals in the service learning literature:

Is service learning a pedagogical strategy for better comprehension of course content? A philosophical stance committed to the betterment of the local or global community? An institutionalised mechanism fostering students’ growth and self-awareness concerning issues of diversity, volunteerism, and civic responsibility? Or, as some critics note, a voyeuristic exploitation of the cultural other that masquerades as academically sanctioned servant leadership? (ibid: 1675).

Butin argues that questions must therefore be raised concerning the academic, political and social consequences of such differing perspectives. These concerns are supported by Patel (2003) in discussing the political economy of civic service. She argues that civic service (the idea of giving of oneself for the benefit of others), while not a new phenomenon,

is increasingly recognised as a significant social institution and an emerging social phenomenon in a context of global social, economic and political change (ibid: 89).

Like Butin, Patel cautions against too easily accepting definitions of such a concept without understanding that an activity such as civic service, is not a neutral activity. The various civil service traditions have implications for the design, implementation and evaluation of such programmes. The same arguments could be made for service learning. Taking the above into account does not mean that definitions are not important; they are. However it is perhaps more important to note the questions they ask, the views of the world they encompass and the direction of movement they imply.

Given the challenges facing higher education identified at the beginning of this study, it is perhaps not surprising that the interest and development of service learning has grown internationally over the last decade. Zlotkowski (1998) argues that one of reasons why service learning has increased in popularity is that it is positioned at the point where two comprehensive sets of contemporary educational concerns intersect. On the one hand, it

represents a pedagogy that broadens our range of pedagogical resources by addressing directly those ‘problems of greatest human concern’ that are ‘messy and confusing and incapable of technical solution’ (Schon 1995 in Zlotkowski: 3).

On the other hand, service learning works with a second, intersecting axis: from ‘knowledge as self-interest and private good, it creates a bridge to knowledge as civic responsibility and public work’ (Zlotkowski 1998: 4). Zlotkowski argues that it shows important qualities of flexibility and inclusion – just as knowledge as public work in no way denies the validity of knowledge as private good, knowledge as private good should also not exclude the former. Through service learning activities, students can learn about the importance of attending to their needs as individuals *and* as members of a community. By bringing public work into the very heart of the educational system, i.e. into the curriculum, Zlotkowski argues that service learning helps students to avoid seeing private advancement disassociated from public standards and public need.

### **Philosophical and theoretical roots of service learning: Dewey, Freire and Kolb**

Kezar and Rhoads (2001) attribute the growth of service learning in the US to a response to three critiques of higher education: lack of curriculum relevance, lack of faculty commitment to teaching and lack of institutional (and faculty) responsiveness to the public good. Yet the authors argue that it is important to trace this interest further back. They argue that if one looks at the late 1960s and early 1970s, there were important innovations in higher education. These include multiculturalism, collaborative learning and learning communities as well as service learning (see also Pollack in Stanton et al 1999). According to the authors, we need to link these innovations to the work of philosopher and pragmatist John Dewey.

Each of these pedagogical innovations evolved out of newly applied philosophies of education grounded in experiential and emancipatory approaches to learning ... shar[ing] the core assumptions of Dewey’s philosophy. For example, service learning evolved from Dewey’s belief that dualisms in philosophy had created a problematic distinction between doing and knowing, emotions and intellect, experience and knowledge, work and play, individual and the world (2001: 151).



Given the focus in this thesis on the interface between the university and community, and on the nature of the ‘activities’ that take place in a service learning course, I shall focus on the work of three important influential thinkers and educators whose legacy is visible in different practices and whose interests lie in the combination of action and reflection, theory and practice: John Dewey, Paulo Freire and David Kolb.

### ***John Dewey and ‘philosophical pragmatism’***

Giles and Eyler (1994) argue that one of the gaps in service learning research is a lack of a ‘well articulated conceptual framework’ as it is a relatively new social and educational phenomenon. The authors do not believe that theory is good for its own sake, however, nor that service learning needs it ‘simply for the purposes of social and political legitimacy’ (ibid: 77). Rather, it is necessary as a way of developing and refining a solid research agenda for the field and, if we are to know more about service learning, we need ‘a systematic way of generating and organising our knowledge’ (ibid: 78). The authors go on to outline the conceptual basis of service learning from the history of the field and locate much of the original thinking and work around service learning with the ideas of John Dewey – pragmatist, philosopher and educationalist.

Linking their thinking to the work of Dewey is important on a number of fronts. In particular, Giles and Eyler argue, it is critical as a starting point to link learning to issues such as citizenship and democracy. By not doing this, we create a

false dichotomy between the ideas related to learning and those related to citizenship and democracy. For Dewey, pedagogy and epistemology were related – his theory of knowledge was related to and derived from his notions of citizenship and democracy... *experimentalism and radical democracy* are ‘two central and intertwined strands of Dewey’s social and political philosophy’ (Robertson 1992: 337 in Giles & Eyler 78-79; emphasis in the original).

Key to understand in Dewey’s work therefore is the relationships between reflection, inquiry and experimentalism. While the concept of service learning was not directly part of Dewey’s work, a philosophy of experience is central to his ideas on pedagogy. In particular, his emphasis on the principles of experience, inquiry and reflection as key elements to a ‘theory of knowing’ in service learning help us to think about how learning

takes place, what the learning is and the relation of learning to action. A central question for Dewey in developing what he called a ‘philosophy of experience’ is: How is it that experiences are educative?

Two principles inform whether experiences are educative and form the core of his philosophy of experience. These are the principle of continuity and the principle of interaction.

- *Continuity*: All experience occurs along a continuum called the experiential continuum. Experiences build on previous ones and need to be directed towards growth and development and it is the role of teacher to shape such experiences. This is the temporal or linear dimension of experience.
- *Interaction*: This is the lateral dimension ‘where the internal and objective aspects of experience interact to form a *situation*. Learning results from the *transaction* between the individual and the environment.... Learning for Dewey is “situational learning” (Giles & Eyer 1994: 79; emphasis in the original).

For knowledge therefore to be useful through recall and application,

it has to be acquired in a situation – otherwise it is separated from experience and is forgotten or not available for transfer to new experiences. This means that acquisition as well as application of knowledge is dependent on the context, a key element of which is the interaction in the situation (ibid: 79).

Hatcher (1997) argues that Dewey’s work has influenced service learning in a number of ways because ‘the basic theory of service learning is Dewey’s: the interaction of knowledge and skills with experience is key to learning’ (Ehrlich 1996: xi in Hatcher 1997: 23). However it is important to note that his work is also the foundation for experiential learning and the work of Kolb (1984), and Kolb’s four-stage experiential learning cycle, on which much critical reflection in service learning is based. According to Hatcher, the historical context in which he was writing is essential to understanding the moral dimensions of Dewey’s philosophy.

Dewey observed fundamental social changes in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century as a result of industrialisation and he was brought into contact with the social problems and discrepancies symptomatic of urbanisation and immigration. The foremost concern in his writing is the complexity of this emerging industrialised society: the machine age was going to destroy community and eventually threaten democracy. The only way to combat this was to create 'great communities' and thereby sustain 'the vital, steady and deep relationships which are present only in an immediate community' (Dewey 1927: 214 in Hatcher 1997: 23).

Within this context of valuing community and democracy, Hatcher argues that three explicit moral dimensions are visible in his philosophy of education:

- Education must develop individual capacities.
- Education must engage citizens in association with one another.
- Education must promote humane conditions.

Following Dewey then, learning occurs through an interaction between the learner and the environment; it is not passive but an active process of creating knowledge. For Hironimus-Wendt and Lovell-Troy (1999) Dewey's pedagogical ideas are deeply embedded in a social philosophy. His approach links theory and practice and it serves as the basis for connecting school to the community. In addition, both educational experiences and community service can play a role in social reconstruction. The goal here is to 'achieve a democratic community through associations that promote social justice' (ibid: 364). In other words, Dewey believed that classrooms that actively modelled participation in community life and instilled values associated with democracy and social justice would best prepare students for life in a democratic society.

### ***John Dewey and Paulo Freire: action-reflection, self and society***

Deans (1999) looks at the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, the 'Latin John Dewey', and compares the work of this educator to that of Dewey. Deans argues for the importance of understanding the context and history against which educational

interventions take place. He argues that the context out of which Dewey was writing at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century is very similar to the present day inequities visible in society. He organises his discussion around two key relationships evident in Dewey's work – knowledge to action and individual to society – and argues that it is important to see his real attempts to bridge dualisms.

- Knowledge to action (action-reflection)

Education for Dewey is 'a form of growth through *active experimentation* and *reflective thought*' (Deans 1999:16; emphasis in the original). Means cannot therefore be disconnected from ends, i.e. how one learns is connected to what one learns.

- Individual/society relationship

Deans argues that Dewey recognises the interconnectedness of individual cognition and social context. Education is thus ultimately social in aims and since Dewey's theory of democracy rests on social action, so too does his educational philosophy; 'democratic education' aims to help individuals learn and work towards contributing to social aims. Radical interaction and 'continuity' between the individual and society is the cornerstone of his philosophy.

In looking at the work of Freire, Deans argues that many draw on Freire's work in service learning because it resonates with many of the goals some service learning projects set themselves, e.g. 'the political transformation of individuals and society through literacy education, critical reflection, and collective social action' (ibid: 19). Freire's work in the 1960s, 70s and 80s is based on his experiences working with Brazilian peasants in educational and literacy programmes. Freire argues for an educational theory and approach based on a critical understanding of power and the dialectical relationship between word (language or text) and world (cultural context). Freire was influenced by neo-Marxism and emphasises the need to challenge oppressive structures in both schools and society. His approach underscores the potential for personal and political transformation through dialogue, articulates the action-reflection dialectic of 'praxis' and encourages the development of critical consciousness.

Central concepts in Freire's work are that of 'action-reflection' and the notion of 'praxis' in particular: 'Within one word we find two dimensions, reflection and action, in such radical interconnection that if one is sacrificed – even in part – the other immediately suffers' (Freire 1970:75 in Deans 1999: 20). Praxis must be a concurrent, ongoing process of action-reflection. Knowing is a constructive, experiential process and learning is located in the situation. Freire talks about the 'cognisable object' mediating between teachers and learners. This process (dialogue, dialectic, action-reflection) is the cornerstone of his approach, 'thereby locating learning in one's creative response to a situation, the relation of the individual to the material problem' (Deans 1999: 20).

In conclusion, Deans argues that both Dewey and Freire build their educational philosophies around core concepts of experience, growth, inquiry, communication, mediation, problem posing/solving, consciousness-raising, ethical social action and transformation. Both are humanists seeing education as bringing action and reflection, theory and practice, self and society into intimate and ultimately transformative dialectical relationships on both cognitive and social levels. And both see education as having a major role to play in this process.

### **Experiential learning: Kolb and others**

When one shifts from the history and philosophy of service learning and begins to look more closely at the pedagogy, the work of experiential learning theorists emerges strongly. It is the theory of learning and pedagogy that has most influenced the service learning movement (Stanton 1998; Moore 2000). Embedded in these theories is the key assumption that a learner's experience should be acknowledged and celebrated in learning. Experiential learning theorists have been important in the work on educational interventions that seek to transform existing models. According to Fenwick the main tradition of experiential learning is an individualised one sharing the following essential conceptualisation of learning:

an independent learner, cognitively reflecting on concrete experience to construct new understandings, perhaps with the assistance of an educator, towards some social goal of progress or improvement (Fenwick 2003: 12 in Cooper 2005: 42).

This body of theoretical work has thus succeeded in putting ‘experience’ at the centre of the educational process, and thereby it has

challenged the dominant epistemology of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century which excludes a role for subjective experience in knowledge construction (Cooper 2005: 42).

In the service learning field, the work of David Kolb (1976; 1981; 1984) in particular remains a strong influence and is reflected in the different forms of pedagogy. Kolb, and Kolb and Fry (1975), explore the processes that are associated with linking experience and learning. The concept of ‘experiential learning’ embodied in their work explores the way in which learning from experience takes place through a cyclical series of actions: from the concrete experience, to reflection on the experience, to developing more abstract conceptualisations of it by relating it to other learning and then to further, new action. The experiential learning cycle is flexible: it can start at any stage and can happen over a short or long period of time; there may even be ‘learning wheels within wheels’ (Atherton 2004).

The experiential learning cycle therefore provides a useful framing for the linking of learning with experience, and provides educators and students with the opportunity for structured moments of reflection, a key dimension of all service learning pedagogy. Keeton (1983) in making a link with Dewey’s philosophy outlined above develops the following argument.

As Dewey states, this process at least results in a ‘reconstruction’ of experience ... a re-codifying of habits ... and an ongoing questioning of old ideas ... Thus experiential learning so pursued transforms the individual, revises and enlarges knowledge, and alters practice. It affects aesthetic and ethical commitments of individuals and alters their perceptions and interpretations of the world (in Stanton 1998: 3).

### ***Criticisms of experiential learning***

Experiential learning has however not been without its criticisms and I shall note some of the main ones here. Cooper (2005) has provided a useful summary of these criticisms, three of which are outlined here. Firstly, as noted by Fenwick above, experiential learning focuses very much on the individual learner's experience with little cognisance of the fact that all learning takes place in and through a range of contexts. By separating the learner from the context, 'context' is viewed as static, a space surrounding the individual rather than an integral part of the process of learning and knowledge construction (Fenwick 2003 in Cooper 2005). Secondly, and linked to the first point, requiring a person to 'step back' from their experience in order to reflect on it creates an 'unnatural split between thinking and action, mind and body, and individual and context' (Cooper 2005: 42).

Lastly, experiential learning theorists are criticised for treating the notion of 'experience' unproblematically, believing that by reflecting on it, a learner can uncover the 'true' meaning of the experience. Cooper outlines how many authors have argued in different ways that experience is never innocent of or free from its historical, social and political location 'where it both reflects and reproduces social relations and social practice' (ibid: 42).

Within the field of service learning, some studies have also attempted to move beyond experiential learning and address some of these criticisms. Moore (1990) suggests a 'post-structuralist' approach to experiential learning: 'a critical pedagogy ... in which students and teachers conduct an ... investigation of social institutions, power relations, and value commitments' (1990: 281 in Cone and Harris 1996: 32). Meaning is not centred or fixed and experiential approaches should offer ways for students to examine 'shifting systems of meaning'. Students must learn to 'read' their workplaces/communities as 'texts' in which they 'examine ... the histories, power arrangements and values underlying their work organisations' (ibid: 32-33).

Cone and Harris (1996) look particularly at the reflection aspect of Kolb's work but argue that his experiential learning is ambiguous: there is no clear sense of how students are to reflect and what guides their reflections. The authors argue strongly that we need

to understand that students come into the service learning experience with their own sets of experiences, values and worldviews, and, while practitioners cannot cater for all possible preferences and backgrounds, they need to see students more holistically. They need in other words to understand that students bring contexts, histories and values into the present learning context and this will impact on both their service and their learning. Students in service learning are ‘engaged in building bridges between classrooms and communities and are engaged in a social process of constructing meaning’ (ibid: 39).

In another set of debates, a number of authors have explored service learning as a form of ‘border pedagogy’ (Hayes & Cuban 1997; Keith 1998; Skilton-Sylvester & Erwin 2000; Taylor 2002), drawing largely on work in critical pedagogy and critical postmodernism (Anzaldúa 1987; Giroux 1992). While not directly addressing some of the criticisms of experiential learning, they argue that we need to develop new lenses to understand aspects of the service learning experience. They argue that the metaphors of ‘borders’, ‘border-crossing’ and ‘borderland’ are useful and important as a ‘compelling starting point for describing and rethinking the nature of service learning’ (Hayes and Cuban 1997: 74). Hayes and Cuban quote Giroux as follows in support of their argument:

Border crossing serves as a metaphor for how people might gain a more critical perspective on the forms of domination inherent in their own histories, knowledge and practices, and learn to value alternative forms of knowledge.... Borderlands should be seen as sites both for critical analysis and as a potential source of experimentation, creativity and possibility (Giroux 1992: 34 in Hayes & Cuban: 75).

Given my interest in understanding the interface between the university and community in service learning, the metaphor of the border or the ‘boundary’ is a useful and important one for me. Metaphors are also useful ways of looking at things differently, generating theory (Bringle 2003) and extending the creative possibilities of drawing interesting pictures and telling interesting stories. The issue of borders and boundaries will recur in Chapter 7 when looking at service learning as a form of boundary work in higher education but through a different lens, one that will be developed in Chapter 3.

In this section I have provided an account of some the history service learning as well as discussed some of the key philosophical and historical influences that I feel are relevant



to my particular study. This included the work of Dewey, Kolb and Freire. I then looked at the pedagogy and at experiential learning. I addressed three of the main criticisms of this form of learning and pedagogy, particularly as they relate to the individualised nature of learning, the split between action and reflection and the lack of problematising the notion of context in learning. It is some of these critiques that informed the development of my conceptual framework in Chapter 3 and my interest in more socially situated accounts of learning. We turn now to look at some of the gaps in the field and how my research addresses some of these.

### **Part 3: Gaps in the service learning field**

This thesis has set out to look at, and theorise, the interaction between universities and communities. It does so in a particular way by asking the question: what happens when the university – through service learning curriculum and pedagogy - meets the community? As has been argued elsewhere, we do not know enough about this ‘intersection of classroom and experiential learning’ (Moore 2000: 126). This section will highlight some of the gaps in the field that my study is trying to address.

Howard (2003) argues that while there has been quite a lot of research in the field, much of it has focused on outcomes, especially student outcomes, as a way of justifying the field. Shumer (2000) and Eyler (2002) argue that we need to look more qualitatively at service learning practice. For Shumer, much current research and the emphasis on quantitative studies are

not sufficient to support the dynamic, professional practitioner in the field of service learning... other paradigms and approaches ... are more philosophically consistent and more able to reveal the fine-grain texture of this work (2000: 81).

For Eyler it is particularly important to recognise that service learning is better researched via ‘deeper, more nuanced descriptions of what can be highly idiosyncratic experiences and outcomes (2002: 6)’. These kinds of studies, she argues, are more appropriate for making sense of forms of interaction in service learning.

Service learning is *about doing, about action*, about learning from experience, and using the knowledge and skills learned. It is about having assumptions challenged through confronting new perspectives or puzzling experiences and learning to sort out complex, messy real-world situations. It is *about knowledge in use*, not just about acquiring and being based on facts (2002: 9; emphasis added).

As a consequence, Eyler (2002) argues for the importance of in-depth qualitative studies. Such ‘thick descriptions’ of service learning are important for the field.

It is not possible to have much confidence in outcomes that depend on quality dimensions that are assumed, but not observed, or rely solely on students’ reports (ibid: 9).

A number of other publications have addressed gaps in the research of service learning. Eyler and Billig (2003) have become aware that the

most critical challenge facing research in the field is to move it from what has been a field built predominantly on programme evaluation and programme description in some cases, to one that tries to answer interesting and challenging theoretical questions about service learning practice (2003: x).

In particular, Moore (2000) has asked a number of questions about service learning research that link to my interests. He looks particularly at students’ experiences of internship and work-based learning. He argues that most people would agree that practices like work-based learning and service learning are subsets of a larger body of practices referred to as experiential education/experiential learning.

All of these practices have in common some degree of first-hand experience in the community or world outside the academy while studying and many claims are made about the effect of this on students. However, Moore argues that very few studies actually ‘entered and examined the black box of students’ actual experiences’ (2000: 125). Drawing on the work of situated learning theorists Lave and Wenger (1991), Moore argues that since we don’t really know a lot either about ‘how experiential learning happens in the context of real-world activities, or about how well the learning goes’, we have a long way to go before we can fully explain how ‘interns and volunteers come to

engage different forms of knowledge in different kinds of communities of practice' (ibid: 125-126).

We need therefore to know more about the practices we set up, about the intersection of classroom and experiential learning. This is for three main reasons: the nature of the problems are different, the 'culturally-shaped procedures' for solving them are also different and problems in the real world are usually undertaken by groups and not individuals, thus the cognitive labour is typically distributed. In order to better understand this, Moore argues that research in both service learning and experiential education/learning thus

needs to address the broad problem of how school-based thinking and work-or service-based thinking are related to each other, and whether, under what conditions and how they enhance each other (ibid: 126).

To summarise, the main gaps identified in the research of service learning are good, 'thick' qualitative research designs, an understanding of student's experiences in the field and a set of research and conceptual tools that can enable us to understand how different kinds of learning, thinking and knowledge are related to each other. While I am clearly not able to address all of these in this thesis, I shall outline in the following section how I see my research linking to some of these issues.

### **My research focus**

In coming to the focus of my research, I shall briefly provide some background to my particular interests and focus. I have been involved in service learning for the past eight years. From 1999-2001, I was the institutionally-nominated academic partner in a nationally funded project to bring universities (in my case, UCT), communities and service sector organisations into partnerships for service learning in South African higher education<sup>2</sup>. It was through this work, and in particular, through a set of incidences early in 2001 when we were evaluating our practice, that I began to define and clarify my interests. This was to better understand the 'messy, challenging' interface zone. More

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<sup>2</sup> This was the Ford Foundation funded community-higher education-service partnership (CHESP) project, managed and administered by the Joint Education Trust (JET) in South Africa.

particularly, I wanted to ‘map’ this interface yet I lacked the vocabulary and tools to do this<sup>3</sup>.

In 2004 I was working on a service learning research and development project with a number of departments at UCT. One of the project outputs was a conceptual framework to guide our research across five different service learning sites. In developing this framework (McMillan & Shay 2004), a colleague and I came to draw on the work of situated learning theorists Lave and Wenger (1991), and Wenger (1998) in particular (see Chapter 3). I suddenly became aware of how these tools might assist me as starting points in ‘mapping the interface’. Situated learning theorists are interested in social practice and focus very much on practice, context, identity and processes of participating in activities, or in ‘communities of practice. This then became the way into this doctoral research. While I moved beyond some of these initial ideas during the research process, they were the important starting points for my thinking in this project.

What I came to realise about service learning, and what I argue in this thesis is essential to understand, is that as a form of educational practice, it introduces two fundamental changes to teaching and learning that impact on the curriculum, on learning and on the students. Firstly, what I am calling an ‘expanded community’ and secondly, ‘dual but inter-related objects’. Neither of these are accidental but are – to varying degrees and in various guises – intentional aspects of service learning practice in many different contexts. In the first instance the ‘expanded community’, or what could also be viewed as two ‘communities of practice’ (Lave & Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998), means that the university and its students are no longer in a ‘traditional’ higher education community and set of relationships of ‘teacher/educator and learner’, nor are they physically located in the ‘traditional’ university community but are learning off campus.

Many other courses might also involve students off campus, e.g. students in a hospital doing professional training, students doing work-based learning or students doing teaching practice. However, in service learning the relationship with the community is in many ways different. The university engages in a partnership to work with the

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<sup>3</sup> I would like to thank my colleague and friend Tim Stanton for taking an interest in my questions and for the many conversations we had in Cape Town around this time, giving me confidence in my ideas.

community based on *the community's* issues and through this the community is considered to have important knowledge for the students' learning. Engagement with community is therefore a fundamental underpinning feature of service learning.

This brings us to the second of the two features or characteristics of service learning – a dual but inter-related object, i.e. one of learning and of service. How these objects are enacted or play themselves out in different contexts differs but at the heart of service learning (as opposed to internships or professional training for example) is a commitment to render some kind of 'relevant, negotiated' service 'in partnership' with a community. This means that the form that the curriculum takes in its construction and the way that pedagogy is enacted as a result of this reflects this dual object. These two features have informed much of my thinking, both before and during the writing of this thesis.

## **Overview of the thesis**

This chapter looked at some of the history and philosophy in the field of service learning. It did not provide a full overview of all the issues. I tried to focus on issues that resonated with my particular research topic and interest: the relationship between the university and the community. By so doing, I focused on issues of the relationship between theory and practice, doing and thinking, and the role of education in developing critical citizens. I also looked briefly at experiential learning theories as these inform a lot of the approaches to pedagogy that we see in the field today. The chapter concludes with an outline of the rest of the thesis.

*Chapter 2* introduces the *two case studies* of service learning: the 4<sup>th</sup> year MBChB medical students primary health and public health block, 'community-based education', and the 3<sup>rd</sup> year human geography 'field-based research' course. Both of these are forms of service learning and were my primary sites for the research. I am introducing them early in the thesis so that they can provide the context against which to read the rest of the thesis, in particular Chapter 3.

*Chapter 3* is the *conceptual framework* that develops the concepts and tools drawn on to both initially describe and later analyse the service learning courses. I developed the frame in ways that show how my interests and data shifted over the course of doing the research and how I came to realise that, as in any research project, one eventually selects aspects of the story to tell and develops a lens to do this. In particular, I drew on activity theory as a lens to illuminate, rather than to change, existing practice. In particular, I see activity theory as a useful tool to shape and focus a unit of analysis, enabling one to foreground certain things and background others.

*Chapter 4* is the *research methodology* chapter, explaining my approach to the study and my research design. This includes discussing my orientation as a researcher, the process of selecting sites and data collection and how I set about analysing the data. These processes are linked to issues raised in Chapter 1 about service learning and Chapter 3 on conceptual tools. The chapter also discusses ethical considerations in qualitative research, the challenges of doing research and some of the limitations of the study.

*Chapters 5 and 6* are the *two service learning case studies* and each are presented in the same ‘descriptive-analytic’ way and a more detailed and theorised fashion than Chapter 2. Part 1 provides a link to Chapter 2 recapping on the course background but providing further details on the community partner and the nature of the partnership in each case. Part 2 describes the activity system via identifying what I am calling, following Yamagata-Lynch (2003), three ‘nested activities’ making up the whole system. In each case, the actual activities that took place are first described and then presented as nested activities. At the end of each, the key contradictions that emerged are highlighted. These two chapters therefore provide the ‘thick description’ for each of the cases.

*Chapter 7*, the *analysis and discussion*, reviews both cases and provides an analysis of the findings. Part 1 discusses the contradictions across both cases drawing on the data presented in Chapters 5 and 6 and presents this as a ‘nexus of practice’. Through this the key contradictions are highlighted. Part 2 analyses three key contradictions that emerge in both cases and, based on these, analyses service learning as ‘boundary work’, one of the main the tasks outlined in the thesis. In particular the concepts of ‘boundary zone’, tools

of mediation as ‘boundary objects’ and educators as ‘boundary workers’ (with very particular identities and kinds of expertise), are discussed.

In *Chapter 8*, the *concluding chapter*, I consider questions for practice and future research that have emerged from the framework I develop in this study. We turn now to Chapter 2, the introduction and background to the two case studies of service learning.





## **Chapter 2: Context and background to the case studies**

This chapter introduces the two case studies of service learning: ‘community-based education’ in the 4th year Public Health/Primary Health Care block in the MBChB (medical training) in the Faculty of Health Sciences, and ‘field-based research’ in EGS315S<sup>4</sup>: Interpreting the Urban Environment, in the Department of Environmental and Geographical Studies, Faculty of Science, at UCT. I have introduced the cases early in the thesis in order to provide the learning contexts against which the conceptual tools outlined in Chapter 3 as well as the methodological resources in Chapter 4 can be located. I shall present each in the following way:

- The background and description of the departments and courses will be provided.
- An overview of the service learning component of the courses will be sketched.
- An orientation to the communities and service learning sites and partnerships will then be outlined.

Part 1 will discuss the 4<sup>th</sup> year MBChB block, and Part 2 the 3<sup>rd</sup> year EGS course. Most of the data on which these descriptions are based was drawn from a combination of course materials, my own knowledge of the programmes and interviews with course convenors and lecturers.

### **Part 1: 4<sup>th</sup> year MBChB: public health and primary health care block**

#### **Background**

The 4<sup>th</sup> year MBChB Primary Health Care/Public Health community-based block is a compulsory block offered by the School of Public Health and Family Medicine within the Faculty of Health Sciences at UCT. It is a compulsory part of the degree students

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<sup>4</sup> The course code denotes a 3<sup>rd</sup> year (315), second semester course (S).

take when qualifying as medical doctors in South Africa. The MBChB is an undergraduate degree over six years, including a seventh year of internship in order to qualify<sup>5</sup>. This block comprises eight weeks in which students are on site in the community three to four days per week. The block integrates teaching in Primary Health Care, Public Health and Family Medicine. It consists mainly of project work in a community with a focus on experiential learning (Course Handbook 2004). Through this block students conduct epidemiology surveys in the communities of Khayelitsha, Nyanga, Woodstock, and Mamre<sup>6</sup> for the Public Health part of the course. They then use their research findings to shape a health intervention to address a particular health problem that has been identified in liaison with community representatives, the Primary Health Care aspect. During this block, students also have an attachment to a family practitioner as part of the Family Medicine section<sup>7</sup>.

The block is the result of a partnership between the School of Public Health and the Primary Health Care Directorate in the Faculty of Health Sciences. Public Health has always had an epidemiology project but this has not always been community-based. Initially, epidemiology supervisors would have students working with them on their own research projects. The Faculty of Health adopted a primary health care approach in 1994 and two years later this particular course was run for the first time. In 1996 the Primary Health Care Directorate in the Faculty of Health Sciences was given four weeks of the curriculum and decided, through the partnership mentioned above, to join up with Public Health and the block then became eight weeks long.

According to the Course Handbook (2004) an effective health care service requires that health professionals appreciate the impact of social and environmental factors on the quality of an individual's life. An awareness of the person's circumstances will help such

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<sup>5</sup> In 2002 a new curriculum was introduced in the Faculty of Health Sciences at UCT which includes a period of compulsory community service at the end of the degree before qualifying as a doctor. In addition, the curriculum has been restructured in such a way that there is no 4<sup>th</sup> year block like this one – the primary health care ethos is built into the curriculum in various ways from 1<sup>st</sup> year.

<sup>6</sup> These are historically disadvantaged communities located between ten minutes and one hour's drive from campus. All of the partnerships with the exception of Woodstock were the result of other pre-existing projects.

<sup>7</sup> However, because this section of the block is not part of the service learning or community-based education, I have not looked at it in this thesis.

professionals make appropriate clinical and social management decisions about a patient's health problems. This approach is based on sensitivity, mutual respect and understanding between the health professional and the patient. To achieve long-term results the health of a patient should also be viewed in a community context, rather than in isolation. To enhance the quality of life of the general population, health professionals may therefore be required to become involved in initiatives that address social, economic and environmental causes of ill health. Population oriented skills help health professionals to respond to the needs of communities, to plan and to evaluate interventions.

All the staff members involved in the block are located in the School of Public Health, the School of Family Medicine and the Primary Health Care Directorate. The Course Convenors in Public Health have medical backgrounds, as do those in Family Medicine. The staff members in the Primary Health Care Directorate who are immediately responsible for the site placements for the block overall are Joan, the Site Development Co-ordinator, and four community-based, university-paid, Site Facilitators (SF) at each of the community sites. Joan has a nursing background and the Site Facilitators have a combination of nursing and adult education.

The role of the Site Facilitator is a complex one as is their history in the Faculty (see Cooper 2001 for details of this role and the complexities of their position). The key challenges lie in the fact that these women are community-based education and development practitioners working in a health sciences faculty that prides itself largely on 'scientific knowledge', as well as the fact that most of them do not possess formal health degrees although all have qualifications in adult education. This leads to ambivalence in the role that they play as well as the amount of power they have. I look at this in more detail in Chapters 5 and 7.

### **Description of the service learning project**

Although the block integrates teaching in Primary Health Care, Public Health and Family Medicine, different components of the block are managed separately by the three

divisions. Hence, learning objectives, activities and course requirements are outlined separately. I have not discussed the different course components in detail but have rather included a broad description of the service learning activities as they relate to two of the three components the Public Health and Primary Health Care. It is these two which comprise the community-based learning as is discussed below.

Epidemiology concerns the investigation of social or health problems that contribute to health hazards in a community, such as violence against women, alcohol abuse or child abuse. Epidemiologists investigate the manifestation, extent and cause of the problem. As such, the epidemiology project within this block introduces students to practical quantitative epidemiological research methods (biostatistics). Each group is allocated a research topic and a health related issue (which students must address) based on a problem identified at the community site.

At the beginning of the block, the students are divided into groups of eight with access to a supervisor and a Site Facilitator. These groups are then sub-divided into teams of three or four. It is in the interest of students to work as a team, since they receive a group mark for their projects, the health promotion report and oral presentations. Students are required to agree on group rules and norms, such as their expectations of each other, suitable times to work together and a plan of action with time frames. Both the epidemiological and the health promotion project are done on the same site.

As indicated, the students are on site approximately three to four days per week of the eight-week period. When students are not on site, they attend meetings with their supervisors, their Site Facilitator, with each other or have workshops that prepare them for their site visits. For instance, during the first workshop the basic concept of public health care is explained to students. Students also receive a workshop on safety as some of them are concerned about being attacked or mugged on site<sup>8</sup>. In another workshop, students receive a library orientation in which they are taught how to do correct

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<sup>8</sup> Safety is a real issue for service learning and one sees it discussed in much of the international literature. However there are many very particular safety issues in South Africa that one needs to take seriously both for the safety of students as well for issues of liability give the complexities and history of the context here. The Faculty of Health Sciences has developed a safety manual for this purpose.

referencing and literature searches. They also have to schedule time for writing of research protocol, data collection and reports.

In outlining the overall learning objectives, the Course Handbook states that these might 'differ from previous learning experiences'. The learning aims are to:

1. *gain knowledge* about the theory and practice of health promotion; primary care systems and their restructuring and principles of family medicine
2. *foster attitudes* with respect to 'partnerships' in health with patients, families, communities, health personnel and other sectors; mutual respect; empowerment of self and others; health oriented care; prevention and promotion; self-directed, life long learning; constructive, creative and critical evaluation; responsible problem solving approach
3. *develop skills* in the areas of observation and communication; listening, empathy, and reflection; problem solving; and participatory health education (Course Handbook 2004).

The Course Handbook stresses the fact that the philosophy of primary health care means the learning process is largely the students' individual and group responsibility. As a consequence, this block attempts to encourage *experiential, problem-based learning in a community; and critical, self-directed adult learning*. In order to achieve this, students will

work collaboratively with individuals and/or community groups in attempts to solve health problems. By exploring specific health issues, you can learn more about the local community. Meet and talk to people who provide a service, advise and support the local community! (Course Handbook 2004).

During their first week students are taken on site by their supervisor for an orientation and introduced to relevant community representatives. The students meet with these representatives to discuss the pressing health issue<sup>9</sup>. Joan, the overall Site Co-ordinator, summarises this part of the course:

Epidemiology would be investigating a health problem or a social problem like, for example, violence, maybe the attitude of people towards violence against women or child abuse. It could be different aspects. It is investigating a specific problem where communities feel the problem is important for them to know about and maybe to promote awareness about it. We investigate the extent of

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<sup>9</sup> This is broadly identified by the community and the Site Facilitator before the students get to the site as part of the feasibility study and course preparation phase.

the problem, i.e. see how the problem occurs, what are the causes? Epidemiology will be asking those questions which means students will be guided by the epidemiology supervisor<sup>10</sup>: they will design a questionnaire, they will go and in-pilot the questionnaire where they understand the community with which they are involved, then administer the questionnaire and from there analyse the data (Joan, interview 18.03.04).

Once they have completed their surveying, each group has to analyse its data and write up an epidemiology report. In addition to their epidemiological findings, students are also encouraged to find other sources of information which could confirm, substantiate or challenge their findings. The Site Facilitator guides the students to other organisations, such as NGOs and state health institutions, which they could approach for additional information.

After completion of the epidemiology project the students together with their community partners must decide on a health promotion strategy to try and address the health issues that have emerged via the epidemiology project. The Site Facilitator is the students' main resource in producing the health promotion and report. She has to broker a partnership between the students and the community and help them to jointly explore interventions that might have an impact on the health issue. Such an intervention could comprise anything from running a campaign on television to promote awareness of the topic to running a workshop on ways to deal with the particular health issue. Students are required to arrange a date with the community stakeholders to report back on the progress of the project.

The eight week block thus has a number of key features that shape the ways in which the curriculum and learning takes place. Joan put it like this:

The objective of the block is to introduce students to community-based teaching where they will be engaging with communities to work on projects that have been identified by the communities at sites at which students are placed. If they identify a project they have to work with communities to look at the epidemiological aspect of the project as well as doing a health promotion part. Therefore when you talk about empowering the communities and students

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<sup>10</sup> The epidemiology supervisors are campus-based, medically trained public health professionals who teach the students in the public health part of the block and thus ultimately assess their epidemiology projects.

learning from what communities have been doing, it means communities have to be involved, they have to be part and parcel of the planning cycle (Joan, interview 18.03.04).

As part of their assessment, the students have to keep a reflective journal with four entries by the end of the course counting towards their final mark. As will be shown in Chapter 5, these journal entries are critical for the students' in their experiences throughout the block. The SF assesses these entries.

### **Communities and site development**

Because of the emphasis on primary health care the sites selected are ones that have been economically, politically and socially disadvantaged due to apartheid. People living in these communities had little, if any, public health care services under apartheid as most of the health care services were rendered by community and non-government organisations<sup>11</sup>. In many cases, service delivery is still a problem although there are many more clinics or primary health care facilities in these communities post-1994. The particular site of my research was the Woodstock site, in many ways different from the other sites in the block as I shall explain later.

Linked to the broader more holistic approach underpinning the block as described above, learning needs to move beyond the classroom. The 'site' for both epidemiology and health promotion requires that students go outside of the traditional classroom:

If you're dealing with something like population health and health promotion, you can't teach it in the classroom ... because in a classroom it's all so clean and clinical and it will just be totally theoretical; you've got to do it in the real situation. You've got to see how messy it is. You've got to experience the difficulties (Mary, interview 18.03.04).

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<sup>11</sup> An example of this is SHAWCO, the student-led volunteer organisation at UCT that served communities in this way by employing social workers for more than 50 years as there were no state services. The organisation shifted strategy post 1994 and many of those posts were taken over by the State.

Mary<sup>12</sup> argued that, for her, the idea of learning ‘beyond the classroom’ is important. It is not necessary that students need to be in poor communities for all of their learning and community-based projects. A community in this context for her means a space and context outside of the traditional classroom:

You need the every day ...To understand it properly you’ve got to go out and do it. You’ve got to test your questionnaires... you’ve got to gather the information. You have to see the difficulties in sampling all of that. You can’t learn it in a textbook ...It doesn’t matter where it is but it’s got to be outside of the classroom (Mary, interview 18.03.04).

However, when one talks specifically about *primary health care*, it *does* matter where the community is:

But if you’re looking at primary health care and you’re looking at issues of equity and inequity ... students don’t know how under resourced the other areas are. And so if you’re looking at the philosophy of primary health care, they have to be exposed to the difficulties of under-resourced communities (Mary, interview 18.03.04).

In other words, the context in which students learn is of primary importance:

The students are learning (to apply) the holistic approach in the context of what they are learning. You cannot divorce the problem from the social context (Joan, interview 18.03.04).

The philosophy underpinning primary health care and the ethos of a more holistic approach to the health and well-being of individuals and populations, has thus led to the development of partnerships and relationships with various organisations in communities off campus, most of them historically disadvantaged communities. The sites selected for community-based education/service learning were based on partnerships and other projects that members of staff in both the PH and PHC departments, were already involved in. However, Mary indicated that because the partnerships emerged out of pre-

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<sup>12</sup> Mary was the first Site Development Co-ordinator, a post she held from 1996-2001. She is still partially based in the health sciences but in a curriculum, education and development unit. As a previously trained nurse herself, she has extensive experience in both health and education. She provided much of the contextual and background data I needed to understand this site.



existing relationships, each of the four current sites have a slightly different history. In the beginning, many of the partnerships were linked to studies that epidemiological supervisors had as research projects – the communities and structures in those communities served as the springboard for other projects. She also discussed the fact that while the sites emerged from existing relations in the department, each of them required building relationships with community structures:

[B]ecause they were community based, in a sense, they had consulted with communities, they developed health committees which were part of the broader (Civic) and all the other organisations. So in town too, (the Civic) and health committees and everything would have been involved in the consultations, also in Mamré (Mary, interview 28.02.06).

However, the Woodstock site's history is different from these:

But in Woodstock it was purely a partnership with NOAH<sup>13</sup>; there wasn't broader consultation (Mary, interview 28.02.06).

### **The Woodstock site**

What is important to note upfront is that the project in Woodstock with the South African Domestic Servants and Allied Workers' Union (SADSAWU) was based on the fact that the Union offices are in Woodstock<sup>14</sup>. The domestic workers themselves are employed and live in a variety of neighbourhoods in and around Cape Town.

Woodstock is an inner-city neighbourhood about five kilometres from the university. It is an interesting area, both historically and presently. It consists of both residential properties as well as light industry and, in particular, many of the Western Cape's clothing factories are located in this area. In fact, the presence of the clothing industry

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<sup>13</sup> Neighbourhood Old Aged Homes (NOAH) a non-government organisation caring for the aged.

<sup>14</sup> SADSAWU is an affiliate of COSATU – The Congress of South African Trade Unions – the largest of the trade union federations in South Africa.

was one of the rationales for developing this site as it was believed that students would gain much insight into occupational health and safety issues in this sector.

There are a number of significant differences that distinguish Woodstock from the other community sites – differences that, according to Mary, are both advantages and disadvantages. Firstly, the Woodstock site developed a link with a particular NGO<sup>15</sup> in the area that has a focus specifically on one sector of the population – the elderly. One of the staff in the department was on the Board of the NGO and it was through his role that this relationship developed:

[It was]totally around the elderly, and diabetes, and hypertension and compliance to medication – a lot of chronic illness stuff (Mary, interview 28.02.06).

Secondly, partly due to its close proximity to campus, it developed as a ‘pragmatic, multi-disciplinary site’ across the Faculty of Health Sciences:

It was a pragmatic site ... then also what happened at Woodstock which was different to all the other sites was, because we had occupational therapists there, physiotherapists from UWC<sup>16</sup>, and it was close to campus, a multidisciplinary programme developed (Mary, interview 28.02.06).

Thirdly, its very location near the city made it an interesting site in and of itself. Under apartheid, Woodstock was one of the few neighbourhoods that was unaffected by the Group Areas Act (1956) which demarcated areas in the city based on racial categories. Woodstock has thus retained its class and racially mixed features.

There is not an official ‘Woodstock site’. Originally NOAH provided the base for the students and their projects, but since ‘NOAH has become over-researched’ (Mary, interview 28.02.06) there has been a need to seek out other projects. Given this, there are no consistent structures with which the university and students engage. This differs from

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<sup>15</sup> A non-government organisation.

<sup>16</sup> UWC – the University of the Western Cape, the only designated ‘Coloured’ university under Apartheid. It is located in Bellville, a community about 25 minutes from UCT.

the other three sites where there are structures in the community that provide the basis for the engagement.

The project with SADSAWU is linked to a broader project co-ordinated by an academic in the Sociology Department at UCT<sup>17</sup>. He has been working with the union for a number of years on a whole range of issues from organising to capacity building. As an educator, he also works in the Health Sciences Faculty on the new curriculum. Through contact with him and knowledge of his work, Anna negotiated access to the Union for this project. Through this process, it was decided that one of the key issues facing the workers, and which could work for the medical students, was that of occupational health and safety hazards in the workplace.

The topic for the epidemiology project was therefore the occupational health and safety hazards faced by domestic workers in their places of employment. The students collected data from domestic workers via a structured questionnaire and the results of this data formed the basis for their health promotion project. This project, a workshop and brochure on occupational hazards, thus emerged during the activities as an outcome of the research project. Anna herself had previously worked for an NGO which focussed on work in this area and had recently completed a small research project on the topic herself. Thus the project at the Woodstock site did not give the students access to Woodstock specifically but rather to a constituency based in that area<sup>18</sup>.

In summary, the service learning activities are as follows: the 4th year medical students complete an eight-week block in which they undertake an epidemiology research project on a topic negotiated with SADSAWU, in this case occupational health and safety. Based on the findings from their research, they then undertake a health promotion project which in this case consisted of running workshop with the workers on occupational health and safety and compiling a small brochure on the topic. I return to this case study in Chapter 5 when I present the set of activities the students engaged in.

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<sup>17</sup> The details of the project are discussed further in Chapter 5.

<sup>18</sup> This is not the case in all the student projects based in Woodstock and I discuss this further in Chapter 4 when discussing the selection of my sites and cases.

## **Part 2: EGS 315S: interpreting the urban environment**

### **Background**

The Department of Environmental and Geographical Sciences (EGS) at UCT dates back to 1985 before which there were two departments: Geography which had been in existence at UCT for 40 years and the School of Environmental Studies which had existed for less time. The discipline of geography in turn has two strands, or areas of interest, running through it: physical geography or earth system science, from the natural sciences, and a social science strand, drawing on social sciences methods and including sub-specialisms such as development studies. The EGS Departmental webpage describes it as follows:

Environmental and Geographical Science at UCT is [thus] characterised by an integrated approach to the study of human-environment relations. The discipline requires the practitioner to draw on a range of knowledge and skills associated with the natural and social sciences. The student is offered a sound theoretical and practical training in the study of environmental and geographical sciences (EGS Departmental website, accessed July 2005).

Common across both strands is the importance of research as a tool through which geographers learn about the environment, about cities and how to produce geographical research and knowledge based on this field research. The knowledge can also serve more applied purposes, useful in development, policy formation and reflection. Watson (2003) argues that it is important to consider the relationship between research, planning and action, particularly in contexts like South Africa:

[T]here is not a simple or linear relationship between the three and ... we ought to be careful of assuming that good research will necessarily result in good plans which will in turn deliver better urban environments (2003:55).

In particular, spatial problems in Cape Town are defined as having some key features, among them

urban quality concerns – the problem that lower income areas had been planned as desolate, unfunctional areas, with large tracts of unused and derelict open space and little shelter of sense of ‘urbanity’ (ibid: 56).

The Head of Department argues that given environmental issues are increasingly important in the global world, physical geographers are increasingly moving into areas that are more interdisciplinary. This connects their work with a more social sciences-oriented human geography course like 315S, the focus of my research. While the physical geography aspect of the work has always been quite strong in the department, it is the 'human-geography oriented' side of the work that is new and particularly relevant in the South African context: 'it is highly relevant in a developing world context so it's either urban or rural Southern Africa' (EGS Head of Department, interview 28.07.05).

Susan, the lecturer who convenes the field-based research part of this course, has a background in the social sciences and refers to herself as a 'human geographer' located in the discipline of geography. She argues that her work is very much discipline-based research:

Geography is absolutely a discipline. It is a mix of physical and social sciences. There are a whole bunch of us who have been trained as geographers and know that we do very different things [i.e. physical and social] but are quite happy and understand that geography as a discipline bridges physical and social science (Susan, interview 30.08.05).

### **Field-based research: linking theory and practice**

EGS 315S is a second semester third year elective offered by the Department of Environmental and Geographical Sciences within the Faculty of Sciences<sup>19</sup>. EGS 315S tries to explain how a 'daily functioning urban system' is structured and how it 'works'. Students analyse the morphology of the city (i.e. its site, size, plan, profile, land-use distribution, differential densities and architecture), its activity patterns and its socio-political organisation in general theoretical terms. While it is intended that the concepts, principles and theories covered in the course will equip students to interpret and analyse the geography of any city and expose them to facets of city life around the world,

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<sup>19</sup> In discussing the EGS 315S course, I found it confusing as it is sometimes referred to it as 'urban geography' and at other times 'human geography'. According to Susan, the course is a 'human geography course', its specific focus is 'urban geography', a sub-focus of human geography, and the focus of the practicals (the service learning part) is 'field research in human geography'.

particular attention is devoted to circumstances of the South African city. Susan describes the role of the sessions in the field as follows:

Field-based research helps [students] disaggregate the practical experience of all these [community] problems into small chunks ... in order to focus on them to get some research done ... It's isolating [data] into an issue as a question and then [using the] appropriate research methodology, and then writing it from there and being specific about what you're doing ... to see that it is really simple, i.e. that it is demystifying the research process. It makes it so much easier to talk about methods and it also makes it easier to shift to high level sort of abstract discussions around what we do as geographers; it demystifies the theoretical (Susan, interview 12.10.05)

In this quote, Susan indicates the importance for EGS students of understanding research and theoretical issues in 'real contexts' in order to 'demystify' them and make them 'really simple'.

The core of EGS 315S revolves around the concept of urban geography. Students interact with the city on three main levels: at a conceptual level, at a policy level and through primary research. Classroom debates and discussions are combined with extensive project-based fieldwork in neighbourhoods of Cape Town. Rather than running laboratories and practicals on campus, which has been the traditional practice in the past, Susan negotiates research projects with community-based organisations. These projects fulfil research needs identified by the community-based organisation. In the process, students learn field research skills (interviewing and mapping) and gain first hand experience of problems related to urban geography that are discussed at a conceptual level in class.

The main theoretical sections of the course which runs across a twelve-week semester are outlined in the course brochure. These are:

- The *Introduction* which includes lectures on settlements as social constructs; the origin, support and growth of settlements; approaches to urban analysis; and a theoretical introduction to field research and the South African context.
- *The morphology of the modern industrial city* including topics such as conceptions of the city; the city as a resource-allocating mechanism; social differentiation of cities: the South African City in Perspective; and housing delivery.

- *Urban cultural geography: the public and people in cities*, including topics such as cities for the public; urban planning: the deconstruction of the street for the good of the public; the city as a gendered space; the city as a place of resistance; and South African cities (Course Brochure 2005).

These topics are covered by a colleague of Susan's and take place immediately preceding the fieldwork. The field-based research constitutes six weeks of the course, four sessions of which are in the field directly; two are lecture and classroom-based. There is an additional two weeks of supervision and project presentation at the end.

In this case study, students were involved in a research project with a Civic organisation in a historically disadvantaged 'Coloured' community on the Cape Flats. Their project involved collecting data (quantitative and qualitative) of the lives of people living in backyard shacks<sup>20</sup>. They went on four site visits and worked particularly with the Valhalla Park United Civic Front (VPUCF), a community-based activist organisation. The service work was aimed at collecting data in order for the Civic to negotiate with the City of Cape Town for better housing (see Chapter 6 for further discussion on this project). It is thus an attempt at better understanding the relationship mentioned by Watson above, namely between research, planning and action.

The course is examined through a formal examination paper in the October/November examination period. Two class tests, an essay and a project together constitute the 'Course work Mark'. The project is the product of the field-based research/service learning part of the course together with a reflective journal requiring four or five entries for assessment.

### **Communities and site development**

As noted above, field based research is an important tool that geographers use to learn about cities and to produce geographical research and knowledge. Fieldwork also often

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<sup>20</sup> The term 'backyard shack' is one of many (e.g. bungalow, Wendy house) used to describe the houses erected in the yards behind the more formal houses in a community like this. This is a widespread practice in South Africa where there are still massive housing shortages and can be seen in many communities. The relationships between the house owners and backyard shack dwellers are complex and beyond the scope of this thesis.

serves applied purposes and is useful for development, policy formation and reflection. The practicals for EGS 315S serve as an introduction to fieldwork methods and as a first-hand way to learn about the South African city.

In selecting sites, Susan's own experience and interests play a large part. She has had a long standing research interest in citizenship and community-based mobilisation for development. Her interest extends to neighbourhood based research on community and state initiated development projects, but also focuses on South African urban social movements. This includes work with the Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign<sup>21</sup> and assisting with the training of eight community research groups comprising the Valhalla Community Research Group (CRG). The research conducted by the CRG feeds directly into the efforts of the Valhalla Park community to campaign for improved housing.

From 2001 to 2003 the field-based research practicals were run at second year through another course 'Cities of the South' and the activities were based in New Crossroads, Nyanga<sup>22</sup>. Susan and the students worked with the CBO Mayenzeke<sup>23</sup> although the contact between the university and the community was brokered by the NGO Mandlovu<sup>24</sup> Development Initiative. When the practicals shifted to EGS 315S in 2004 Susan decided to work in the Valhalla Park community with the Civic organisation, because of the work that she had done in that community and her extensive contacts there. Thus it is important to note that the work with the Civic was begun in 2004. The cohort of students I observed for this research in 2005 thus continued with the project that has not been completed in 2004 because these students did not get to map the whole of the Valhalla Park community as it was too big.

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<sup>21</sup> A social movement which focuses its activities on access to housing for poor communities. It was particularly active during the 1980s under Apartheid.

<sup>22</sup> Nyanga is one of the oldest formal African townships in the Western Cape dating back to the 1950s where African workers with permits were permitted to live in single sex hostels while working in Cape Town. Their families, many of whom lived in the rural areas north and east of Cape Town, were not permitted to live with them. New Crossroads is a slightly newer section of Nyanga which developed in the 1990s after people living in Old Crossroads (an informal settlement that was demolished in the 1980s) were allowed to re-settle and build their homes in the area.

<sup>23</sup> 'Mayenzeke' means 'Let it happen' in Xhosa, the dominant African language in the Western and Eastern Cape in South Africa.

<sup>24</sup> 'Mandlovu' translated literally means 'elephant'. According to a Xhosa-speaking colleague, this implies that someone of the clan name Mandlovu, a 'strong, capable person', would have been involved in the organisation at some early stage, hence the name.



For Susan the development of partnerships has been critical to the success of her service learning projects (Oldfield 2007a). In the case of Valhalla Park, the Civic needed to survey 1700 households, a time-consuming exercise. The participation of students from her course was thus an

excellent way to supplement members' [of the Civic] activism and my need for an interesting, applied and real context in which to situate a service-learning project (ibid:7).

### **Description of the service learning**

Susan described the service learning component in the following way:

In this case what we are going to do [is] map where the back yards are... We want a list of the back yards, names of families, number of people, where they are, a table where the data is crunched into numbers and then some sort of narrative to go with it. Ideally, because we have this on-going community research project, I can link up with a really good student and Patricia or another activist can say 'you guys do this together' because the exclusive goal of the Community Research Group Project is that they do the research and I support them in the research. I don't *do* the research; I help them with the research. They have a very explicit goal for the survey. Our goal as a class, and in terms of our relationship, is to have the data crunched by the end of the semester (Susan, interview 17.08.04; emphasis added for tone).

Before going to Valhalla Park, students have two weeks of lectures, presented by Susan, on the topic, 'Critical thinking on the city, research and "backyarders"'. Sets of readings are distributed to students which they have to read before going into the field. The readings often directly inform the assignments in the course that students have to finish after each practical. These include both individual and group assignments and included short essays, interviews with residents to obtain a short life history and comparisons between the readings and students' actual experiences in the field. Students are also required to complete five individual reflective journal entries during their course, based on their fieldwork observations (a critical skill for social geographers) and often linked to a theme coming from the course readings.

There are four field-based sessions where the students go out into the community plus another two class-based sessions linked to the fieldwork for supervision and project presentations. Before each practical session Susan meets with students to discuss the day's specific field assignment. Students then travel by UCT student transport to Valhalla Park, situated about ten kilometres from the UCT campus. On their first trip, they are dropped off at the local library where they are met by members of Valhalla Park United Civic Front (VPUCF) who provide them with background information about the community and inform them of the Civic Front's work. At the end of the guided tour of the main parts of Valhalla Park they return to campus. After their orientation session, Susan asks students to write a short reflective journal entry on their first impressions of Valhalla Park.

Before their next site visit students are divided into groups of two or three. Students may self-select the groups in which they do their projects over the next four to five weeks. Each group is given a street map with numbered plots and assigned to a designated area in which they have to conduct surveys. They have to fill in the street names on their map and indicate which houses have backyard shacks. Only house owners with backyard shacks are to be interviewed.

Each group has access to a community activist/facilitator or Civic Guide<sup>25</sup> who explains the purpose of the survey to homeowners and requests them to take part. Because these facilitators are well known within their community, their presence gives the students a lot of credibility. The Guides also act as interpreters, since many of the students could not speak Afrikaans<sup>26</sup> and most of the residents were Afrikaans-speaking. At the end of their six weeks of field-based research, the students write a report of which the quantitative appendix is specifically produced for use by the community, as it contains the survey data collected by the students in Valhalla Park. As part of developing mapping skills, the

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<sup>25</sup> There were many terms used for the Civic members both in the students' journals and by the Civic members themselves. I shall use 'Civic Guide', a term used quite formally by Rose, one of Susan's student advisors who worked with the students in the field. It is the term she introduced to the students in one of the pre-fieldwork class sessions.

<sup>26</sup> Afrikaans is the language spoken by many in the 'Coloured' community, particularly in the Western Cape, as well as by many white South Africans. Under Apartheid it was the language of the State and seen as the 'language of oppression' resulting in many forms of resistance, the SOWETO riots by youth in June 1976 being a particularly important example of this resistance.

students collate the data into a table which can be used by the VPUCF in further engagements with the City of Cape Town over housing issues.

The second part of the project is more qualitative. The students conduct life history interviews with residents of the community based on a theme that they have chosen following their observations and experiences in the community. These range from issues of overcrowding, employment, youth issues, the use of energy, household relationships and survival strategies. These have increasingly been found useful by the VPUCF in developing a history of their community and supporting the quantitative data in their advocacy work.

As students work in groups, each group has to designate a person to take notes in the field, someone to do the survey interview, and if there is a third student, he/she acts as an additional observer. Susan encourages the students to rotate the division of labour in the group so that each of them gains experience in the different aspects of fieldwork data gathering.

In addition to surveying people in Valhalla Park each group also has to identify a specific research topic which guides their observations. This topic eventually informs the group report which is the main outcome of these practicals. Groups focus on different issues in their reports such as the future aspiration of backyarders, the importance of family structure in the fight for survival in Valhalla Park, lack of privacy, gangsterism in the community, the various terms used for backyard shacks and what each term signifies.

Although most groups formulate their research focus after the orientation visit, many groups change their focus as interesting issues often only emerge once they have started surveying the community and gained more contextual knowledge. Susan allows the groups a lot of freedom in coming up with their research topics although she guides them if she feels it is either too broad a topic or does not have enough focus.

The last two practical sessions are held on campus. Each of the groups meets with two student assistants, Rose and Jess, who have served as fieldwork assistants throughout their research and who help in assessing their collected data and structuring their final

report. Following the practicals, each group has to deliver a fifteen-minute presentation to the rest of the class. The VPUCF Guides attend the session and are invited to address questions to students about their findings. Following these presentations, each group has to submit a final report that includes both the quantitative survey data as well as the qualitative data gained from interviews and observations. Susan separates these two products very specifically: while the quantitative data is of crucial importance to the VPUCF, it is the combination of both quantitative and qualitative data that they need to be able to produce as social geographers.

In summary, the EGS students need to learn mapping skills as part of becoming geographers. In this human geography service learning course, the students work in partnership with the VPUCF to collect data on backyard living. The students need the data to develop their maps and the Civic require the data for their own advocacy work with the Cape Town City Council. The students are divided into groups and over a period of four to six weeks, they collect data (quantitative and qualitative) and produce a report for their course which also serves as a product for the VPUCF.

We turn now to Chapter 3 which outlines the development of my conceptual framework.

## Chapter 3: A conceptual framework

Service learning is a complex form of educational practice argued by some to be both a form of pedagogy, and a philosophy and strategy in which the university engages with communities in a learning and service-oriented project. As noted in Chapter 1, much research in the field has focused on benefits and outcomes of service learning or on a particular constituency in the service learning story, e.g. the students, the partnership, the assessment practices or the role of the academic or the degree of institutionalisation of practice. This thesis is about understanding and analysing service learning in a particular way that is a shift away from the lenses highlighted in the first chapter. What I am interested in looking at and trying to understand is the ‘interface’ or ‘boundary zone’ between the university and community. This has been little theorised and analysed and can provide a useful contribution to the field of service learning research. As indicated in Chapter 1, this has led to the particular research question:

What happens when the university – through service learning curriculum and pedagogy – meets the community?

Related questions:

- What is the nature of the interaction between the university and the community in service learning?
- How can we ‘map’ this educational practice?
- In particular, how are the practices of service learning negotiated and experienced, in particular by the students?
- What are the discourses that are evident in this interaction?
- What role do tools of mediation play in this?
- What are the roles, identities and power relations that come into play?

In other words, I want to look at the service learning experience as a form of social practice that links the university and the community in particular ways. Specifically, I wish to develop conceptual tools that can help us explore and theorise this complex interaction. The rest of this chapter sets out to discuss my framework, reflecting the

journey I undertook in developing it. Both the framework and my questions got refined as I moved through the study and developed more certain analytical tools, in particular as I moved from data collection to analysis and discussion (I discuss this further in Chapter 4). Part 1 outlines the initial ideas and theoretical tools that I came into the study with, namely situated learning, and which influenced me particularly in the stage of collecting the data. Following this, Part 2 looks more closely at the work of post-Vygotskian social practice theorists, and activity theory in particular. This includes a discussion on 'boundary work' and the concepts used to develop this frame. This discussion enables me to indicate how I finally settled on my research design and methods of data analysis in Chapter 4.

**Part 1:            Situated learning: beginning the research and identifying key terms**

As indicated above, I have set out to answer a broad question in my thesis: what happens when the university meets the community? In order to answer this question I wanted to look at service learning as a form of educational practice that brings the university – or at least sections of it – into contact with sections of constituencies/communities off campus. But how can one begin to study, analyse and theorise this interaction or this 'boundary zone'? What does one need to identify and study in order to understand what happens at the interface? Clearly what is needed is a way of looking at what happens here, a way of demarcating what is being looked at and what is not. This was no easy task, as the research question I was posing is very broad. What I shall show in this chapter is that my research questions became more focused and refined as the research proceeded.

While the question was broad, what I did know from the beginning and from earlier experiences, as highlighted in Chapter 1, was that I wanted to see how the students and the community members or organisation 'worked'/interacted together during the process of the service learning project or course. My interest eventually focused on the 'social practices and activities' that constituted the service learning experience and how these got enacted, by whom, with what means, with what results and in the context of what set of

power relations. In other words, I was interested in ‘mapping’ students and communities and their interactions in a social context; in this case particularly in a new kind of context where an outside community enters into the picture and is central to the planning and outcome of the practices.

From the above it is clear that the contexts in which learning take place are critical to the nature of the practice and therefore necessary to understand. They both shape practice and are shaped by the practices and activities that take place. It is these contexts that frame the ways that I am trying to look at, understand, analyse and thereby theorise, the relationships, the activities and the practices that are engaged in through service learning. What follows is the development of my conceptual and theoretical tools.

### **Situated learning**

I started with the notion of learning and engagement as ‘social practice’, using the concept of ‘social practice’ very broadly in the Lave and Wenger (1991) sense to emphasise the ‘relational interdependency of agent and world, activity, meaning, cognition, learning and knowing’ (1991:50). From a situated learning perspective, the authors argue that social practice is understood as a lens that puts an emphasis on the

inherently socially negotiated character of meaning and the interested, concerned character of the thought and action of persons-in-activity. This view also claims that learning, thinking, and knowing are relations among people in activity in, with, and arising from the socially and culturally structured world (ibid: 50-51).

In other words, learning and other activities which in other frameworks might be viewed as individual, mental and non-social are viewed as situated, collective and historically specific. It is this ‘doing in a historical and social context’ that structures and gives meaning to what we do. This leads us to looking at theories of learning that reflect such an understanding of social action.

## Communities of practice

In terms of understanding how this engagement with others takes place, Lave and Wenger introduce the notion of ‘communities of practice’<sup>27</sup> to refer to the sustained engagement with others in practices over time. They argue that communities of practice are neither inherently harmful nor beneficial to individuals or enterprises; rather, as a ‘locus of engagement in action, interpersonal relations, shared knowledge, and negotiation of enterprises’, they hold possibilities for real transformation.

Accessing a community of practice must be understood in terms of ‘newcomers’ and ‘oldtimers’ and the process of learning as ‘legitimate peripheral participation’ in community of practice. In this framework, the ‘curriculum is the community of practice itself; the authors argue that teachers, masters, and specific role models may be important but it is because of their community of practice membership as a whole that they can play their respective roles. In other words, roles, identities and relations are played out in terms of being part of a specific group or community of practice. Following from this, academic disciplines, professional discipline-related bodies on the one hand, and community organisations and activities/practices, on the other, could all be viewed as communities of practice with their particular practices and ways of doing things<sup>28</sup>.

Situated learning theorists thus argue that most accounts of learning have ignored its social character. They take an important step forward by proposing that learning is a process of participating in communities of practice. As a consequence, rather than asking what kinds of cognitive processes and conceptual structures are involved in learning, they ask “what kinds of social engagements provide the proper context for

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<sup>27</sup> The term ‘community of practice’ has been extensively used in educational research, particularly that focusing on non-formal learning in the workplace where Lave and Wenger introduced it early in their work. While applied quite differently by some, it is broadly used to describe processes of learning and participation with others in activities over a period of time. This participation is key to identity formation and the development of social practices.

<sup>28</sup> While a key point in situated learning is that people are members of multiple communities of practice – often simultaneously – I am looking specifically at the students in their discipline-based communities and the community in their practices as activists engaging the students. While this could be criticised as over-simplifying a complex concept like a community of practice, given that I did not set out to look at individual students or community members but rather at the group they represented at the time of this research, I believe this decision can be justified.



learning to take place” (Hanks 1991: 14). The individual learner is therefore not gaining a discrete body of abstract knowledge which he/she will then transport and reapply in later contexts; he/she

acquires the skills to perform by actually engaging in the process, under the attenuated conditions of *legitimate peripheral participation* (ibid: 14; emphasis in the original).

From this point of view, the activities of people and the communities of which they are a part, are seen as segments of a mutually constituted whole. There is a constant dialectic and mutual dependence between individual, mind and culture; as a consequence, the learner acts *with* the environment rather than *on* it (Harris 2000). Lave and Wenger thus emphasise learning as a form of ‘identity formation’ with increasing participation within a community of practice. A person’s intentions to learn are engaged and the meaning of the learning is configured through the process of becoming a full participant in a sociocultural practice. This social process includes, ‘indeed subsumes’, the learning of knowledgeable skills. This emphasis differentiates their approach from others; for them learning is part of social practice. They focus on the structure of social practice rather than on that of pedagogy, pedagogic practice or forms of knowledge in learning.

In his later work, Wenger (1998) has elaborated on the concept of community of practice. He argues that a community of practice has three important dimensions which result in the practice being a source of coherence in a community: mutual engagement, joint enterprise and a shared repertoire.

- *Mutual engagement*: Practice does not exist in abstract. It exists because people are engaged in actions ‘whose meanings they negotiate with one another’ (1998: 73). In this sense, Wenger argues that while practice might involve artefacts of all kinds, practice ‘resides in a community of people and the relations of mutual engagement by which they do whatever they can do’ (ibid: 73). He goes further to say that membership in a community of practice is a matter of acting together; a community of practice is therefore not just an aggregate of people defined by some similar characteristics: ‘the term is not a synonym for group, team, or network’ (ibid: 73); rather it is participating in activities that defines engagement.

- *Joint enterprise*: A shared enterprise is a collective process of negotiation defined by the community in the process of pursuing it. It is therefore a negotiated response to the situation in which the community finds itself. In addition, the enterprise creates what Wenger terms ‘relations of mutual accountability’ that then become central to the practice.
- *Shared repertoire*: By jointly pursuing an enterprise over time, a shared repertoire or set of resources to be used in the practice is developed to be used in negotiating meaning. The elements of such a repertoire need not be homogenous – in fact they can be very heterogeneous. They gain coherence because they belong to a community pursuing a joint enterprise. This shared repertoire includes ‘the discourse by which members create meaningful statements about the world, as well as the styles by which they express their forms of membership and their identity as members’ (ibid: 83).

What defines a community of practice then, is not just a matter of time spent as a community. Developing a practice *does* take time. It is

a matter of sustaining enough mutual engagement in pursuing an enterprise together to share some significant learning. From this perspective, *communities of practice can be thought of as shared histories of learning* (ibid: 86; emphasis in the original).

However, it is important to note that some communities are long-lived, others are of short duration. Wenger argues that communities of practice are such because they are ‘intense enough to give rise to indigenous practice and to transform the identities of those involved’ (ibid: 86).

Other theorists have made similar arguments in the importance of the broader context or community and its role in learning. Lemke (1997: 38) has argued that people function in ‘micro-ecologies’, material environments endowed with cultural meanings, ‘acting and being acted on directly or with the mediation of physical-cultural tools and cultural-material systems of words, signs and other symbolic values’. In these activities, ‘things’ contribute to the solutions every bit as much as ‘minds’ do; information and meaning is

coded into configurations of objects, material constraints and possible environmental options, as well as in verbal routines and formulas or ‘mental’ operations’.

I have found only found one study that explicitly looks at service learning through a situated learning lens. Other studies have suggested it might be useful, e.g. Castle and Osman (2003), but they haven’t explored the link fully. Wolfson and Willinsky (1998) begin their article by arguing that many studies of service learning that attempt to explore the learning dimension of the practice

work with traditional measures of learning ... while failing to establish the gains made across the greater range of skills and understanding that might be expected to be associated with service learning (ibid: 22).

Instead what they argue is that the view of learning as ‘situated learning/cognition’ provides a very useful way of ‘grounding the educational claims to be made on behalf of service-learning as a way of learning’ (ibid: 22). They acknowledge that while service learning is not a ‘workplace practice’ where a lot of situated learning theory has been applied, it can also engage students in communities of practice, i.e. students do not simply provide a service but they participate in organised activities in ways which invoke a community of practice apart from classroom learning activities. This approach marks a significant shift in terms of how learning, particularly formal learning in higher education, is conceived, including many of the formulations in the service learning literature as well.

Wolfson and Willinsky are quick to acknowledge that although situated learning places an emphasis on the social contexts in which learning takes place, learning clearly involves both cognitive processes and cultural practices. However, they believe that we should not argue about the degree to which either of these two ‘advances the causes of education’; rather, we should understand a situated learning approach as a different model of learning. They put it like this:

Underlying the cognitive and situated approaches is an orientation to the world that can be said to fall between personal and public spheres, individual and collectivity, competition and cooperation. There is decidedly room for both, and this is an especially important point for situation and service learning advocates, because the situation of learning has been largely a missing factor in the structure

of teaching, even though there has been good opportunity to pay it greater mind without losing sight of the cognitive element (ibid:23-24).

### **Criticisms of situated learning**

While situated learning theory, and communities of practice in particular, have been drawn on to show how learning happens in social contexts, they have also been the subject of criticism. One such criticism is levelled by Hay (1993 in Wolfson and Willinsky 1998). Hay raises two key objections, both of which, while not diminishing the usefulness of the Lave and Wenger (1991) thesis, are relevant here. Firstly, Hay argues that the notion of the legitimate peripheral participation actually diminishes the learners' opportunities for taking charge of or responsibility for the activity that needs to be learned. In addition, rather than providing opportunities for critical analysis, independent thinking or creative risk-taking, the process serves to emphasise the socialisation of the learner within an existing practice.

In order to overcome these potential shortcomings, Hay argues secondly that students need to be provided with the opportunity to create their own communities of practice, to become involved in more than one community, to move from peripheral forms of practice and to initiate new ways to the centre of the practice (in Wolfson & Willinsky 1998:24-25). In this way, Hay's extension of the theory of situated learning in fact brings it closer to service learning models whereby students are involved in 'multiple communities of school and neighbourhood, while initiating their own communities of practice through their service' (ibid: 25).

A number of other criticisms of situated learning have been advanced in the literature on learning, and learning as social practice. Lemke (1997) tries to go beyond Lave and Wenger by drawing on social semiotics to argue that it is not only the context of the situation that is important but also the context of culture when an analysis of meaning is undertaken: 'we interpret a text, or a situation, in part by connecting it to other texts and situations which our community, or our individual history, has made us see as relevant to the meaning of the present one' (Lemke 1997: 50). This use of 'intertextuality', of networked activities, provides Lemke with the tools for the 'creation of an account of

ecosocial systems which transcend immediate contexts. This allows him to discuss learning in and across activities and communities of practice' (Daniels 2001: 74).

In an interesting study, Hodges (1998) has written about the tension around identity and participation within a community of practice frame in the context of her own experiences as an early childhood educator attending a training course. The key point she makes is that at the end of her apprenticeship in the community of practice she was unable to identify with the identity of 'being a teacher', one of the goals of the course. In order to explore these tensions she introduces two concepts that reflect her struggles with the community of practice lens: 'non-participation' and 'dis-identification'. Hodges argues that while Lave and Wenger do talk about power and broader social structures, they have not taken this far enough. She argues that while they have considered that 'legitimate peripheral participation is ... implicated in social structures involving relations of power' (Lave & Wenger 1991: 36 cited in Hodges 1998: 272), her paper takes this argument further by 'analysing how political/historical inequities and ... normative relations affect what I am provisionally calling "non-participation"'. She defines non-participation as

an identificatory moment where a person is accommodating in participation and yet is experiencing an exclusion from any 'normative' or unproblematic identification with practice. Quite crucially ... [it] describes conflict in the space between activity and identification, where there is a moment of multiplicitous identifications, or, *identificatory possibilities* (1998: 272-273; emphasis in the original).

The 'space' referred to above emerges in the midst of participation as a conflict, as a split between

a person's activities and their relations with participation, a rupture between what a person is actually doing, and how a person finds herself located in the 'community'. Non-participation describes how a person might be participating in the contexts of grappling with possible, albeit mutable, identities (ibid: 273).

The 'shift' in terms of participation in a community can be referred to as 'dis-identification' in that a person might be rejecting the identity expected of them within a particular community, yet they are re-constructing an identity within this context of 'conflict and exclusion'. Hodges argues that this is where we might start to acknowledge the social and situated nature of learning and identity formation by understanding that

we are not born with complex identities, but rather we *become* ‘multiplied through ongoing sociality (ibid: 273; emphasis in the original).

This, she argues, helps her to understand how identities are sites of struggle and negotiation where certain contexts afford more value to some identities, or to particular constructions of identities. Hodges concludes by arguing that belonging, as well as the desire for membership in a specific community of practice, ‘further shape, and are shaped by, the quality of participation in the community of practice’ (ibid: 280). And finally, a point that Hodges argues does not come up in the Lave and Wenger frame, is the need to remember the ways in which an individual’s historical-cultural ‘baggage’ is evoked and shifting, displaced and continuous through processes of participation. I find Hodges’ study resonates in interesting ways with the experiences of some of the students in my two cases. Many of them struggled with issues of identity and with ‘being a student’ in the service learning experience. This was particularly so in the MBChB case.

However, the key criticism that I have of this lens for the purposes of this study is that it does not explore in more depth the socio-cultural contexts that mediate learning. This weakens it as a tool to use in exploring different communities of practice when they interact with other communities of practice in a new setting. Additionally, a situated learning lens does not directly and explicitly develop a theory of power and power relations (see Cooper 2005 for further discussion on this). Granted, there is discussion of the fact that a community of practice is made up of various agents and agencies with more or less power in certain situations; also that community of practice cannot be considered in isolation from the broader context in which they are located: ‘their members and their artefacts are not theirs alone. Their histories are not just internal; they are histories of articulation with the rest of the world’ (Wenger 1998:103).

However, for the purposes of answering the questions guiding my study, there are still no ‘analytical tools’ in this approach to facilitate the development of a more comprehensive theory of social practice. More specifically, tools that can take into account the nature of the relationship between structure and agency, i.e. power relations, particularly as it applies to service learning as ‘boundary work/practice’ in higher education.

Finally, a situated learning perspective does not directly develop a theory of curriculum, pedagogy and knowledge. Learning through participation is largely concerned with informal learning and processes and procedures linked to this. Given this gap, it was difficult to find a way ‘into’ the pedagogical and curriculum practices that I observed and heard about in my research through this lens. This is supported by Cooper (2005) who found this frame somewhat lacking when looking at learning and pedagogy, both non-formal and formal, in a trade union context. This is a significant weakness for my own study as well.

The problems with situated learning discussed above began to emerge as I engaged more and more with the data collected. I realised that while the concept of a community of practice was useful as a way into my initial data collection phase, it was not generative enough in the stage of data analysis. I therefore began to look at an additional body of theory.

### **Part 2: From situated learning to activity theory: towards analysis and methodology**

Situated learning theorists, as indicated above, place high value on the relationship between *social and cultural processes* and they view human knowledge and interaction as inseparable from the world. In other words, these theorists look at the world through the lenses of social constructivism and this work contributes to a developing body of research in the human sciences that explores the situated character of human understanding and communication; it takes as its focus, the relationship between learning and the social situations in which it occurs. From a social constructivist perspective, individuals are viewed as actively constructing their understanding of their environment while at the same time, engaging in ‘goal-oriented activities’ (Yamagata-Lynch 2003).

## 2a. Post-Vygotskian approaches and socio-cultural analysis

Vygotsky, a key social constructivist whose work forms the foundation of activity theory, tried to explain learning as a *semiotic process*, or *mediated action* in which individuals or subjects construct meaning while they interact with artefacts as well as with others in their environment. It is this ‘dynamic interaction’ between artefacts, individuals and social others that contributes to the ‘social formation of the individual mind’ (Wertsch 1985) and shapes individual knowledge construction (Yamagata-Lynch 2003:101). Vygotsky therefore argued that this semiotic process is a result of a mediated activity between signs, artefacts or tools and the individual.

Wells (2000 in Lee & Smagorinsky) argues that if one draws on a post-Vygotskian lens, this approach calls for an approach to teaching and learning that is both exploratory and collaborative. Curriculum is then viewed as the ‘negotiated selection of activities that challenge students to go beyond themselves towards goals that have personal significance for them’ (ibid: 61).

While I am not trying to define curriculum and pedagogy in this thesis, Wells’ points are useful for thinking about research as well. Studies need to reflect an approach to *researching* such practice that is also exploratory and if possible, collaborative. Whatever approach is taken, one is faced with the need to define a ‘unit of analysis’ that provides the primary focus and shapes the way in which an analytical lens is developed. In my research journey, I had become interested in ‘joint activity’ as a unit of analysis and realised that this would require a set of tools and resources that made it possible to look at and analyse such activities. But what exactly is a ‘unit of analysis’? If mine is focused on the activities between the students and the community, then what theoretical tools will enable me to look at these more critically?

These issues amongst others necessitated returning to the roots of situated learning and to the work of Vygotsky, or more precisely, the work of a number of post-Vygotskians. Engeström and Miettinen (1999: 11) refer to this body of theory as ‘the current wave of contextual and culturally situated theories of mind and practice’. The strands of this body of theory have been variously delineated. Both Daniels (2001) and Engeström and



Miettinen (1999) argue that the strands, while all influenced in different ways by the work of Lev Vygotsky and others in the field of socio-historical psychology, can be located across three primary lines of enquiry.

The first strand is represented by the theory of situated learning most evident in the work of Lave and Wenger and others where the central concept or unit of analysis is the community of practice. I discussed this in the previous section. The second strand is the sociocultural theory of mediated action which is emphasised in the work of Wertsch (1991) amongst others. This approach focuses on the Vygotskian idea of mediation of behaviour by signs and other cultural symbols and artefacts, 'enhanced and enriched with Bakhtin's notions of social language, speech genre and voice' (Wertsch 1991: 82). The unit of analysis here is mediated action and the focus is on the individual performing actions in a sociocultural setting. Before looking at the third strand, namely activity theory, it is important to understand some of the central ideas in Wertsch's work. Daniels (2001) summarises the main points of Wertsch's theory as follows.

Specific forms of mental functioning reflect and reproduce concrete social, cultural and historical settings, the emphasis being on the use of cultural tools in mediated action. An example of this is revealed in studies of how humans employ speech in the course of particular forms of action. Central to this work is the concept of mediated action predicated on the idea of agency as 'individual(s)-acting-with-mediational-means' (Daniels 2001: 79). Because mediated action typically serves multiple goals, this approach brings out the tension between agent and means and makes claims about the material nature of mediational means, e.g. 'affordances and constraints, power and authority associated with them' (ibid: 79).

In sum therefore, the analysis of mediated action is concerned with how humans employ cultural tools in social and individual processes. Due to its focus on the irreducible tension between agents and tools, it stands in contrast to other approaches which look at individuals or instruments in isolation or approaches that leave out tensions completely. This is one of the major criticisms of work such as Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998). While they acknowledge that participants in communities of practice bring their

own histories with them, their analyses fall short of a look at how power relations work in practice within communities.

Other contemporary approaches to which we shall now turn have gone even further to examine issues such as the conditions that have given rise to cultural tools, and the constraints as well as affordances associated with them. Service learning is one such practice that – due to the fact that there is an expanded notion of what constitutes ‘context’ and ‘community’ – brings issues of tension and contestation to the fore. We turn now to the third strand of post-Vygotskian theory, activity theory.

### **Activity theory**

Activity theory emphasises the psychological impacts of organised activity and the social conditions and systems which are produced in and through such activity. It is evident in the work of Kozulin (1998) and Engeström and Miettinen (1999) in particular, in which the unit of analysis is the *activity system*.

Given that I am interested in activities that take place between and amongst people to achieve particular objectives, activity theory proved most useful as a way into the analysis of my data. This is because it addresses some of the main critiques of the situated learning lens and is particularly applicable given its focus on *joint activity*. Daniels (2001) has argued that one of the main problems in the situated learning frame comes from what he terms an ‘underlying ambiguity’ – namely a tension between a historical Marxist orientation (coming from the work of Vygotsky) and a more symbolic interactionist perspective. This ambiguity is reflected in the ways in which communities of practice seem to enable agency of their members without taking account of the historical and material conditions that shape such activities.

In addition, Engeström and Miettinen (1999) argue that the theory of legitimate peripheral participation seems to depict learning as a one-way movement of novices from the periphery to the centre which is inhabited by masters or ‘oldtimers’. What is missing they argue, is movement outward and in unexpected directions: a ‘questioning of authority, criticism, innovation, initiation of change. Instability and inner contradictions

of practice are all but missing' (1999: 12). They argue that activity theory offers possible ways to address this problem.

### ***Principles of activity theory***

While located within the body of post-Vygotskian approaches to understanding cognition, activity theory is less of a theory in itself but rather an 'analytic lens' or framework through which to look at a set of phenomena that constitutes a unit of analysis for research. However, while activity theory *is* a broad, evolving framework and often interpreted differently by its proponents, Russell (2002) argues that there are at least seven basic principles shared by its adherents, all of which can be traced back to the thinking and work of Vygotsky (1978):

- Human behaviour is social in origin and human activity is collective.
- Human consciousness or 'mind' grows out of people's joint activity with shared tools.
- Activity theory emphasises 'tool-mediated action' in context – humans not only act on their environment with their tools, they also think and learn with tools.
- Activity theory is interested in development and change which is understood broadly to include historical change, individual development, and moment-to-moment change.
- Activity theory grounds analysis in everyday life events, the ways people interact with each other using tools over time.
- Activity theory assumes that 'individuals are active agents in their own development but do not act in settings entirely of their own choosing' (Cole 1996:104 in Russell 2002: 67).
- Activity theory 'rejects cause and effect, stimulus response, explanatory science in favour of a science that emphasises the emergent nature of mind in activity and that acknowledges a central role for interpretation in its explanatory framework'. Accordingly, it 'draws upon methodologies from the humanities as well as from the social and biological sciences' (ibid: 67).

### ***Defining an 'activity system'***

There has been a lot of debate in activity literature on the appropriate unit of analysis or 'the minimal unit that preserves the properties of the whole' (Davydov and Radzikhovskii 1985) and this has shaped the way in which the activity theory field has developed.

Engeström and Miettinen (1999) well as other activity theorists, see 'joint activity or practice' as the unit of analysis for activity theory, not individual action. In this vein, they argue that the work of pragmatist Dewey (1916; 1922) and symbolic interactionist Mead (1938) on action, practice, symbols and even collective action has common features with activity theory. This is because these theorists are also interested in 'transcending the dualisms' between thought and activity, theory and practice, facts and values, issues that are central to much of activity theory. Engeström and Miettinen also talk about the link to Mead's theory of 'significant symbols' within the context of division of labour in society. Mead argues that it is 'co-operative activity based on division of labour' that makes 'reciprocal role taking' necessary (Engeström & Miettinen 1999: 6). Mead (1938) talks of the 'non-individual social act', the 'whole act' or the 'whole social act' thus moving, Engeström and Miettinen argue, towards the concept of collective activity. According to Mead, an act of an individual is 'abstracted' from the whole social act that is the prime object of study (Mead in Engeström & Miettinen 1999:7).

In Russell (2002) we hear activity theory described as 'less of a tight theory' than a 'philosophical framework for studying different forms of human praxis as developmental processes, both individual and social levels interlinked at the same time' (2002: 66). Russell argues that learning in this framework therefore is not the internalisation of discrete information or even skills by individuals; rather it is 'expanding involvement over time' – social as well as intellectual – with other people and the tools available in their culture. The question of individual learning thus becomes the question of how

that which is inside a person might change over time as a consequence of repeated social interactions with other people and their tools, including the very powerful tools of words, images and gestures (Hutchins 1995: 290 in Russell 2002: 65).

For Russell, when looking at student learning, it is not a collection of individuals and stimuli/artefacts; rather it is a group of individuals who share a common object and motive over time and the wide range of tools they share to act on that object and to realise the motive. In broad terms, an activity system builds on Vygotsky's notion that learning is not just a stimulus-response activity but that it involves social relations as well as tools to serve as mediators of learning. All of these tools and relations are located historically and we need to develop a framework that can take account of this complexity and which can provide a way into a data set that can be analysed for my study.

For Engeström and Miettinen, activity theory provides a very useful starting point in defining a unit of analysis for exploring and understanding what are often very complex interactions and relationships. It does this via the concept of an 'object-oriented, collective, and culturally mediated human activity, or activity system' (1999:9). Such a system is a 'flexible unit of analysis' or theoretical lens that enables us to look in different directions and with different levels of 'magnification' to try and answer the questions that puzzle us. The internal tensions and contradictions<sup>29</sup> of such a system are therefore 'the motive force of change and development' (ibid: 9). According to Russell (2002) however, the world is not neatly divided up into activity systems waiting to be analysed. Rather, it is up to the researcher/designer to define what constitutes an activity system based on the purposes of the research study. He provides examples of activity systems, e.g. a religious organisation, an advocacy group, a school, a discipline, a profession or a company.

Another researcher, Yamagata-Lynch (2003), has drawn on activity theory in interesting ways in researching teachers' practice. She argues that it was a useful lens for her study as it enabled her to represent and illuminate insights from data on multiple individuals collaboratively engaging in learning activities in their natural setting. In her study Yamagata-Lynch argues that there were a number of activity systems present:

- teachers before the training course
- teachers during the training

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<sup>29</sup> The terms 'contradiction' and 'tension' are often used interchangeably in the literature; however I prefer to use the term contradiction as it is the term used by the authors.

- teachers immediately after
- teachers one month after

However they were linked in that the outcome of one system, e.g. new learning, then becomes a tool in the next one. In other words, we need to understand that an activity system is made up of a number of activities or ‘mini-systems’ that together comprise the overall activity system. What interested me particularly about the study was the concept of *nested activities*. This term is used to refer to the fact that an activity system consists of an object that often spans a number of activities and where the outcome of one activity is often the tool in the next:

From an activity theory perspective, an examination of any phenomenon (e.g. learning in the classroom) must consider the dynamics among all these components. In addition to the interactions of an activity system of a particular time and space, it is important to note that an activity system is made up of *nested activities* and actions all of which could be conceived of as separate activity systems or other instances of the same system depending on one’s perspective ... A focus of activity theory is on how participants transform objects, and how the various system components mediate this transformation ... This perspective expands the unit of analysis from the mind of the individual (as in traditional cognitive research) ... to the entire activity system (Barab, Yamagata-Lynch et al 2002: 79-80; emphasis added).

I used this approach in presenting the data in both the cases and found the ‘nested activities’ a generative concept: not only did it enable me to unpack what was happening, but it also provided a richer account of the tensions and contradictions that emerged in my own data.

Finally, while an activity system might seem similar to Lave and Wenger’s notion of a ‘community of practice’, according to Engeström and Miettinen (1999) there is an important difference. A community of practice is *sociospatially* a more encompassing and wider term than an activity system; one community of practice might thus comprise a number of activity systems within it. In terms of service learning, both the students and the community are members of a number of communities of practice including the one that links them to each other through the service learning. Because they are involved in

activities together, they then form an activity system to achieve this. This provides our unit of analysis.

### ***Three generations of activity theory***

Engeström (1999 in Daniels 2001: 85) argues for ‘three generations’ of activity theory which have developed in the six decades since Vygotsky’s death. The first generation drew heavily on Vygotsky’s concept of mediation and represented the mediated act that relates actors and their intentions to particular outcomes achieved using certain tools. The second generation builds on the first and includes elements of the ‘social’ not visible in the first generation as well as how these different elements intersect and are visible in the tensions and contradictions in such systems. The third generation activity theory looks at the interactions *between* activity systems. Given my argument that I see the students and the community in both cases form one activity system from their respective communities of practice, the third generation does not apply as much to my study. Rather, as indicated towards the end of the chapter, I prefer to consider this practice a form of ‘boundary work’ or in Wenger’s (1998) language, a form of ‘boundary encounter’ or ‘boundary project’.

### *First generation activity theory*

Russell (2002) argues that there are three essential elements in any activity system: subject/s, object/s and tools. These are reflected in first generation activity theory in the following way.





might well be in tension or conflict with the motives of the community group, even if they both have the same dual but inter-related objects (service and learning) in mind.

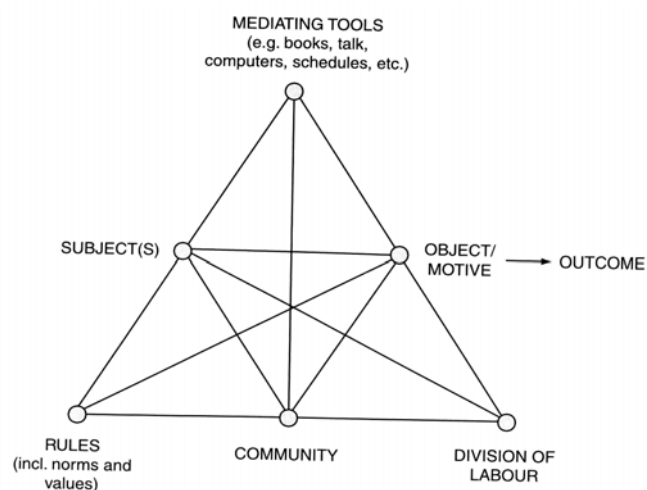
*Tools* in an activity system are understood as things that mediate subjects' action upon objects, i.e. they mediate or facilitate subjects doing things. Tools can be both material and/or conceptual and because tools or cultural artefacts are used to act on objects, human behaviour is contingent on a whole range of variables in any one activity system. In addition it is important to note that there might be many different tools or artefacts used and valued by different people to achieve the same outcome, and these might differ culturally and historically. In addition, the tools that people in some activity share and the ways they use them, change over time, 'as they borrow new ways of working together from other activity systems or invent entirely new ways, potentially transforming the activity' (ibid: 70). In service learning such tools might include texts, student questionnaires and other artefacts needed in order to learn in the context of a particular course or discipline.

#### *Second generation activity theory*

The role and study of artefacts or tools of mediation in the work of Vygotsky is paramount. However Engeström (in Daniels 2001) argues that the study of artefacts must be viewed in terms of its relationship with other components of an activity system as activity systems are dialectical in nature and inherently contradictory. In order to extend the development of activity theory, Engeström has therefore expanded the original triangle representing an activity system in order to examine systems of activity at the macro level. In other words, in first generation activity theory, the diagram represents the micro level of artefact mediation and does not locate this within broader contexts. The second generation model is an attempt to do just this. As Daniels (2001) argues, this was in order to enable an examination of

systems of activity at the macro level of the collective and community in preference to a micro level concentration on the individual actor or agent operating with tools. This expansion of the Vygotskian triangle aims to represent the social/collective elements in an activity system, through the addition of the elements of community, rules and division of labour whilst emphasising the importance of analysing their interaction with each other (ibid: 89).

The importance of this second generation activity theory lens therefore was that it foregrounded interrelations between the individual subject and his/her community, or grouping of which he/she was a member. It can be represented as follows in the diagram below (taken from Russell 2002).



Russell (2002) describes these new dimensions in a second generation activity system in the following way. The *community* is the broader or larger group interacting in the activity and of which the subject/s is a part. This is an important component of the system as it acts to condition or shape all the other elements of the system. Even though people engaged in some activity may be separated by differences of many kinds – including deep historical or conflictual differences – they do form a community if they act together on a common object with a common motive over time. In a service learning course, students form a community themselves, but together with the geographic or social community they engage with in the activity, they form the community in the activity system.

The *division of labour* refers to the fact that in any activity there are always power relations and different roles are evident. Where there are new roles, or new affordances or constraints arising from different configurations of the other aspects of the activity system, this can cause tension in the system. For example, when new kinds of tools are introduced the division of labour could change, especially if we understand that tools are embedded in history and practice. This tension will be evident in both the service learning cases and is discussed in Chapters 5, 6 and 7.

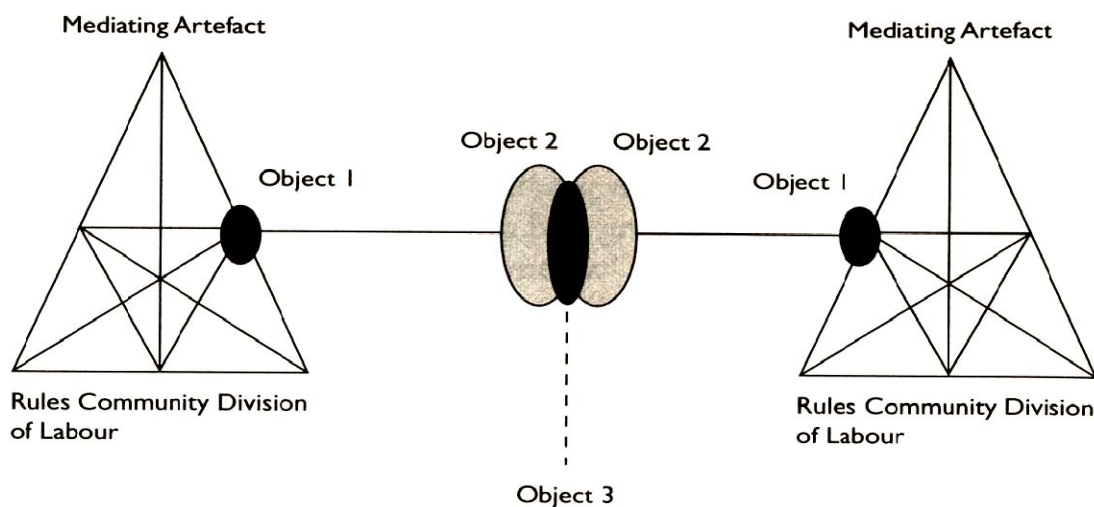
*The rules* operating in any activity are broadly understood as not only formal and explicit rules governing behaviour but, perhaps more importantly, also those that are ‘unwritten and tacit’, often referred to as norms, routines, habits, values and conventions (Russell 2002; Engeström 1999). These act to shape the interactions of subject and tools with the object. In my study, I am using rules in a way akin to the notion of ‘discourse’ (Gee 1990) which I define in the next chapter. However, in understanding rules in relation to my study, a real tension emerged for me that I have not attempted to resolve in this study. I discuss this when introducing the notion of discourse as part of my emergent methodology and analytical framework in the following chapter.

### *Third generation activity theory*

One of the more recent formulations within activity theory is what is called the ‘third generation’. Third generation activity theory developed by Engeström is aimed at providing tools and concepts that can enable us to understand and explore multiple viewpoints, value systems and ‘networks of interacting activity systems’ (in Daniels 2001:91) where contradictions highlighted by contested activity system objects emerge. Daniels (2001) argues that this is an important addition to the activity theory framework. As he puts it,

the idea of networks of activity systems within which contradictions and struggles take place in the definition of the motives and object of an activity system calls for an analysis of power and control within developing activity systems (ibid: 91).

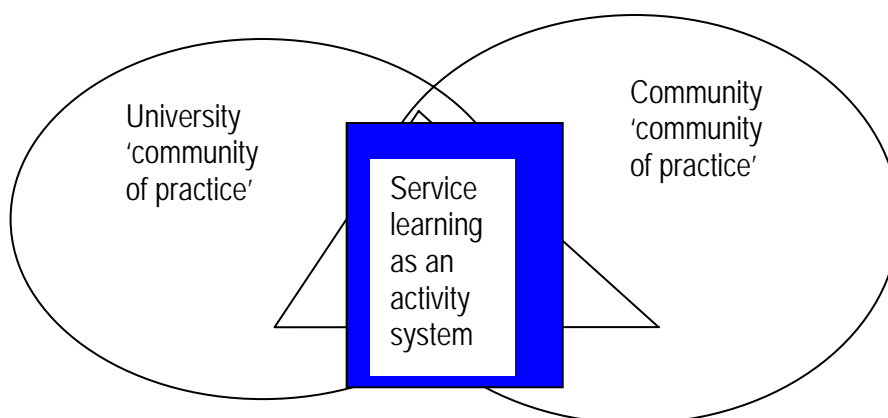
This is represented on the next page where two activity systems are shown exhibiting signs of contradiction and tension. The ‘object’ of each system is seen as a potential sight for contestation and struggle. ‘Object 3’ which emerges from the contestation between ‘Object 1’ and ‘Object 2’ in two different activity systems that come together in joint activity, then becomes a site of joint struggle and contestation. It is therefore important to extend beyond the boundaries of individual activity systems to understand development and change, and to work towards the transformation of networks of activity. Third generation activity theory can be represented like this (diagram taken from Daniels 2001:92):



I have been influenced by third generation activity theory in my own thinking about service learning as boundary work. I have found it useful to think about contestations between and not only *within* activity systems. My formulation of service learning as ‘boundary work’ is similar to this; however in my case, I am arguing that the tensions and contradictions arise because two communities of practice are forming an ‘expanded community’ and are working together on a ‘dual but inter-related object’. Like in third generation activity theory, they engage in the activities with very different rules, division of labour and even artefacts. In a service learning course, engagement happens between a group of students from the university on a specific course, and a community organisation or grouping with a very different history, set of resources and issues, a very different knowledge base and very different roles in the division of their labour.

I have argued rather that I see two communities of practice interacting via one activity system and engaged in joint activities. This is because the students and communities represent bigger constituencies than activity systems, i.e. communities of practice are geospatially larger than activity systems. An activity system is a representation of them when they come together. In other words, both students and community members are linked to bigger practices of ‘being a student’, ‘being a community activist’, ‘being a domestic worker and member of SADSAWU’. They are in an activity system only in relation to engaging with an outside community of practice. It is only in the engagement, at the intersection with each other, that these communities of practice become one

activity system and through the activities they do together the elements of the system get constituted. The activity system does not exist outside of the service learning activities; these activities act therefore to *constitute the* system. My formulation of third generation activity theory, or service learning as ‘boundary work’, can therefore be represented as follows:

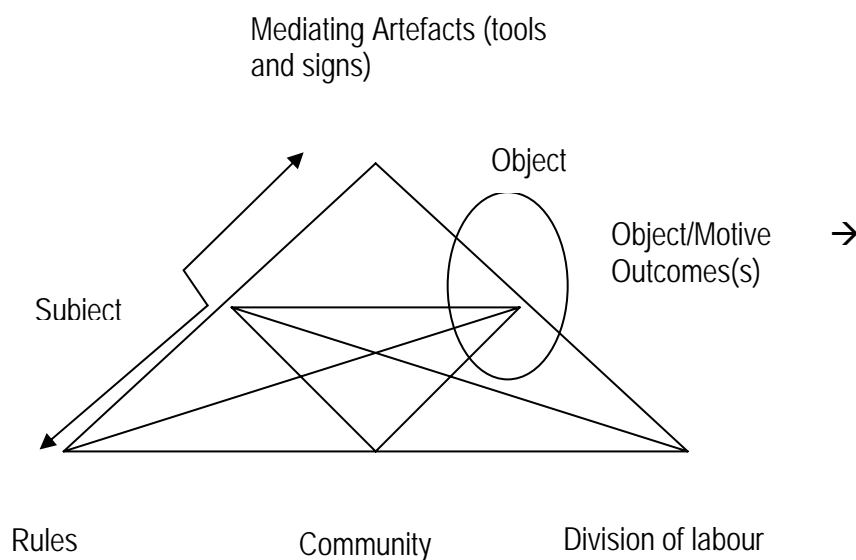


Unlike third generation activity theory which focuses on the contestations around the object, I have identified a range of contradictions that emerge and as such I needed a frame that enabled me to capture these. These include the relationship between discourses (Gee 1990), contestations over tools, as well as challenges to roles and identity. This framework will be developed in Chapter 4.

A last but very important point needs to be added before proceeding. I am aware that we are all members of multiple communities of practice and therefore my way of representing both communities and students as I have done above is simplistic and problematic. It does not capture the complex ways in which we move between and across the different worlds represented in the communities of practice. However the communities of practice that each of these groups belongs to could be endless and is beyond the scope of this study. I have therefore tried to indicate that for the purposes of this research, I am focusing specifically on the community of practice that brings them into contact with each other. In the case of the students this is either a fourth year medical student or a third year geography student at UCT; for the communities this is either a member of the VPUCF or a member of SADSAWU.

***Conflict and contradictions in the system***

The final dimension of Engeström’s activity theory lens that needs discussion here is the notion of ‘contradiction’. Engeström argues that not only do we need to include the structure of the social world in our analysis but we also need to take into account that social practice is inherently contradictory and conflictual. ‘Instability, contradictions and tensions’ are the motive force behind change and development (Engeström 1999:9 in Daniels 2001: 91). Thus within one activity system there are inherent contradictions, e.g. between community and object, between artefact and division of labour or between artefacts and rules. It is the resolution of such tensions that leads to change and therefore development. Such tensions can be represented as a broken arrow as follows:



In this case, the broken arrow represents tension and contradiction between tools, e.g. a form of educational materials, and rules, e.g. new ways of teaching that might be developed in a service learning course. Can teachers and students adapt to this and to the new norms and values implied by this new form of pedagogy? What happens to the division of labour when there are struggles over tools of mediation? However, all contradictions need to be understood in relation to the activity system as a whole and not in isolation from each other. Roth et al (2004) argue that Engeström (1987) identifies

four types of internal contradictions, all of them relating differently to the components of an activity system.

‘Primary’ contradictions are those within each of the system constituents, ‘secondary’ are those that are found between the constituents, ‘tertiary’ contradictions ‘juxtapose the object of the dominant form of activity with the object of a culturally more advanced activity’ (Roth et al 2004: 5) and ‘quaternary’ are those contradictions existing ‘between each entity of the dominant activity and the entity producing neighbouring activity’ (ibid: 6). In this study I have not made a distinction as Roth has done but would argue that were I to do so, the main contradictions evident are secondary. I say this given that I am arguing the students and communities come together and form *one* (boundary) *activity system* for the duration of the service learning. The contradictions therefore arise between the constituents of this, albeit temporary, activity system. However this is something that I would like to explore further.

### **2b: ‘Boundary work’: encounters between social worlds**

To take the idea of the interactions between communities of practice via activity systems further, we look at what I have termed ‘boundary work’ in higher education. Developing this lens meant drawing from a range of resources across fields such as sociology and workplace learning. Building on earlier work of Engeström (1987) and symbolic-interactionist studies of work such as those of Star and Griesemer (1989), Fujimura (1992) and Henderson (1991) have studied not only what happens within activity systems but ‘what happens in encounters between different *social worlds* – a unit of analysis roughly equivalent to an activity system’ (Engeström & Miettinen 1999:7; emphasis in the original). Through this work Engeström and Miettinen (1999) have developed concepts such as boundary zone, boundary object, translation and boundary crossing to analyse

the unfolding of object-oriented co-operative activity of several actors, focusing on tools and means of construction of boundary objects in concrete work processes. This work represents obvious challenges and opportunities for activity theory. It is no longer sufficient to focus on singular, relatively isolated activity systems. We need to develop tools for analyzing and transforming networks of culturally heterogeneous activities through dialogue and debate (ibid: 7).

This work, Engeström and Miettinen argue, poses challenges to and opportunities for activity theory: no longer is it sufficient to focus on singular, relatively isolated activity systems; ‘activity theory needs to develop tools for analysing and transforming networks of culturally heterogeneous activities through dialogue and debate’ (1999:7). It is this *‘unit of analysis’* namely the *‘transaction’ or ‘engagement’ zone* between the university and the community where my interest and thesis is located.

We turn now to the final piece of my emergent conceptual framework, namely that of service learning as ‘boundary work’. Wenger (1998) is a social practice theorist who has developed a vocabulary for beginning to talk about boundary work. Given the kind of practice that service learning is, we need to understand the interface between two or more communities of practice – this is Wenger’s notion of the ‘nexus of multi-membership’. He identifies three concepts/tools that can assist in this: brokering, boundary objects and boundary encounters drawing on the work of Bowker and Star (1999) and their notion of ‘theories of classification’. In trying to understand how ideas, things and artefacts are categorized/relate to each other, Bowker and Star argue that we need to look for ‘indicators’ of connection:

One cannot directly see relations such as membership, learning, ignoring or categorising. They are the names we give to patterns and indicators. If someone is comfortable with the things and language used by a group of others, we say that he or she is a member of that group. In this sense, categories – our own and those of others – come from action and in turn from relationships (ibid: 285).

In developing ideas about ‘boundary work’ we need thus to move from people and relationships in one particular community of practice to the idea of the interaction that results from two or more communities of practice intersecting in one activity system. In the next section I shall outline some of the key concepts that are useful related to my particular study. They are further addressed in my cross-case analysis in Chapter 7.



### **‘Boundary zone’ or ‘third space’: opportunities for engagement?**

The concepts of ‘boundary zone’ and ‘third space’ both reflect the interface or zone between two communities of practice where joint activities occur in an activity system. While such spaces are generally places of challenge, contestation and playing out of power relations, they can also be potential sites for new learning opportunities and new knowledge. Because such zones represent a place free from pre-arranged [or familiar] routines or rigid patterns and are the places where each activity system or community of practice reflects its own structure, attitudes, beliefs, norms and roles, elements from both are always present in these zones (Tuomi-Gröhn & Engeström 2003). Because of this, such zones can potentially allow for challenge and new insights. Looking not at classroom but at workplaces Tuomi-Gröhn and Engeström discuss it as follows:

Because it is a hybrid, poly-contextual, multi-voiced and multi-scripted context, the boundary zone is considered as a place where it is possible to extend the object of each activity system and to create a shared object between them. In that way, the activity itself is reorganised, resulting in new opportunities for learning (ibid: 5).

Gutierrez and Stone (2000) use the notion of the *third space* in a similar way to describe the learning and development space in classrooms where ideas and needs from different cultures meet, collide and form new meanings:

In particular, we use the theoretical category of the third space to identify and describe the competing discourses and epistemologies of the different social actors in the social space of ... learning. The third space is a discursive space in which alternative and competing discourses and positionings transform conflict and difference into zones of collaboration and learning. In this way the third space provides the mediational context and tools necessary for future development... Accordingly, in these contexts, we can observe and document the collective negotiation of meaning (in Lee & Smagorinsky 2000: 157).

Gutierrez and Stone thus argue that when there is tension resulting from the intersection of discourses and practices, we need to allow for spaces where some element of negotiation can take place, where there can be the *collective negotiation of meaning*.

### **Tools of mediation, struggle and ‘boundary objects’**

An artefact is an aspect of the material world that has been modified over the history of its incorporation into goal-directed human action. By virtue of the changes wrought in the process of their creation and use, artefacts are simultaneously ideal (conceptual) and material. They are ideal in that their material form has been shaped by their participation in the interactions of which they were previously a part and which they mediate in the present (Cole in Bowker & Star 1999:289).

Cole (1996) argues that we need to understand both the history and uses of artefacts or tools in any activity in order to understand their role in mediation. Wenger (1998), in looking at tools and their role in boundary work, argues similarly: artefacts, documents, terms, concepts and other tools are ‘forms of reification’ around which communities of practice organise their interconnections. They therefore have a history and are bound up in practices and ways of participation often overt and implicit. In order to understand their role in boundary work, we need to understand them as potential ‘boundary objects’ (Bowker and Star 1999).

According to Bowker and Star, boundary objects are tools of mediation that serve to co-ordinate the perspectives of various constituencies for some purpose, e.g. joint activity. They thus potentially enable people to connect specific functions/roles/tasks across a wide range of communities of practice and constituencies. However, not all tools are boundary objects. To the extent that they belong to multiple practices, they are the nexus of perspectives (junction) and therefore carry the potential of becoming boundary objects *only if through them, various perspectives can be co-ordinated*.

Boundary objects are thus both plastic enough to adapt to local needs and the constraints of the several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites. They are weakly structured in common use, and become strongly structured in individual-site use. These objects may be abstract or concrete... Such objects have different meanings in different social worlds but their structure is common enough to more than one world to make them recognisable, a means of translation (ibid: 297).

In an earlier study, Star and Griesemer (1989) first observed this phenomenon in a museum. In this work, the specimens of dead birds had very different meanings to

amateur bird watchers and professional biologists. However the ‘the same’ bird was used by each group. In other words, it is at the meeting of different perspectives (or a nexus of perspectives), that such objects obtain their meanings. On their own and outside of a specific context, tools are not inherently meaningful or powerful (e.g. a workshop, a questionnaire), but when put to use in a specific context, they take on very strong, often contestable, meanings. In other words, designing tools of mediation for boundary work, and crossing in particular, is therefore the designing of *potential* boundary objects. Consequently, such designing needs to be geared for participation by different social actors, not just for use. There is thus an important relationship between the practices of design and the practices of use.

Lastly, it is important to note that when a boundary object serves multiple constituencies, e.g. a workshop (Chapter 5) or a research questionnaire (Chapter 6), participants in the activity on both sides of the boundary zone have only partial control of the interpretation of the object. Jurisdiction/control over aspects of the object is distributed among constituencies involved and using the artefact as boundary object requires processes of co-ordination and translation. Boundary objects thus represent a ‘nexus of perspectives’ and it is at the meeting of those perspectives that they obtain their meaning (Wenger 1998).

### **Boundary work and the role of ‘boundary workers/brokers’**

The final part of this framework is an understanding of the role of ‘brokers’ (Wenger 1998) in boundary work. Wenger introduces the concept of ‘broker’ to explore the role of the ‘boundary translators’ or *‘boundary workers’*, as I prefer to call them. Boundary workers play an important role in boundary work and in service learning. Wenger argues that brokers can make new connections across communities of practice, enable co-ordination and, if they are experienced, open new possibilities for meaning and therefore learning.

In effect, what brokering offers is what Wenger terms ‘participative connection’. This is because what boundary workers draw on in order to connect practices is their experience of ‘multi-membership’ and the possibilities for negotiation inherent in participation.

Wenger argues that the role of the broker is a common feature of the relationship of a community of practice with the outside world, i.e. with other communities of practice. It is a complex role however as it is about the processes of translation, co-ordination and alignment between perspectives. This requires enough legitimation (on both sides of the boundary) to influence the development of a practice, to mobilise attention and to address conflicting interests – in other words, to *assist with learning by introducing elements of one community of practice into another* (Wenger 1998).

Because of this, many brokers prefer to stay at the periphery of a practice rather than move to the core of a new one and this impacts on how they do their work, and what Wenger terms the ‘ambivalent relations of multi-membership’ (ibid: 109). There is also ambivalence about their role: boundary workers often feel they are not valued because their specialism is being on the boundary or periphery of a practice whereas power usually lies at the core.

Wenger argues that boundary workers need to avoid two simultaneous tendencies: being pulled into become full members of a new practice or activity, and being rejected as an intruder. This in turn requires the ability to carefully manage the ‘co-existence of membership and non-membership’ (ibid: 110), yielding enough distance to bring a different perspective but also enough legitimacy to be listened to. ‘Uprootedness’ is therefore a feature of brokering. Because communities of practice can focus on their own enterprise, boundaries lack the kind of negotiated understanding found at the core of practices about what constitutes competence. Brokers can often feel individually inadequate in their roles and lacking in credibility and power.

### **Summary**

This chapter has set out to show the development of the conceptual frame that I have come to see as useful in this study of service learning. As indicated at the beginning of this research, I have found much of the service learning literature lacking in terms of a language that can capture the complexities of the practices involved in service learning. Thus while I set out with some quite strong ideas and possible lenses from my own

involvement in service learning, the final framework only emerged once I had read through my data and revisited my own notes. It is this that I see as a contribution to the already existing service learning field.

To summarise, I am arguing that service learning involves two communities of practice intersecting in the 'boundary zone' which then constitutes an activity system comprising an expanded notion of community (university *and* community) and a dual but inter-related object (service *and* learning). The (expanded) community in each activity system of the two case studies undertake a series of activities in the course of the service learning module which I have referred to as 'nested activities' in order to achieve the (dual but inter-related) object. This is akin to third generation activity theory but I am arguing for a slightly different formulation where the contestation is not about creating a new or third object. Rather, contestation happens *because* there is an already established dual but inter-related object which in turn is a reflection of the expanded community. This formulation, together with service learning as boundary work, will be further explored via the two cases in Chapter 7.

We turn now to Chapter 4, the research methodology chapter.



## **Chapter 4: Research methodology**

If we see schools, universities, civil service departments and so on as places which allow particular ways of thinking and recognize possibilities for certain actions and not others, it follows that *research* needs to be played into these sites *as activity systems with histories and goals ...* to enrich the interpretations and responses of practitioners (Edwards 2001: 9; emphasis added).

This chapter will outline my research methodology, my research design and the approach taken in this study. As such it follows on from the development and discussion of the conceptual framework and tools in the previous chapter. The chapter will be structured as follows. Part 1 will focus on my research design and will include discussion on the approach I took as a researcher. This will be located against broader research paradigms. Part 1 will also include discussion on the process of doing the research, the selection of the cases and the methods used to collect the data. Part 2 develops the lenses I drew on to analyse the data and interpret it as it emerged as well as outline the conventions used in presenting the data and analysis. Finally, Part 3 will highlight the limitations of the study, and discuss the issue of doing ethical qualitative research.

### **Part 1: Research design**

This section outlines the design of my research. This will include a discussion on my choice of methodology, how I selected my sites as well as the process of collecting my data. My research design and thus ultimately my analysis were iteratively informed by the theoretical and conceptual tools developed both in the course of the thesis, as well as through my own teaching and research work. However, such a process is never neutral and I wish to comment briefly on myself as a researcher before proceeding with the project.

#### **Being a responsible and engaged educational researcher**

I understand my broad orientation and personal interest along the lines identified by Edwards (2001) in a paper looking at responsible research and ways of being a responsive educational researcher. In her work Edwards draws on a post-Vygotskian framework and argues that this is a particularly useful frame in educational research at the

current time. She argues that it is being increasingly recognised that learning happens in more places than ever before, i.e. other than just in formal educational institutions, and in this way the boundaries of formal educational settings are being eroded. As educational researchers we need therefore to respond to this new context:

The cultural spaces within which educational research has been located are being disrupted [and] unless educational research can encompass and inform more informal and dispersed educational opportunities it may find itself becoming an anachronism (2001: 4).

In addition, because educational research is a multidisciplinary field, educational researchers are often more sensitive than discipline-based researchers to key concepts and ways of enquiring across a range of contributing disciplines (Edwards 2001). As many of us work on the margins of our original disciplines (in my case, sociology) and as we engage with educational issues, Edwards argues that this location and engagement can serve to

sharpen the conceptual development of these disciplines ... and we are well-placed to bring our educational knowledge to bear in alliances with other social scientists in research beyond traditional educational sites (ibid: 5).

Edwards argues strongly for educational research to be viewed as ‘engaged research’ which for her means a double challenge for researchers: it should be both relevant as well as robust – relevant to long-term societal well-being and thus not always immediately utilitarian, and robust in sustaining its own integrity and trustworthiness and therefore open to scrutiny. The primary purpose of educational research, she believes, is to provide insights into innovations and actions in policy and pedagogy, as such insights can serve to enrich understandings of accepted practices and even to challenge them. Thus she argues that ‘responsible interpretative research’ is not necessarily problem-solving research although it can act to shed light on the problem ‘teasing out the complexities and pointing towards how it might be tackled by practitioners in policy and pedagogy’ (ibid: 6). For Edwards therefore, research such as this needs to be understood as ‘research in context’.



Vygotskian/sociocultural approaches to learning and the contexts in which it occurs support the claim that research and its contexts should not be separated and is thus a useful lens to draw on. Educational research from this point of view is therefore not only aimed at solving problems of practice and communicating these findings, nor is it only about field-testing ideas and working out their likely efficacy across a range of settings. Rather as noted above

it follows that research needs to be played into these sites as activity systems with histories and goals (Cole & Engeström 1993; Engeström 1999) to enrich the interpretations and responses of practitioners (ibid: 9).

Something that I have become much more explicitly conscious of as a researcher and educator is the fact that a person's experience is a mosaic made up of a wide range of incidents over a period of time (MacLure 1993). As such, it could be argued that one's identity and allegiances are described quite differently when one talks to different people in different contexts 'with (different) conversational axes to grind' (ibid: 382). As a result of this, I became aware very early on in the research process of the multiple roles and the power relationships implicit in my research: of researcher and educator when interviewing students, of being at 'the university' when engaging with community members and of my peer relationships when engaging with fellow academics. I also became aware of the 'construction' role played by researchers, even in qualitative research.

The way 'truth' is constructed in research is supported by van Manen (1990). He argues that when conducting research that explores experiential accounts or lived experience descriptions, these accounts are never identical to lived experience itself. All recollections of experiences or reflections on those experiences are already experiences transformed. In dealing with such accounts, it is important therefore to realise that

experiential accounts or lived-experience descriptions ... are never identical to lived experience itself. All recollections of experiences, reflections on experiences, descriptions of experiences ... are already transformations of those experiences ... We [thus] need to find access to life's living dimensions while realising that the meanings we bring to the surface from the depths of life's oceans have already lost the natural quiver of their undisturbed existence (ibid: 54).

What I aim to elucidate in this thesis therefore are my ‘surfaced meanings’ and understandings of service learning as social practice and boundary work. I shall discuss the methodology in the following sections.

### **Qualitative, interpretive research**

By the very nature of the questions and issues that have guided my thinking and which I seek to address through this study, I have been drawn to undertaking a qualitative study. Such an ‘interpretive’ study is designed to

investigate human experience and to do so in ways that both reveal its complexity and reflect its historical and situational contexts (Maclean 1987: 132).

Following this, my goal is to take the wisdom and insight of people and give it expression and grounding in order to reveal and better understand the complexity and dynamics of human behaviour. Such understanding emerges through a process of interpretation, the goal of which is to elucidate meanings embedded in human behaviour. Qualitative research is therefore concerned with how people make sense of their experiences (e.g. of students engaging with communities) within the ongoing framework of their lives. Furthermore individual perspectives cannot be interpreted without an understanding of the context in which they are developed. This thus requires a qualitative researcher to observe and document the characteristics of the broader socio-cultural milieu, something I argued for in the previous chapter.

Following Edwards, Usher (1996) and Grix (2001), I locate my approach to the research within an interpretive paradigm, a branch of post-positivist social sciences research. Such approaches incorporate a number of different data collection methods. Interpretivists argue that while social science research can use the same methods as the natural sciences, it needs to move away from these more positivist tendencies by adopting a more ‘interpretive understanding’. Interpretivists are therefore concerned with ‘subjectivity’, with ‘understandings’, with ‘agency’ and the way people construct their social world (Grix 2001). In this view, there exist the possibilities of contradictions and internal inconsistencies arising as part of the explanations produced: in other words, findings are

likely to be ‘messy’ where the positivists’ explanations tend to be neat and tidy. According to Grix (2001) there are a number of core premises of the interpretive paradigm:

- The world is socially constructed through interactions of individuals, and the separation of ‘fact’ and ‘value’ is not as clear cut as the positivists would argue.
- The emphasis is on *understanding* as opposed to explanation.
- Social phenomena do not exist independently of our interpretation of them and it is these interpretations that affect outcomes – i.e. researchers are inextricably part of the social reality being studied and are not detached from this.
- Researchers in this paradigm tend to place emphasis on meaning in the study of social life and emphasise the role of language in constructing reality.
- In particular, such researchers stress ‘the meanings given to the world in which those studied live’ (Williams and May in Grix 2001: 83-84).

Qualitative studies coming from within an interpretative framework allow one to develop narratives and accounts of practice. As O’Leary (2005) argues, such studies are attempts to ‘investigate the complexities of the social world’. As she puts it,

there are times when you want to delve deeper into social complexities; times when you want to get below the ‘pure and simple truth’ – times when you want to explore the interactions, processes, lived experiences, and belief systems that are part of individuals, institutions, cultural groups and the everyday ... delving into such complexities is likely to find you working with small numbers, but generating ‘rich’ data. The goal is to gain an intimate understanding of people, places, cultures and situations through rich engagement and even immersion into the reality you are studying (O’Leary 2005:113).

Thus while there were elements of ethnography in my approach based on the need for forms of ‘thick description’ of social practice (Geertz 1973) particularly in Chapters 5 and 6, I did not immerse myself fully into an anthropological, ethnographic study<sup>30</sup>. Rather I drew selectively on ethnographic data as I collected it as part of my field work. This was for a combination of practical, pragmatic and conceptual reasons including time, access

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<sup>30</sup> I am grateful to my supervisor Johann Graaff for alerting me to Clifford Geertz’s seminal work on the Balinese cockfight and his discussion of ‘thick description’. It proved critical in assisting me to understand the difference between description, presentation and analysis of my data.

to sites and the nature of the phenomenon under scrutiny. The last point in particular was significant in shaping my choices, as in a formal learning context like this, while what happened when the students engaged with the community in joint activities in both cases was quite often negotiable, there was an a priori curriculum and certain non-negotiable parameters which pre-dated my study. As a consequence I took these as the starting points for my design and data collection. However, as with most research, these processes are far from simple; I was challenged on important assumptions I had made about my data during the research process as I shall indicate below.

### *Interpretive case study methodology*

My goal in this thesis is to provide an in-depth examination of one particular set of activities that can add much illumination to the service learning research field. I therefore set out to explore a 'bounded system', i.e. a particular instance or entity that can be defined by identifiable boundaries. The emphasis is on understanding the unity and wholeness of the particular case. Studies concentrated on cases bring 'unity to a study': they are a way of organizing social data so that the unitary character of the social object or phenomena being studied is preserved (Goode & Hatt in O'Leary 2005: 116). Such studies can thus allow for in-depth exploration; they are an examination of subtleties and intricacies; they attempt to be holistic, i.e. to explore processes as well as outcomes and ultimately they aim to investigate the context and setting of a situation.

My choice for using an interpretive ethnographically-oriented case study approach is as follows. On the one hand, I was drawn to ethnography as it offers the opportunity for the study of lived experiences (Brodky 1987). While this does not preclude boundaries between 'me' as researchers and 'them' as subjects, Brodsky believes that an ethnographer understands these not as natural boundaries but as boundaries we construct to maintain 'space' and thus show respect for subjects<sup>31</sup>. As she puts it, they are '*social* borders that we help maintain when we refuse to travel in uncharted territory' (ibid: 42; emphasis my own).

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<sup>31</sup> This is a well known dilemma for many qualitative researchers.

On the other hand, the case study offers the chance to study in depth ‘a particular instance rather than attempting to survey specific, clearly identified variables across a large sample’ (Hemson 1996:14-15). In my case, I have chosen to do intrinsic case study work (Stake 1995), in order to learn something about the experiences of specific students on a specific programme in a specific moment of its life. Such an approach is not sampling research; a case is studied not primarily to understand other cases, but rather ‘our first obligation is to understand this one case’ (ibid: 4). A case study is a specific, a ‘bounded system’, being both the process of learning about the case and the product of our learning (Stake in Denzin & Lincoln 1994). In addition, a case study can serve to expose the limitations of a particular assumption, e.g. about learning, about the nature of the university-community interface, and generate important questions for practice, alerting practitioners to issues that might need to be addressed in other cases or by other methods of research.

A case study approach has been able to provide rich insight into the experiences of students, community and educators on both courses, as well as into the relationship between the university and the community members in service learning. It needs to be stated however that, following Brodsky, I am aware that accuracy of the information is relative to the particular orientations, approaches and relationships built up during the research process and reflective of the power relations that exist in any research context, qualitative and quantitative.

As a consequence, a qualitative case study has the following characteristics:

- It is about understanding the *meaning* of an experience.
- It sets out to investigate or explore different dimensions of a phenomenon, not just one particular variable.
- It puts an emphasis on description and explanation, rather than the testing of hypotheses (Merriam 1988; emphasis in the original).

There are a number of reasons why cases are used in social science research (O’ Leary 2005):

- They offer boundaries for the study.
- They attempt to build holistic understandings through some degree of prolonged engagement and study.
- The goal is authenticity and while not necessarily generalisable, they can still offer much to the production of knowledge. This is due to the fact that they:
  - Have an intrinsic value
  - Can be used to debunk theory
  - Can bring new variables to light
  - Can be used to provide supportive evidence for a theory
  - Can be used collectively to form the basis of a theory.

### **Case selection**

There are a number of factors that need to be taken into account in selecting cases. Two of the most important are those of generalisability and typicality (Schofield 2000). In terms of generalisability, my intention is not to be able to generalise about service learning courses per se but rather to develop both conceptual and research tools through the two cases in my study that could be used to unpack and understand similar service learning courses – as Schofield (2000) puts it, to generate ‘sensitising concepts’ that can be used in other similar cases. Chapter 3 was the beginning of the development of my conceptual framework; this chapter explores the research tools that could assist in using the framework for analysis.

Typicality, on the other hand, is an important issue in that one needs to ensure that there are enough features of a case to be a recognisable form of the practice on its own terms. Typicality was evident in that both courses in my research had common features:

- Both were of the same length.
- Both included some notion of developing ‘professional’ knowledge – as human geographers and as medical doctors.
- Both involved joint activities that could be divided into three ‘nested activities’
- Both included group work and assessment.

- Both involved moving students into unfamiliar community settings for their learning.<sup>32</sup>
- Both cases involved academics as educators with an interest and some experience in this kind of work.
- Both included students' reflections as part of learning and assessment – a feature which, at the time of collecting the data, I did not realise would turn out to be as important a source of data for my study as it was.

In terms of my own researcher identity, I had an intrinsic interest in both cases. They were both forms of service learning that, while located in different disciplines, had some important common features, important for research in learning about and improving a particular form of educational practice. I also had longstanding relationships with both departments having worked with them both since about 1999.

My ongoing work with both departments and the fact that I knew both course lecturers were convenience factors. Thus while I was dependant on lecturers to let me know when meetings were taking place, I had easy access to the courses enabling me to observe students in 'joint activities' as these were the focus of my study. However, because of the complexity of the health sciences curriculum and the fact that students' classes take place solidly when they are in the block, I decided not to use classroom data unless it held specific significance central to my study. This was despite the fact that I had easy access to classroom practice in the EGS case. In addition, I realised that for discussion across the cases in my analysis it would improve the reliability of my study if I used the same data set in both cases.

### **Data collection**

As indicated above, my methods of data collection were to some extent opportunistic because of my knowledge and history of the practices. I therefore knew what needed to happen and when I had to set aside time both inside the normal working day as well as

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<sup>32</sup> While both groups of students went 'into the community' I have also noted the significant differences of these contexts in Chapter 2. I am thus aware of the effect of this on the data but think this can be justified given the focus of my topic.

on weekends (in the MBChB case) to go with the students into the communities. Because I was already involved in a qualitative research project looking at service learning at UCT<sup>33</sup>, data collection in some ways thus preceded my actual proposal: the project and my engagement with the departments led to the development of my ideas that then formed the basis of my research proposal. My main data sources were:

- my own field notes observing student activities in the field when engaged in ‘joint activities’ with community partners<sup>34</sup>
- interviews with academics and educators involved in the two courses, and particularly responsible for the service learning dimension of them<sup>35</sup>
- interviews and discussions with community members – these were more informal and evaluative, rather than a main sources of data
- student reflective journals
- interviews with students<sup>36</sup>.

I began with data collection in 2004 spending time in sessions and going on field visits with both MBChB and EGS students. I did a second round with the EGS case in 2005 as I was not able to attend all the sessions in 2004. For purposes of this thesis I limit my data to the 2005 course except in a few places where reference is made to the 2004 cohort.

### *The MBChB case*

In the MBChB case the 2004 course became the site of my primary data collection. This was primarily due to the fact that the curriculum changed in 2005 and I did not want to

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<sup>33</sup> Both these departments were involved in the research project thereby facilitating my access to the sites. However I did not rely on the project for access to sites – I was particularly explicit about my PhD intentions to all the participants.

<sup>34</sup> In both cases these were hand written – I felt recording would be too intrusive. Retrospectively I think I ought to have asked permission to record as much of the rich detail is lost without it.

<sup>35</sup> I had all my interviews fully transcribed and would like to thank the Emerging Researchers Programme at UCT for financial assistance that made this possible.

<sup>36</sup> I soon realised that interviews with individual students were going to be difficult as they moved on to different courses fairly quickly. I thus never planned for them formally in my research. However in the EGS case I was able to talk to two students and these then turned into interviews, which I have only drawn on very briefly. I did not get to talk to any of the MBChB students as their course was at the end of the academic year and they all left on vacation shortly thereafter.



bring the variable of a new curriculum into my study. I had also assumed that I would collect all the EGS data in the same year but was ultimately unable to do this. In the MBChB case, I collected data in the field from September to November 2004. I provide details of the sources below.

### Observation data

I attended the three activities where the students engaged with the members of the domestic workers' union: the initial meeting to negotiate the project, the presentations of the students' epidemiology findings to the union and the health promotion workshop. I also attended the epidemiology presentations made on campus to other students and supervisors but given that I was not using classroom data in either case, I only refer to these superficially in the study and to indicate a few points of comparison. This resulted in a total of 12 hours of observation.

I need to add a note here about my data in this case. Unlike in the EGS case where I went with the students into the field to collect their data, I did not have access to the primary data collection for the epidemiological research, the interviews with domestic workers. Given the vulnerability of many the workers and their fears of losing their job should their employers find out about their involvement in the research, I was not able to sit in on the interviews as this might have jeopardised the confidentiality agreement with the students.

### Interviews

I conducted the following interviews using a semi-structured interview schedule which I had let all my interviewees see before the interviews (except in the case of the trade union where the nature of the interview was more informal):

- I conducted a group interview with all four Site Facilitators across the different sites.
- I conducted an interview with Anna, the Woodstock Site Facilitator.

- I conducted an interview with the overall Site Co-ordinator, Joan, together with Anna and the original Site Co-ordinator, Mary.
- I conducted an interview with Mary by herself.
- I conducted an informal interview/discussion with members of the trade union as part of evaluating the engagement with the students. However, this was not ultimately drawn on in my study.

### Student journals

I negotiated access to student reflective journals from the course via Anna and email with the students. After this process I had access to the journals of four of the seven students, totalling ten entries (two students wrote three entries and two students only two). The students I labelled E, F, G and H to protect their identities. In fact when I received the journals, I received them grouped per student but only received information on gender and race (which I had requested); thus I did not know which actual student's journal I was reading.

### Student questionnaires

Because I had managed to get some funding for a larger service learning research project at UCT of which this was one site, I administered required funder-designed questionnaires to all the students across the 4<sup>th</sup> year block. While useful as background information, I did not draw on them in the final analysis.

### *The EGS case*

My data collection process was similar in this case except that I selected data from the 2005 course as I was not able to attend all of the field sessions in 2004. I outline the sources below.

### Observation data

I attended all the field sessions with this group of students which enabled me to observe the three ‘nested activities’ of the activity system making up the field-based research. Given the nature of the course, my fieldwork was more extensive than in the MBChB case. I went with them in the university transport, attended the meetings and went with selected groups of students and their Civic guides during the mapping sessions. These included:

- the orientation meeting and tour of Valhalla Park with the Civic in July 2005.
- three of the four mapping sessions in Valhalla Park (July-August).
- the campus-based presentation of the research projects to academics and members of the Civic (September).

The total number of hours I spent observing was roughly 15.

During the fieldwork sessions the process of selecting students to walk with and observe in the field was initially fairly random. Given that I had no concrete idea of what I would see in the field, in the first field-based session the first week I walked with the whole group as we went together on the orientation tour. From time to time I would walk and chat to one or two students, one of the guides or Susan and one of her assistants. The second week, the first mapping session, I chose to go with two students whom I had chatted to briefly the previous week while on the orientation tour. Later in this session, I joined two other students briefly who had gone into a shebeen<sup>37</sup> as I was keen to get a sense of how the activities would develop in this context. For the second mapping session, I chose another two students I had chatted briefly to during the first orientation session in order to see how their field work experience was developing.

In the final session when I was in the field which was the last mapping session, I rejoined the two students I had joined on the first mapping session so that I could try to get some

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<sup>37</sup> This is a colloquial term for a ‘township tavern’ seen often in many of the townships in and around Cape Town and other parts of South Africa. While many of them are informal social venues and unlicensed, many of them are licensed establishments and provide a much needed income to the owners.

sense of how their experiences might have developed including their sense of the mapping, the community context and their relationship with the Civic Guide who had been their mediator.

I did not set out to explore students' experience per se but rather their engagement with the community and their experience of field work, an approach I believe is consistent with an activity theory-oriented approach. In her study of teachers and professional development, Yamagata-Lynch (2003) argues that by observing activities of teachers over a period of time, she was able to say a lot about how the courses they attended benefited them in their practices or not. This approach enabled me to make better sense of some of the students' journal entries which reflected activities over a period of time more significantly than any interview with an educator (or a student or community member, I would argue). I shall discuss this significant issue in more detail when considering my methods of data analysis later in the chapter.

### Interviews

I conducted the following interviews over the period 2004-2005<sup>38</sup>:

- I interviewed Susan on three occasions, twice in 2004 specifically for the purposes of data on her course and a third time in September 2005 when her course was selected as an example of social responsive teaching and learning to be included in the university's social responsiveness report (for which I wrote up the case study).
- I interviewed members of the Valhalla Park Civic twice, once formally with Susan in 2004 and then again more informally on my own in 2005.
- I conducted interviews with two students, one in 2004 and one in 2005. Given that my study has not focused on individual students or tracking students and their learning per se, the purpose of this was as background information; I have only quoted from them very briefly in the thesis.

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<sup>38</sup> As part of the national service learning project discussed in Chapter 1, I had also conducted an interview with Susan; however in this study I have not drawn on it save for reading parts of it to clarify my own understanding of her work.

### Student journals

As in the MBChB case, I had access to students' reflective journals. In this case, I received the journals of all of the students; however I selected only those of students I had actually spent time with in the field as I wished to use the journals to triangulate my own observations. In the end, I worked with the journals of eight students whom I have labelled as they worked in their partnerships as A1 and A2, B1 and B2, C1 and C2, and D1 and D2. Each student was required to complete five journal entries over the course of the fieldwork; however in the case of two students, I only received four entries. All in all, the sample of journal entries I worked with totalled 25 entries, mostly one page in length.

### Student questionnaires

As in the previous case, I administered funder-designed questionnaires to the students; however both because the return rate was poor but also because they were not questionnaires I had designed, I only used them as general background documentation.

## **Part 2: Data analysis and interpretation**

This is the part of the research process and the whole thesis that I found the most difficult and challenging, Yet it was here where I learnt the most about doing studies of this nature.

In analysing in-depth, ethnographically-oriented qualitative research, an important starting point is to realise that one cannot see processes of engagement or learning happening; an approach must be found that can provide a way of generating indicators to use in the analysis. It is necessary therefore to define quite closely what constitutes a bounded 'unit of analysis' in order to proceed with reading and understanding the data. This first step took quite a long time as I had begun with a very broad question and thus there were many different ways of coming to answer the question and looking at the practices at the intersection of the university and community. As discussed earlier, my approach was shaped by an inherent interest in social practice and mediated action. I have developed this as well as the associated theoretical lenses over a period of time both

through my teaching practice and my work as an adult educator in many different contexts. This led me to look to studies drawing on situated learning initially, then activity theory and this is where I began with my analysis. In this section I trace the development of my data analysis tools as they needed refinement as I got into better understanding my data.

### **Activity theory as a ‘descriptive-analytic’ tool<sup>39</sup>**

As discussed in the previous chapter, while I found situated learning a useful lens to get into the research initially, I ultimately found it lacking as an analytical frame. While I draw on some of the concepts derived from communities of practice in the analysis, I do so via an activity theory frame.

In an interesting study, Barab, Barnett, Yamagata-Lynch, Squire and Keating (2002) draw on activity theory to understand the ‘systemic tensions’ in an astrology course. The authors argue that activity theory is a useful means to analyse participation by students and teachers in the course, highlighting the nested instances of activity that characterised the course dynamics. In describing these dynamics, the researchers show the historical development and changes that the course went through. In using the tools of activity theory, they argue that they are trying to highlight the ‘course-in-the-making’ rather than the ‘ready-made’ course. Thus, in trying to capture the dynamic unfolding of course participation, their research presents multiple snapshots and explanations of different kinds of activities that took place at different times. Finally, they use ‘systemic tensions’ to frame the analysis given that activity systems are characterised by systemic tensions.

Researchers who use activity theory are thus focused on embodied action, doing in order to transform something, the focus being on the contextualised activity of the system as a whole. Barab et al argue that the ‘minimal meaningful unit of analysis/context’ is the whole activity system including ‘the *actor* (participants) or *actors* (subgroups) *whose agency is chosen as the point of view in the analysis* and the acted on (object) as well as the dynamic

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<sup>39</sup> The term ‘descriptive-analytic’ is my way of naming the first stage of my analysis which combined description with a first level analysis. I first used it in my Masters thesis (1998) in an attempt to signal that describing and analysing are often part of the same process in qualitative research.

relations among both' (2002: 78; emphasis added). In addition, we need to understand that components of activity systems are not static components existing in isolation but are dynamic and interact continuously with other components. The authors draw on an example of tensions in a system to illustrate this point:

Activity systems are characterised by their internal contradictions ... These ... are best understood as tensions among the components of the activity system. For example, in school learning there is a pervasive tension between learning the material to receive a grade (what Lave 1993 described as the 'exchange value' of what is learned) and learning material because of its importance in addressing real-world problems (what Lave described as the 'use value'). Tensions are critical to understanding what motivates particular actions and in understanding the evolution of a system more generally ... As tensions enter the systems they become the moving force behind disturbances and innovations and eventually drive the system to change and develop (Barab et al (2002: 79-80).

What I find particularly useful in what Barab et al argue is that while there are a number of actors in any system, as a researcher one selects an actor or group of actors whose activities become the focus of the analysis. In my case I have selected the students as the focus and even though the community is discussed to quite a large extent in the activities, this serves only to highlight how they challenge the students.

In another study Yamagata-Lynch (2003) argues that one can use activity theory for describing and analysing systems and leave the study at that, save for hinting at what might be done differently the next time, or, for doing a 'before' and 'after' intervention and looking at what has changed. Mine is clearly the former in that I have not designed my study to evaluate change but rather to illuminate elements of practice. In her study, Yamagata-Lynch (2003) used activity theory as an analytical lens to gain an historical understanding of the developments initiated as a result of interactions that took place between participant teachers and professional development courses/projects.

Given that the unit of analysis in activity theory is the mediated action itself, she argues that examining individual behaviour is the gateway for the researcher to enter into and to vicariously experience the activity of the subject. Because I am not looking at the experiences of individual students per say, this is an important point. I am looking at their experiences and their accounts of the experiences as a way to understand the system

more broadly and the points of tension within them. However the role of the students' experiences in my research became a complex issue as I shall discuss later. Two other points Yamagata-Lynch makes are worth noting in terms of how one uses activity theory:

- When the researcher has identified the activity (or nested activities in her and my case), she needs to shift the focus of the study to understanding motive-goal-instrumental conditions rather than the observable individual behaviour and use this information to understand the collective meaning-making process.
- Individuals are not randomly in activity systems/settings; it is the shared goals of such systems that attract certain members thus the activity setting determines participants of a research investigation.

Researchers who use activity theory, are therefore focused on 'embodied action, 'doing' in order to transform something', the focus being on the contextualised *activity of the system as a whole*. In terms of the methods used to analyse her data, Yamagata-Lynch began the process by identifying activity systems. As she got to better understand her data she was able to identify 'meaningful activities that were prevalent throughout the multiple sources' (ibid: 107). This then enabled her to arrange the activities into chronological order, an approach that is important in seeing the development of activities. Yamagata-Lynch argues that there are both benefits and limitations to using activity theory as a lens in research. In terms of benefits, the author argues that through her own research on classroom practice, she gained an understanding of the following interactions:

- evolving historical relations of human activities surrounding professional development programmes
- the historical development of new resources which become cultural artefacts or tools
- intricate relations between individual teachers, school-wide and professional-development goals
- how further activities in the school can develop from activities done in the professional development programme



- the tensions faced by teachers before, during and after professional development and how these tensions affected teacher activity

In terms of my own data I drew on Yamagata-Lynch's work particularly in the first stage of data presentation, largely reflected in Chapters 5 and 6. I identified the nested activities (see previous chapter for a discussion on this) making up each of the two service learning activity systems fairly early and found this a really useful way into the data. I identified and described key moments in each activity and provided data from my own observations in the field, from interviews and from student journals in order to supplement and support my descriptions. Following this I identified the key points of tension or contradiction in each activity. This represents my first level of data analysis and was accomplished largely through reading and coding my own field notes, student journal entries and the interview data from educators and community where relevant.

As mentioned in the beginning of Chapters 5 and 6 I found separating out the description from the analysis an incredibly difficult and somewhat problematic process. This is because the analysis needs to be layered over the descriptions at all times in using an activity theory lens that can allow for understanding how elements of the system 'rub up against each other' (Thesen 1994). This entailed presenting each activity separately to develop the narrative. Following this, I presented the whole activity system across the nested activities, identifying the contradictions in each to conclude the two case study chapters.

### **Refining the lens: moving beyond activity theory**

As often happens in qualitative research of this nature, the further I read into my data, the more I realised that I needed to re-think my initial reliance on activity theory. It had proved useful to assist in delineating my unit of analysis and helping me to make sense of very rich contextualised experiences; however I was finding that it was not able to capture some of the richness and fluidity that was emerging in the data. It was starting to feel too static a lens to do justice to the complexities of the service learning engagement I was encountering in my own field notes, in the student journals and in the interviews I had conducted and was analysing. In addition, through my own process of data analysis,

I made a critical discovery about the nature of my data that was to shape my study in significant ways. This centered on questions about what constituted what I am calling ‘core’ data vs. ‘secondary’ data – data that was more retrospective, reflective and analytical and which I did not consider as initially central to my study.

Based on her own educational research experience, Yamagata-Lynch (2003) has described the limitations of using an activity theory lens.

- The triangles representing the activity systems into which all the data is put cannot capture all the complexities in rich learning environments. While the triangles serve as convenient tools for communicating and analysing (as well as for defining/zooming in on a unit of analysis) they can give the impression of ‘freeze framing’.
- In the process of analysis, the researcher had to ‘strip each unit of the triangle out of its context’. These triangles cannot be used to map out a generalisable reality of an observed phenomenon but should be used rather to understand complex systems in everyday settings that can be fractioned into meaningful units of activity.

These points echoed what I was finding in my own research. However another more important and more interesting issue was emerging in my study around my own data set which set in motion another data analysis process. I came to realise that what I initially thought constituted what I am calling ‘core’ data (interviews with academics and even community members) was in fact ‘secondary’ data and what I saw as more reflective ‘secondary’ data (students’ reflective journal entries) was in fact ‘core’. In other words, I planned initially to focus on the interviews and course documentation and use the student reflective journals as secondary, more reflective data, i.e. as a possible source of triangulation.

However, I began to realise as I read activity theory as well as my own data, that the data contained in the students’ journals was critical and therefore core. I realised through considering activity theory and the need for accounts of *joint activity*, that together with my own field observations, the journals in fact provided evidence of these activities in ways that interviews with academics and even community members could not do. This

was because they were able to capture activities over a period of time in their reflections and tell the story of how they did things and why they did them *as they did them*. They were also, through this, able to highlight key systemic tensions and things that changed that I would otherwise not have been able to surface. What is very important to note is that I am *not analysing the journals per se* in this study; that is a different (and very exciting) future study. I am using them to indicate what happens in activity systems from the point of view of the participants as they are experiencing the activities.

Therefore, because I had initially assumed that I would focus on the data with the educators and my own field notes and use the journal data to supplement this, I believed that activity theory would suffice as a method of analysis. However I had to rethink this approach and I also had to revise my two data chapters and find a way to include the different data sources in various parts of the thesis. The interviews with the educators then became more important for Chapter 7 in the analysis and discussion of the findings as a way of supporting and clarifying some of my own conclusions. This was probably my most important methodological shift and challenge which developed as the thesis and story developed. I found it challenging, disorienting but ultimately exciting as it confirmed the fact that research is a journey and we need to be prepared for unexpected events.

Due to this insight, I realised that I had to have a means of making sense of what the students were reflecting in their journals, and activity theory could not provide the ‘why’ beyond arguing that there are inherent tensions in an activity system. If, following Russell (2002), the ‘community’ dimension of an activity system impacts on all the other elements, then I needed to think about why this might be so. Service learning as I have argued is characterised by an expanded community. Thus, what impact does this have on the system and how can I make sense of this? How am I constructing my theoretical framework and my data analysis?

To summarise, in this thesis I am looking at joint activities between students and members of off-campus communities. In other words I am looking at two communities of practice interacting. The moment of their interaction – the joint activities – I am calling an activity system and not a community of practice as it has a primary focus on

joint activities and is a smaller unit than a community of practice. My unit of analysis is therefore an activity system and I am using activity theory to delineate it thereby demarcating it as a system. This in turn helps to better describe and analyse the things that students do with their community partners in a service learning course.

### **Understanding ‘discourse’ as analytical tool**

However, examining the point where communities of practice intersect, each with their own ways of thinking and doing, requires an explanation of these tensions. Scollon (2001) and Scollon and Wong Scollon (2002) call this meeting point the ‘nexus of practice’: a point where a number of intersecting, complex and possibly even competing practices come together in the pursuit of activity. I have found this approach very useful. The authors also analyse how ‘discourses’ circulate and come together in social action. But what does ‘discourse’ mean in a study like mine? Wenger (1998) argues that discourses are resources that communities of practice have that they can draw on in the development of their practices. This is a useful start. Given my interest in activities, I need to find a version of discourse that has more than a linguistic meaning and that can provide evidence of social practice as well.

### ***‘Discourse’***

In reading the data and re-reading my field observations, I therefore realised that I am looking at ‘discourse’ (Gee 1990) and how communities both reflect and shape elements of discourse. As we saw from Chapter 3, this is the ‘rules’ dimension in an activity system. What was happening in my study was that different rules (discourses) were coming into contact via the communities interacting. The rest of this section will outline my understanding and use of the term discourse, as well as discuss methods more appropriate to analyse my data.

A closer look at Gee’s (1990; 1999) arguments will be helpful. Gee is a sociolinguist who works in the field of literacy studies. In his work (1990) he argues for a broader understanding of literacy. It is not only what you say, but also how you say, how you act, all in a particular context. In his work Gee argues for the term ‘*Discourse*’ with a capital

D and differentiates it from 'discourse', which is more focused on pieces of language. He defines *Discourse* as follows:

A *Discourse* is a socially accepted association among ways of using language, of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing, and of acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or 'social network', or to signal (that one is playing) a socially meaningful 'role' (Gee 1990: 143; emphasis in the original).

He argues that what is important is not language per se but 'saying (writing)-doing-being-valuing-believing' combinations. *Discourses* are thus

ways of being in the world, or forms of life which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, social identities, as well as gestures, glances, body positions and clothes (ibid: 142).

In other words, it is

a sort of identity kit which comes complete with the appropriate costume and instructions on how to talk, act and often write, so as to take on a particular social role that others will recognise (ibid: 142).

Furthermore, Gee argues that everyone acquires a number of social *Discourses* and many social identities, both of which are not static but in flux (Paxton 2005). *Discourses* also contain many sub-*Discourses*; they are embedded in 'a medley of social institutions', and even involve various 'props' or objects (e.g. books, magazines, laboratories, classrooms, other buildings). *Discourses* are thus a form of a 'club' with tacit rules about who is a member and who is not and about how members ought to behave (Gee 1990). For Gee therefore *Discourses* are social languages and are 'products of history', whether they be connected to academic disciplines (physics, history) or academic practices e.g., 'essayist' writing-talking-and-thinking, with businesses or other social institutions or with *Discourses* embedded in particular communities. *Discourses* are also representative of power relations in broader society. As such, *Discourses* are:

different ways in which we humans integrate language with non-language 'stuff', such as different ways of thinking, acting, interacting, valuing, feeling, believing and using symbols, tools, and objects in the right places and at the right times so

as to enact and recognize different identities and activities, give the material world certain meanings, distribute social goods in a certain way, make certain sorts of meaningful connections in our experience, and privilege certain symbol systems and ways of knowing over others (Gee 1999:13 in Scollon 2001 145-146).

Each of us is therefore constituted of a range of Discourses. Gee distinguishes between 'primary' and 'secondary' Discourses where a primary Discourse is a person's initial Discourse developed in the primary process of family enculturation, and secondary Discourses are those developed in association with, and by having access to and practice with, social or secondary institutions (the church, school, workplaces etc). In terms of the relationship between these Discourses, Gee (1990) argues that

the various Discourses which *constitute* each of us as persons (or subjects) are changing and often not fully consistent with each other; there is often conflict and tension between the values, beliefs, attitudes, interactional styles, uses of language and ways of being in the world which two or more Discourses represent (1990: 145; emphasis in the original).

The arguments above represent my understanding and use of the term Discourse in my analysis. It provides for me a way of describing and analyzing the complex set of interactions and tensions at the interface of the university and the community – of making sense in other words, of some of the complex dynamics evident in activity systems that represent more than one community of practice. My final comment relates to how I represent the term in the rest of the thesis. Although Gee distinguishes between 'discourse' and 'Discourse' (capital D), given that I have explained my understanding and use of the term above I am, following Paxton (2005), using 'discourse' without the 'capital D' for the sake of clarity and consistency.

Scollon (2001) argues that Gee's definition of discourse covers a wide range of issues. It is both linguistic (discursive in the narrow sense) and non-linguistic. It involves a consideration of power relationships, embeds an ideology and privileges not only people and groups but their symbol systems as well. Central to Gee's discourse is a concern for the production of identities, both those established by and within a discourse and the identities of those produced outside. Scollon (2001) argues that because of what they can illuminate, *discourses, together with activity systems and 'nexus of practice', are the critical level of*

*analysis of social practice.* These issues reflect my interests as they link to looking at activities that take place in activity systems in the service learning experience.

Before proceeding, I wish to discuss an important tension that I was unable to resolve during this thesis. I noted it in the previous chapter; it centres on what I understand as ‘two levels of discourse’ in my study. The first refers to the level discussed by Scollon above, i.e. where discourse, together with activity systems and nexus of practice, are useful as levels of analysis (see also Gee 1999). This is the macro level.

The second, more micro level is where I have argued for an understanding of discourse that is similar to the rules in an activity system. If rules are the values, habits and norms of a particular community of practice or activity system, this is surely similar to Gee’s notion of discourse discussed above. However, rules in the activity system also shape other dimensions. In the previous chapter, Russell (2002) argues that rules shape the interactions of the subject and tools with the object. In my case, I am arguing that rules – or discourse – shape and impact on *not only* the tools *but also* the division of labour that emerges in the activities.

In this way, there are two levels of discourse – a macro discourse which impacts on, and is reflective of *the system* itself, and a more micro discourse (rules) *within the system* which impacts on the tools and roles. In my case I have argued for discourses – students and community – which interact in the system. Because of the dialectical relationship between elements of an activity system, change in one part of the system causes change in others. Therefore I see the challenges and transformations of tools and roles in service learning as a reflection of the ways in which discourses ‘rub up against each other’ brought about by the introduction of an expanded community and dual but inter-related object. Both of these in turn are reflective of more macro discourses which get indexed in multiple ways throughout the activities. I feel a little unresolved about my understanding and use of discourse in this study and it is something that I look forward to exploring further post this thesis.

***Being a student: discourse, disciplines and identity***

In order to locate my own observations and analysis in the two cases, it is useful to look briefly at two studies that have addressed issues of academic disciplines or ‘communities of practice’ and their related discourses and social practices in particular ways. While not using the term itself, they have drawn on the notion of ‘discourse’ I have been discussing.

Becher and Trowler (2001) discuss how academic communities of practice are shaped by different rules, discourses and practices. At a broad level, the authors look at ‘academic tribes’ (academic communities) and their ‘academic territories’ (academic ideas) as a way of enquiring into the nature of the linkages between the two. Two aspects of their study are of use here. Firstly in terms of academic communities of practice, they discuss and highlight the distinctive ‘cultures’ or discourses within academic communities and academic ideas. By ‘cultures’ they refer to sets of taken-for-granted values, attitudes and ways of behaving, which are articulated through and reinforced by recurrent practices among a group of people in a given context (ibid: 23). Their study focuses on groups of academics across a range of disciplines and develops the argument that the way in which particular groups of academics organize their professional lives is related in important ways to the intellectual tasks on which they are engaged. In other words, while there are knowledge forms that shape disciplines, there are also people in the disciplines who can play a role in some of that shaping as well.

The second useful point is on the ways in which disciplines have been categorized. Drawing on the work particularly of Biglan (1973a), Becher and Trowler argue for four dimensions along which disciplines can be categorized: hard-pure, soft-pure, hard-applied, and soft-applied. In summary the characteristics of each can be noted as follows (Becher & Trowler 2001: 36):

- Hard-pure: concerned with universals, quantities, simplification.
- Soft-pure: concerned with particulars, qualities, complication.
- Hard-applied: purposive, concerned with mastery of physical environment.



- Soft-applied: utilitarian, concerned with enhancement of (semi-) professional practice.

The authors are quick to admit that these are ‘broad-brush’ depictions of very complex knowledge domains and there are three factors against which such a depiction must be understood. Firstly, social factors also play a role in constructing disciplinary knowledge; secondly, there is the effect of temporal change that is not visible in this account; and third, is the oversimplification of the categories. While my thesis is not concerned with studying disciplines per se, it is important to note Becher and Trowler’s points about the nature of the disciplines and their practices, as well as the way they might be categorized. This can help us to further our understanding of some of the issues I raise in the analysis of the two cases.

The second study focuses more on the social practices of students in higher education. Nesor (1994) looks at two case studies, in physics and management, and argues that different disciplines incorporate students ‘into discipline-specific temporal and spatial organizations of knowledge’ (1994: 1). Nesor argues that these cases (physics and management) are not exemplary but rather ‘points of entry ... that give us access to the larger processes that constitute and reproduce disciplines’ (ibid: 1). Nesor argues that learning is neither an ‘internal psychological process’ nor simply the product of activities in the face-to-face interaction between students, disciplines and educators.

When students are interacting with people and things in the immediate environment, Nesor argues that they are also interacting with people and things spatially and temporally removed from them. In order to understand how activity is connected to learning and knowledge we have to

look closely at how distant activity is transported into and made manifest in particular settings, and at how activities in *those* settings are connected to activities and spaces elsewhere (ibid: 3; emphasis in the original).

Nesor’s study is useful to highlight here, for while he looks at students in two ‘conventional’ learning contexts on campus and not between students and communities, he is, like me, *not* focused on reconstructing the psychologies of individual students. He is

interested rather in the *social practices and activities* that students engage in which shape and define their learning and their identities. Particularly significant are Nespors observations about the ways in which students in different disciplines engage with each other, the important texts in their disciplines and how they come to relate to the discipline itself – how it impacts on their identities. In this way he is arguing for the fact that practices reflect ‘discourses’ and serve to shape them as we shall see in both of the case studies in this thesis.

### **Mediated discourse analysis to nexus analysis: discourse and social action**

While I am using the notion of discourse in my analysis, I am not doing a discourse analysis in the traditional sense as understood by sociolinguistics. Rather I am using discourse to understand social action and to analyse practices as it has been used in both Becher and Trowler and Nespors above. I have found Ron and Suzie Wong Scollons work (2001; 2002; 2004) particularly useful in this regard and their method of both mediated discourse analysis (MDA) and nexus analysis (NA) illuminating. Scollon (2001) argues that MDA is linked to discourse analysis – particularly critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 1992; 2003), but is not necessarily the same. Whereas critical discourse analysis is founded on the idea that by analyzing discourses in society we can uncover how power operates, what still remains a problem for Scollon and Wong Scollon (2002) is the establishment of links between discourses and social actions:

What has proved to be a difficult integration has been to link moments of action in which discourse (as social interaction) plays a central role, and the broader socio-political, sociological, historical, organizational or cultural themes (ibid: 1).

In other words, it has been a challenge to find ways to connect everyday activities of ‘ordinary people and the enabling (or obstructing) public and social discourses that permeate them’ (ibid: 1). To deal with this challenge, MDA analysis therefore shifts the focus from language use in society to focus on ‘the social actions through which social actors produce the histories and habitus of their daily lives’ (Scollon 2001a in Wodak & Meyer 2001:140).

### ***Mediated discourse analysis***

According to Scollon the phrase ‘mediated discourse analysis’ is used to indicate that all discourses are mediated; all human action is social action and can be seen to be mediated. This follows the work of Vygotsky, Wertsch and other sociocultural theorists. Language is a primary, but not unique mediating tool. Scollon goes on to say that a mediated discourse analysis does not discount language or discourse; however it starts with social action and only looks at language (discourse, texts) when those are understood to be significant mediational means for actions under analysis:

Discourse in MDA is just one of the mediational means by which social action may be taken; it is never considered the central or defining aspect of a MDA project (Scollon 2001a: 143).

Mediated discourse analysis is therefore a form of sociocultural (activity/practice) analysis that seeks to clarify the many very complex relations between discourse and social action. Within such a framework, all actions are viewed as mediated by cultural tools (mediational means). These can range from material objects, physical environmental aspects, to the semiotic tools we use from words to images to gestures (Scollon & Wong Scollon 2002:1).

### ***Nexus analysis: discourses and actions coming together***

A more recent development in MDA is nexus analysis (NA), and this is where I have focused my own analysis. NA starts with the presumption that all actions are understood as occurring at a complex moment or nexus of the intersection of social, psychological and material trajectories. Accordingly its goal is to study and make visible the ‘discursive lines’ forming the nexus or intersection of practices where activities take place (Scollon & Wong Scollon 2002). I saw this as a useful extension of MDA because it can be a means to

opening up the circumference around moments of human action to begin to see the lines ... of historical and social process by which discourses come together at particular moments of human action (ibid: 1).

Scollon and Wong Scollon (2002) argue therefore that nexus analysis ‘can give us a fresh view of moments of social interaction and that such a view gives us leverage in bringing about change in the discourses that emanate from human action’ (ibid: 2). NA developed as a response to the fact that much action does not involve much discourse, neither talk nor text. In terms of discourses at the moment of action, it is important to highlight the fact that while some discourses are present as overt and explicit texts, others are present as internalized discourses ‘which have become practice in the unreflecting actions of a person just doing something’ (ibid: 3). In ‘expanding the circumference of discourse analysis’ (through nexus analysis), it is important to bear in mind the following. Many discourses are present at any moment of action. However few of them are visible in the action – they are ‘buried as practices in the social actors present or as “histories” in the objects and places in which actions take place’ (ibid: 3). Therefore the need is for the discourse analyst to first make visible these discourses, and perhaps more importantly, to establish the relevance of them to the action being analysed.

According to Scollon and Wong Scollon (2004), there are three stages in a nexus analysis:

1. Engaging in the key mediated actions (recognition and identification)
2. Navigating the action: *doing the nexus analysis* (mapping, circumferencing, discourse analysis)
3. Changing the actions (activism and change)

The first stage of ‘engaging’ was collecting my data – I engaged in the actions albeit as a researcher and identified the key moments. The second stage of the *nexus of practice*, navigating the action, is the point where the histories of people, places, discourses, ideas and objects come together to act in particular ways which might in turn impact these trajectories. This stage in my research is reflected in Chapters 5 and 6, and completed in Chapter 7, where the data is presented and then analysed drawing on some of the tools of NA. I did not attend to the third stage, changing the actions, as I wished to surface tensions as a way of theorising service learning. Changing the practice is a possible next step.

### **Why a nexus analysis? How applied to my study?**

Service learning is a form of educational practice located (in this study) in higher education and in a specific context, that of higher education in South Africa. What I have argued in Chapter 1 is that service learning introduces two fundamental changes to the practice of teaching and learning. Firstly what I have called an ‘expanded community’ and secondly, a ‘dual but interrelated object’. Neither of these are accidental but are, to varying degrees and in various guises, intentional aspects of service learning practice in many different contexts.

These are important considerations because they bring with them a new community, new roles and division of labour, as well as new tools of mediation with histories and trajectories. Understanding that tools as well as roles and knowledge are linked to discourses implies that there are a range of discourses that are present in the social action, that ‘brush up against each other’ (Thesen 1994) in this context and through this action. As I shall show in Chapters 5, 6 and 7, the relationship between tools, discourses, and roles and identities is important to understand, both illuminating current service learning practice as well as possibly changing such practice. Scollon and Wong Scollon (2002) used the example of the introduction of computer communications into a university classroom to make their point about discourses and social practice and the usefulness of a nexus analysis in unpacking these. They put it as follows:

What we believe a nexus analysis shows us here (in the case of computers in the classroom) is that whether the nexus of interest is a face-to-face university class or a computer mediated class these nexus are constructed out of a very large and diverse number of discourses and practices (as submerged discourses) and any change to either the discourses or of the mechanisms by which they are linked in the physical world brings about a new set of affordances and constraints which constitute a change in the activity itself. It is only by an Evil Knievel leap of imagination that we can call a university class in a classroom and a university class conducted via a mediating technology by the same name (Scollon & Wong Scollon 2002: 8).

In summary then, the process of coming up with this way of analysing the data in my thesis was a combination of deduction and induction. It was deductive in the sense that when I collected the data, I had a range of sensitising concepts (community of practice,

roles, tools, situated learning) as part of my researcher identity based on both previous experience in the field out of which my interest in this topic arose, plus my own theoretical lenses I draw on in my teaching and other research work. However, in the process of analysis, inductive methods became important as the data that was emerging was requiring me to ask questions about a suitable ‘unit of analysis’ to study the interface, as well as the need for a lens that could take account of the present activities, but in the context of understanding them historically, and as part of bigger, older, more complex practices.

### **Presentation of data**

In the two case study chapters, Chapters 5 and 6, I present each of the cases as an activity system comprising three nested activities. In order to do this, a short vignette is presented of the three nested activities at the beginning of Part 2 in each chapter. These notes are all drawn from my own field notes and include both description as well as quotations from captured conversations. I also draw on these descriptions at times during discussion of a particular aspect of the activities I observed throughout these two chapters. As indicated earlier in the chapter, these observations were not recorded and I was thus reliant on my own field notes. This meant that in many cases I feel there was a lot of the richness, particularly of the actual conversations, that was missing. However given that I was not attempting a discourse analysis, this might not be such a limitation after all. They are boxed in italics both here as well as throughout the thesis.

The vignettes are followed by a description of the activity system as a whole system spanning the three activities. In this case I drew from my field notes as well as student journals. I did this initially thinking that I might want to compare students within the same group. I did not finally do this in my analysis but had already done the labelling of the data. I also indicated which of the journal entries each quote came from, e.g. ‘journal entry 3’. I discuss the issue of anonymity fully under research ethics in the next section. As will be seen I made much use of quotations in the vignettes as well as in the analysis.

Following Cooper (2005) I attempted as far as possible to preserve the voices of the research participants. In some cases in my observations however I couldn’t quite follow

at the time and so did not use as many quotes from these events for fear of changing the meaning of what was said. When Afrikaans was used together with English, I have tried to capture it as it was said and provided a translation in the footnotes. I made an additional choice about the quotations, namely correcting some of the English quotations. I did this for purposes of clarity in reading; however the original transcripts reflect the verbatim words.

### **Part 3: Triangulation, validity, ethics and limitations**

This final section explicates the important issues of triangulation, validity and reliability, research ethics and the limits of my own study.

#### **Triangulation**

Triangulation is an important dimension in qualitative research. It refers to the ways in which a researcher uses different methods of collecting data to strengthen the findings and add validity to the project. Grix (2001) argues that when talking about triangulation, it is important to differentiate between two factors that can be triangulated.

Firstly there is *method triangulation* when two or more methods are used to investigate the same phenomenon. This can be done either sequentially or consequetively. Usually sequential methods are used and it is among these stages and the various methods used that checks between data sources can be made. In my case, I drew on a mix of methods as detailed above: field observations, interviews, student reflective journals, and course documentation across both cases. Clearly these were done sequentially, but there were times when I returned to an interview at a later stage when, for example a journal entry or another interview threw up an interesting and distinguishing fact. This I also saw as good practice in an ethnographically-oriented approach where I was aiming for an element of 'thick description' in my data set.

Secondly and linked to the above, data triangulation is the process in which the researcher draws on *multiple sources of data*, especially in comparative analyses. An example

of this is cross-checking data collected in interviews with published documents or, in my case, field notes and student reflective journals.

Triangulation is thus essentially about observing an object of study from different angles. Clearly, the major benefit is more robust and valid findings; findings are likely to be much more convincing and accurate if they are based on different sources of information (Grix 2001). In terms of my project, this was provided for by a combination of my own observations, students' observations and reflections captured in their journals and interviews with educators (mainly) and some community voice. I also used course materials and background information to support my observations and to provide context to what I was reading in some of the journals. In the EGS case this was notably in the conceptual tools the students used from the course in their journals.

### **Validity**

Validity is about making a judgement on the 'soundness' of the findings in a research project. There has been much discussion in the social sciences about how one makes such a judgement given the often context-specific, localised and 'messy' nature of this kind of research.

In terms of studies of the social world, a number of techniques have been developed to deal with both quality and validity. Hemson (1996) argues that when thinking about issues of validity, one needs to take into account both what a particular study is trying *and* not trying to do. If, as in this study, one sets out to describe, to illuminate and to investigate in order to better understand a phenomenon or process, then the study would have validity if I do this. However, the validity that this study has is in no small part due to my understanding of what is valid for the students as I try and make sense of their accounts. I feel, as Thesen (1994: 12) so eloquently puts it, that if one understands reality, knowledge and experience as largely social constructs, 'then as researcher I have to construct the reality of this research by making it persuasive'. I thus agree with Thesen that if the design and the findings can be seen as persuasive perhaps they will indeed have a fair measure of validity (Thesen 1994).



Assessing the validity of research consists of both internal and external validity checks. According to Scott (1996), internal validity refers to the research's truth value and the accuracy with which it is related to reality. In this case, given that I am arguing not for realism but for 'representational realism', my account needs to be seen as a good representation of the 'reality' of the experiences of service learning. Scott believes that a piece of research is valid if its methods are relevant to the questions being addressed and if the participants in the research recognise their contributions and affirm that they are valid. In order to establish internal validity, researchers need to engage in prolonged fieldwork, persistent observation and triangulation. Following from my discussion on methods of data collection and analysis, I feel that I have largely met these criteria.

External validity on the other hand refers to how a piece of research relates to other contexts and environments. In a case study, as I have argued, the purpose is not to move to generalisations but to better understand this specific context. Therefore, as Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue, the role of the researcher is to collect the

thick description necessary to enable someone interested in making a transfer to reach a conclusion about whether the transfer can be contemplated as a possibility (in Scott 1996: 80).

Given the detail in my cases studies, I believe I have gone some way in providing this. Finally, it could be argued, following Hammersley (1992), that qualitative studies should be judged in terms of their intentions. He argues that a descriptive study (such as this one) should not be judged to have failed because it did not test in any meaningful way a developing theory. Assessing validity therefore involves an identification of the main claims made by a study, 'noting the type of claims these represent, and comparing the evidence provided for each claim with what is judged to be necessary, given the claim's plausibility and credibility' (ibid: 72).

Building on this discussion of validity is the issue of reliability. In terms of reliability, that there is no such thing as absolute reliability of results in a qualitative study of this nature. If one believed this could be achieved, one would need to ask, 'reliable in terms of what criteria?' (Thesen1994). Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that reliability is about dependability and implicit in the issue of dependability is credibility. Thus if a piece of research is credible,

it will also be reliable. My previously mentioned awareness of this credibility influenced me in making sure my data sources across the two cases were comparable. Given that in research of an explorative nature like this project the role of the researcher is integral to the data collected, I am aware of my role in shaping the account. The shape of the research was responsive to the initial data collected through observations and this subsequently influenced the methods I used.

### **Research ethics and power relations**

My thesis proposal was submitted to the CHED Research Ethics Committee (the Faculty where I am based at UCT) for overall comment and approval. It was also presented to the research ethics committee in the Faculty of Health Sciences (for the MBChB case) while permission in the Faculty of Science (for the EGS case) was granted by the Head of Department. Finally I also presented my proposal to the Department of Sociology where I am registered before it was accepted by the Humanities Faculty Higher Degrees Committee in May 2005.

For those being researched, research is always an intervention in their lives whether the process is face to face and personal or more distant as in a postal questionnaire (Middleton 1993). Particularly in the first instance, which has relevance for my study, the process engaged in before and during the research, as well as the methods employed, involves researcher and subjects in a complex, multi-faceted process of meaning-making. Choosing an approach to research is thus a complex and often confusing process (McMillan 1998). There are always power relations in a research process and as such I was very aware of my role as researcher and as colleague, alluded to earlier in the chapter.

Confidentiality was offered to all participants. All interviewees have seen the transcripts of the interviews and had a chance to discuss them with me and make any changes. In terms of confidentiality, an interesting issue emerged about revealing the identities of the participants. In the case of the specific educators and students, I changed all names as agreed to in my proposal and my presentation to the ethics committees. However given that I kept the names of the Departments (both agreed to this) this was never going to be complete anonymity. In terms of both the community partners, when I indicated that I

was going to use pseudonyms in all cases, both said they wished for their true identities to be revealed. They both felt that it was important for their 'stories to be told', for their *'lifestyles to travel'*.

I raised this issue with Susan near the completion of the thesis and she indicated that she would be happy for her identity to be revealed should I decide to go with this approach in the case of the community participants. In the final writing up however I have decided to make all participants anonymous to be consistent in my approaches to different participants. The stories of the community partners will still be told as I have identified both the trade union and the Civic organisation and perhaps it is actually the collective stories that I wish to represent rather than those of particular individuals.

Given that research, and in particular ethnographic inquiry, is seen as a social activity, Scott (1996) argues that researchers in the field collecting data are confronted by a series of methodological dilemmas. These involve researchers in making decisions about how they should conduct themselves, and how to define the rights and responsibilities of the researcher and the researched. He suggests three models of research which inform such decisions. The first, which he calls covert research, emphasises the need for the researcher to conceal from the participants the aims and purposes of the research. The second, open democratic research, lays stress on the rights of participants to control the data which is collected and included in the research report. The third model, the open autocratic model, argues against allowing these rights to veto and thus obligates the researcher to protect the interests of the participants.

My approach is a combination of the second and third position in that while I allowed interviewees to edit the transcripts of their interviews with me, the decisions about what was included in the final thesis has rested with me. It does not therefore represent a picture of complete collaboration between me and the participants. In terms of the open democratic position, Scott argues that there are five important issues to consider in terms of ethical procedures: the researcher, as far as possible, should withhold his/her judgements or suspend their values; participants should be able to control what aspects of the data is released; the control procedures should be a series of negotiations between researcher and researched; research activities should not compel participation; and lastly, the researcher is

not just accountable to the participants in the project but to other bodies who might have a stake or interest in the information that has been collected.

However, these concerns are balanced by issues emanating from open autocratic approaches, the combined position I believe reflects my approach. These are: that I as researcher made the initial decisions about methods (which structured the type of data collected); given that I am operating in the public domain, I have been inclined to present these accounts as slightly neater and more coherent than they actually were; and finally, negotiation between I, the researcher, and the students and community members as participants, can never be a relationship between equals.

This is due to the fact that we are all to a large degree, shaped and determined by aspects of the institutional settings of which we are all part. In addition, the members of the communities are shaped by the nature of their engagement with us as ‘the university’. The manner of negotiation is therefore shaped by these relations of power. As Burgess (1984: 32) reminds us, ‘people respond to the structured situations in which they are located’. This is not to deny attempts at opening up the research process and allowing for agency within it, but to acknowledge that the impact of institutional spaces and structures cannot, and therefore should not, be ignored.

### **Limitations of the study**

There are always limitations in a research study – the ‘final version is always the penultimate one’ (de Gruchy 2005)<sup>40</sup>. Having indicated that case studies illuminate the specific, the local and the particular, one of the temptations in doing research is to move towards generalisation, which seems to be contrary to the reason for choosing to use a case study approach in the first place. While the case study can possibly be seen as a small step towards generalisation, damage occurs when ‘the commitment to generalise or create theory runs so strong that the researcher’s attention is drawn away from features important for

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<sup>40</sup> I have been part of a programme at UCT called the Emerging Researchers’ Programme, a support and capacity development programme for young and/or emerging researchers. The mentors on the programme are established (often retired) researchers from the institution. Prof John de Gruchy has played a key role in the programme as a mentor and one of his favourite phrases is the one above – i.e. you can *always* do better therefore you might as well hand in your thesis at some point. Needless to say I have found this comment very encouraging, on numerous occasions...

understanding the case itself (Stake cited in Denzin & Lincoln 1994: 238). However, arguing that no generalisation occurs is not entirely true. Denzin and Lincoln (1994) argue that researchers using qualitative case studies do not (and cannot) avoid generalisation. The methods used in this approach need primarily to provide insight into the complexities of the particular case; at the same time however, they need to provide enough 'descriptive narrative so that readers can vicariously experience these happenings, and draw their own conclusions' (ibid: 243).

It was important for me as researcher therefore, while using a qualitative approach, to engage with the data and to keep the study focused on issues that played themselves out at the interface of the university and community – the issues that became visible through the joint activities; and to keep it at the level of exploration and meaning-making in terms of these experiences. This is particularly true given the small number of cases used. A study of this nature is thus constrained due to a range of factors and my findings must be read in this light. Two other concerns warrant mention here which in some ways could be seen as limitations of this research. First, I have not theorised the gendered and racialised nature of the data, particularly that of the students. Given the complex and multi-faceted nature of service learning and the contexts in which and through which it occurs, this could be seen to be an omission. In particular the South African context with its torrid apartheid history and legacy would be an intriguing context in which to tease out these (possible) differences in perceptions and experience.

However, while an important issue to explore in the future, the focus of this study was not intended to explore this directly. As I have argued, I did not set out to look at student reflections *per se*. Given the richness of some of their experiences as seen through their reflections in Chapters 5 and 6, I am partly sorry that I did not do so. However it has sparked an interest in me to revisit and analyse the data along these lines in the near future. The second concern is that the small number of cases (only two) studied might be seen as not providing enough depth for comparison. I feel however, given that comparison was not intended in undertaking this study, this choice could be justified.

While in the analysis in Chapters 5, 6 and 7 I reflect on some of the differences that emerged across the cases, I intended for each case to be valued and understood in its own

right. Comparison is only used where I feel it highlights particular issues in new ways. In other words, I did not set out to look at comparing cases but rather to use two cases that had enough in common to be able to generate a set of sensitising concepts that can be used in other similar sites. I was aiming to contribute to knowledge in the field of service learning not through generalisable but rather transferable findings.

We turn now to Chapter 5, the case of the 4<sup>th</sup> year MBChB ‘community-based education’ service learning block, the first of the two service learning cases. It shall be presented in a ‘descriptive-analytic’ way via looking at the ‘nested activities’ making up the overall activity system, then highlighting the key tensions and contradictions that emerge from this.

## **Chapter 5: Community-based education in the health sciences**

This chapter will provide details of the first of the two service learning cases studies, the 4<sup>th</sup> year MBChB Public Health (PH) and Primary Health Care (PHC) block. This will be done in a ‘descriptive-analytic’ way as follows. Part 1 will recap on the eight week block drawing on course materials and interviews with course lecturers and others where relevant. Part 2 will be more analytical and will represent the data in two forms. In the first instance in 2a, a vignette of each activity will be presented in order to capture elements of the actual activities. In section 2b I shall then identify and outline the components making up each activity. This delineates the unit of analysis and indicates how the activities as a whole system were made up. Part 3 will highlight the key tensions and contradictions evident in each activity. The conclusion then summarises the key issues that emerged in this case study.

### **Part 1: The 4<sup>th</sup> year MBChB public health and primary health care block: a brief recap**

The 4<sup>th</sup> year medical students have to complete an eight week block in which they learn about both public health and primary health care. The PH section teaches them about studying the health of populations through conducting epidemiological research and requires them to employ quantitative methods of biostatistics. They conduct research, summarise their findings and then present these findings on campus to their epidemiological supervisors, other staff in the departments and fellow students, as well as to members of the domestic workers’ union the following week. Based on the findings the students then plan, design and implement a health promotion project with their community partners.

The nature of the project they implement is negotiated with the union members, in consultation with the Site Facilitator, Anna, and the 4<sup>th</sup> year Site Co-ordinator, Joan. The nature of this more qualitative project emerging from the findings of the epidemiology research project can range from a workshop, a radio programme, an awareness campaign,

a pamphlet, to a combination of all these. Throughout the eight weeks duration of this block, the students are required in addition to complete a learning journal in which they reflect on their learning experience, linking it to course outcomes and principles of public health and primary health care. From the PH and PHC block it is hoped that there would be benefit for both the students and their community partners.

It is important to note three things about the nature of the service learning before we proceed. Firstly, students do not have a choice about which community site they will be allocated to nor who their larger student grouping will be. Secondly, this project forms part of a much larger, ongoing project on occupational health and safety in this sector that commenced a few years ago. The members of SADSAWU therefore, while they have not had experience working with medical students in a block such as the PH and PHC, have had experience of being linked to academics and activists at the university, particularly through the Department of Sociology. Thirdly, the students' timetable, more so than the EGS course, is highly regulated: students have no choice in the curriculum over the six years of their degree programme, nor when they will complete this block during the course of their fourth year.

### **The project with the domestic workers**

As noted in Chapter 2, the project with the domestic workers' union was not in a 'community' context in the same way as the EGS case was. The project was based in the union offices in Woodstock, while the domestic workers themselves are employed in a variety of wealthy neighbourhoods in and around Cape Town. While many of the workers live-in with their wealthy employers, they come from historically disadvantaged communities in and around Cape Town. The domestic workers' sector in South Africa is probably the most marginalised sector in the economy and yet it is one of the most entrenched forms of labour for black, working class women. Fish (2005) undertook a detailed research project on the sector and she begins her study with the following observation:



South Africa embodies paradox. Tourists flock to the nation to see international landmarks such as Table Mountain ... and even Nelson Mandela's prison cell on Robben Island. Yet these destinations remain inaccessible for the majority of the population ... [W]ithin these paradoxical ... realities, what most powerfully encapsulates the contradiction between democracy and severe social inequality is the *normalcy* by which South Africa is maintained and almost unquestionably reproduced by the black women domestic workers who collectively denote what I assert to be the strongest vestige of the apartheid era. A morning walk through Cape Town's affluent Sea Point<sup>41</sup> neighbourhood reveals the embedded familiarity of paid household labour in South Africa.

At 7.00 am, women pour off city buses and taxis to work as day labourers in gated, high-level security homes facing the striking Atlantic seaside. They have travelled two hours by now. Those workers who 'live-in' in these homes to work as full-time 'maids', are easily identified throughout the neighbourhood. They are walking the dogs, hanging the laundry, pushing (white) children in prams along gated avenues, shaking rugs from the balconies, cleaning the windows from the daily saltwater residue, and even shopping in stores they could not begin to afford for their employers' daily groceries – from which their own meal will be rationed if they work for a 'nice madam'. Their occupation is easily identifiable to even the most unfamiliar visitor; they are the only black women in this residential community (Fish 2005:1-2; emphasis in the original).

The South African Domestic Servants and Allied Workers' Union (SADSAWU) was launched in 2000 emerging from other unions and operates from offices in the Congress of South African Trade Union (COSATU) offices in Salt River/Woodstock. The project with SADSAWU was initiated by Anna. She had worked with Josh, a colleague based in the Sociology Department at UCT, who has for years worked with the domestic workers' sector on a range of research, advocacy and policy issues. One of the areas of concern for him, and linked to his work of producing educational materials for the union, was the issue of health and safety in the workplace. Anna, too, had this interest and had previously worked for a non-government organisation (NGO) specialising in occupational health and safety issues. The conditions of employment for domestic workers are covered under the South African Basic Conditions of Employment Act (1993). This is the first time that domestic workers have been covered in legislation regarding conditions of employment.

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<sup>41</sup> Sea Point is an affluent historically White residential area along the picturesque Atlantic seaboard.

However, given the marginalised status of the sector and the largely ‘invisible, personalised’ workplace, many employers do not comply with many aspects of the law. At the first meeting, one worker put it like this:

*We are a trade union with a difference – we need to build a different relationship with our employer there are often only two people in the house, not like in other workplaces* (Field notes 9 September 2004).

The workers went on to say that health issues are not only physical; emotional and mental abuse is also prevalent. However, the tasks and requirements of domestic workers vary greatly and they are involved in ‘reproducing the household’ in many different ways:

Inside the homes of white South Africans – as well as the small group of ‘newly elite’ employers – domestic workers literally reproduce the household on a *daily* basis. They iron every garment, prepare and serve most meals, care for children of all ages, and maintain an astonishing level of cleanliness that relieves employers of any responsibility for picking up after themselves. These standards extend to South Africa’s public spaces as well – where black women are employed on a full-time basis in almost all private and public institutions. Their daily presence – serving tea, washing the office dishes, and tidying up – reinforces the privilege of leaving the ‘dirty work’ to black women (Fish 2005: 2; emphasis in the original).

It is these tasks, and the accompanying emotional stress and challenges impacting on the health and safety of workers in private homes, that the medical students’ project set out to research and make visible. The students were thus linked to the project in the following way: they conducted epidemiological research, doing interviews with domestic workers in their place of employment for the PH component of their block. Based on their findings, they then initiated a workshop on occupational health and safety as a health promotion strategy in the PHC section of the block as well as producing a brochure on occupational health and safety issues. During the eight weeks of the service learning the students also had to attend lectures, tutorials and workshops as part of their course.

Prior to the first meeting an agreement was reached around the roles and responsibilities of the union, the students and Josh, the academic in Sociology. A summary of the overall

aims of the project, including the roles and responsibilities of the Sociology academic, the union and the students respectively, were outlined in the in the project documents:

We will co-operate on parts of a specific project with the aims of:

- Strengthening the union.
- Promoting the learning of the students.
- Contributing to research on issues facing domestic workers.
- Serving domestic workers by contributing to the production of an information leaflet and thereafter a manual for domestic workers around the health and safety of domestic workers.
- The academic – facilitate liaison between the students and the union and to draw on the students' work to produce a health and safety manual.
- The union – assist the students with access to union members and respect the students' timetable and deadlines.
- The students – respect the democratic structures and processes of the union and make their data from the epidemiology research available to the union for use towards the health and safety manual to be produced as part of the bigger health and safety project (Project Agreement Guidelines document September 2004).

## **Part 2: Activity system of the students: becoming a doctor in the context of South Africa**

The following three activities: the introductory meeting, the presentation of the epidemiology research findings and the occupational health and safety workshop, represent the nested activities of this activity system. Together they provide the unit of analysis for looking at how the students engage with the community, what they do together, what tools are used and the kinds of roles, identities and power relations that get enacted. As I have argued in Chapters 3 and 4, it is important to see that these activities together constitute the activity system as they are linked to achieving the overall goals of the course. In this section I shall do two things: provide a vignette of each of the activities and present the activities as one activity system.

## 2a: The three nested activities

*The three activities I observed all took place in Salt River House, the COSATU regional offices. Salt River House is a very unremarkable building in the semi-industrial suburb of Salt River. Next to it are small corner shops and clothing and textile factories. To get inside the building, one has to take a lift to the fourth floor where one is then given access via a security gate. Inside the fourth floor, are a number of offices used by different trade unions including SADSAWU. Banners of COSATU adorn the tables and pamphlets lie around covering workers' issues. As other unions also use it, the office is busy – it is very much a 'working office' with a strong element of 'politics' in the banners and discourses – everywhere people are referred to as 'Comrade'. Except for in some of the individual offices, there is very little evidence of technology, e.g. overhead projector, and no curtains on windows that have broken panes (Field notes 9 September 2004).*

### Activity 1: The initial meeting, 9 September 2004

The first meeting was the beginning of negotiating the specificities of the project. Anna had already negotiated access to the union and this meeting was the result of that process. I observed and captured the following in my field notes:

*I managed to find the building and went up the lift to the fourth floor of Salt River House, the regional offices of COSATU where SADSAWU has an office. It was a small room that we met in. Seats were in short supply yet many of the students kept their seats. This meeting was aimed at identifying the project that the students would do with the SADSAWU for their epidemiology and health promotion projects.*

*Mavis, General Secretary of SADSAWU, said that it is important to get a clear sense of what they – the students – would like the research project to be about and she is going to ask the students to introduce their own projects. Anna, the Site Facilitator then introduced herself and we all went around and introduced ourselves. We were still squeezed into this small room as the bigger meeting room was being used for training. The women who were there apologised for their other members not being present but many of them are working. They then asked the students to introduce and share details of their planned projects.*

*The students explained that they have eight weeks for this project and that 'we are going to be looking at hazards and health and safety issues for domestic workers. Then, for the health promotion, we will go out with domestic workers and do programmes'.*

*Anna then intervened to clarify issues. She said that 'we need to clarify where you are coming from. The students will be able to respond to a request for research. They need to get exposure to doing research but based on your needs. Josh's project is part of a broader project to which this project can contribute'.*

*The workers then spoke about how 'we have never had people working with the domestic workers about health and we as SADSAWU don't know the environments that domestic workers are working in, what they are exposed to. We need to find out their conditions, the conditions of the individual domestic worker, her health and her workplace, so perhaps you ought to meet with individual workers'. The students then came into the conversation: 'When we thought about the potential hazards, we tried to brainstorm. These could be occupational, conditions to and from work, safety alone at home. Maybe we can find out from you what the major problems are so that we could target those areas'. Another student carried on that 'seeing the union isn't too clear about the problems, perhaps we can try and find out real issues in the actual workplace because that is difficult to get access to'.*

*Mavis then identified that for both groups – the students and the domestic workers – it was the first time and there was nothing like this in South Africa so they must see it as an important pilot for improving conditions for domestic workers. She added: 'We are both going to learn and we need to accept that there could be snags – it is difficult to get access to domestic workers and because of fears – it is going to be hard work – you will get a degree and maybe we will too'. There was some laughter after this last comment. Another worker then said: 'You as students will be part of fighting against the agencies that are involved in selling workers'. This domestic worker then also said that domestic workers are women, just like the women they are working for. If they can understand that they are women, then half their battle is won. There are more than 1 million domestic workers with the numbers growing all the time because many young women can't get any other kind of job. 'In the SADSAWU we have 3800 workers on our books. You will be pioneers for starting this – so you have a quite a big role in this, so you have to be successful because then we can start with the same [kinds of activities and research] in other areas. We don't turn anyone away [from the trade union] but will explain how important it is to be part of the trade union– it costs them R10 per month'.*

*One of the workers then said: 'We will work on the workers as we need workers that will work for you. We will get a group of workers organised for those three days and otherwise you can come to meetings with us. We need to get the right domestic workers for you who are accessible and open, we need to negotiate access for you to the specific workplace, we need to work out how we are going to do this'.*

*At the end of the meeting, Anna then tried to get the students to express what they think they heard. One of the students said that they will go back with some ideas, e.g. about chemicals, physical dangers and threats, emotional issues – that 'domestic workers do not always have a great relationship and that this is an important part of the work and life of a domestic worker. It is almost how the one sort of [abuse] overpowers the others'. The key point the workers made at this meeting was that they as workers with knowledge and experience of the sector, needed to select workers for the research: 'domestic workers are very vulnerable and often need to be protected from their employers'. The students had to agree to this process (Field notes 9 September 2004).*

### Activity 2: The epidemiology research presentations, 5 October 2004

The second activity I observed was the two epidemiological presentations the students needed to make as part of the PH component of the course – on campus and to the union. On campus the students were required to present their findings to the other medical students and their epidemiology supervisors. The following week they presented to the union. I was invited to attend both; my analysis however is based on the second, off campus presentation as it is this activity that formed part of the activity system with the union.

*The classrooms on campus are equipped with the facilities for power point presentation, there are white/black boards and students were seated in rows. The presentation room was a formal seminar room based at the medical campus where all the 4th year students completing this block were presenting their epidemiology findings. I noticed that the students were very smartly dressed and serious about their presentation. The students all spoke from within what I will term the 'academic' discourse and it will be interesting to see what happens in the health promotion project. I say an 'academic' discourse because they, like the other groups, were drawing on their scientific, medical knowledge. Their slides also represented this. They talked about their methodologies – all about statistics and sampling. They talked about validity and how in their case they used convenience as opposed to random sampling.*

*The following week the students presented their epidemiology findings to the union. Once again it was a formal presentation with power point. I found it particularly interesting that they chose to present their findings in the same format as they did on campus. This is a tool that is very familiar in an academic environment but it is not something that is necessarily familiar in a more informal environment such as this meeting. In addition, the slides were faint as the sun was shining through the window on which there were no blinds – a very different context from the formal seminar room I had witnessed the previous week*

*The students seemed quite keen to do this presentation but also a little nervous. They were less smartly dressed than on campus the previous week. They started by saying that 'we left out quite a lot of the language used in the presentation to the university and rather focused on what we thought you might need'. Initially they used quite a lot of the same data they had used at UCT but indicated that this study was 'unchartered territory for all of us'. The students then said that if there were to be further studies, they would want better time management in the whole project; they also felt that 'while our study has fulfilled what it set out to do, there are huge needs in the domestic worker population and many more studies are needed like this'. The domestic workers were sitting with copies of the students' reports. At times during the presentation the students seemed to lose their way and had to ask classmates to help them out. I found myself asking: Is it easy for students to ask for help? How do students move away from individual competitiveness towards partnerships and collaboration in projects like these?*

*One of the domestic workers then asked whether the students were available for workshops on Saturdays and the students seemed quite taken aback by this question. This conversation then became very busy – on the one hand, the students were saying that workshops were difficult to organise and that they had limited time, then some of the domestic workers were saying they needed to get home to cook supper (for their employer in most cases as they 'lived in'). All the while Student G was trying to get clarity on the possible focus 'chemical hazards or ergonomical hazards'. Someone else then started again: 'Weekends are best' and then student G: 'How much impact can their workshop have on empowering the domestic workers?' One of the workers then said: 'A lot of the employers buy all new products on TV so it would have a big impact'.*

*One of the students then interrupted: 'A concern with the workshop is the number of people that can be reached. Where will the greater benefit come from – the workshop or the brochure? We are willing to be flexible'. The domestic workers then responded: 'You people give us a workshop (the committee) and then have a booklet for the others – we will go out and educate the others'. One student then added that domestic workers 'can use the brochure to educate their employers' (Field notes 5 October 2004)*

### **Activity 3: The health promotion workshop, 17 October 2004**

The health promotion workshop was the third nested activity and the culmination of the students' engagement with SADSAWU. As an outcome of the previous activity, they had agreed to design a workshop on occupational health and safety to be presented to the union members as well as a brochure. This was the health promotion strategy and it is linked to the goals of the Primary Health Care part of their course.

*It was a hot Sunday afternoon at the beginning of summer when I went to attend the workshop the students were offering to the members and representatives of SADSAWU. There were nine members of the union there as well as the seven students, Anna and I. I arrived at Salt River House while they were having lunch – the students had brought tea, coffee and sandwiches.*

*The workshop was started by singing the South African National anthem with a lot of passion from the members. It ended with 'Viva COSATU, Viva – Viva Women's League, Viva!'<sup>42</sup> The students were quite muted during the singing of the anthem.*

*To begin the meeting Sandra introduced the 'Comrades' and said: 'We have gone through the process and now here we are'.*

*The students started by saying that they wanted the workshop to 'be some sort of use for some benefit – 'we are not only going to tell you what we found but also equip you with skills'. Student H was talking in front of a huge COSATU banner which was also used as a table cloth. I thought the contrast interesting: student from UCT, COSATU banner in black, red and yellow, the colours of the South African Communist Party.*

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<sup>42</sup> 'Long live COSATU, long live. Long live the [ANC] Women's League, long live'.

*Another student from the student group explained the workshop. She started by asking: 'What are you expecting/ what do you think we can teach you?' I found this an interesting opening as it represented a bit of the formal workshop mode<sup>43</sup> and she also used all the correct workshop terms like 'breaking into groups, scribes' – I found myself wondering whether she had learnt this in primary health or from her own experience. However, while she used the terms I wasn't sure that she 'owned' them completely. She then proceeded to break the domestic workers into two groups with newsprint and felt tip pens. I was struck by how familiar the domestic workers were with the workshop mode and they immediately went into 'role' of workshop participants. One group even broke away from the main room to go into another one and both groups started talking. They were to discuss their expectations of the workshop.*

*Later:*

*The whole workshop then took another turn and became quite funny when one of the domestic workers started acting out. A volunteer worker was asked for by Student H to demonstrate picking up a basket to see whether they were doing 'it correctly'. The whole exercise became quite a farce. One of the workers then exaggerated the role of picking up a basket and made fun of the role play including the student who was running it.*

*'Seven minutes left' was heard from the back of the room. Student H then started demonstrating another role play on ironing showing the technique. While this is going on, Felicia gets up to do a little ironing skit<sup>44</sup> in the corner. One of the other domestic workers said, as if she felt sorry for the student 'ok, I get your point, won!' Felicia then said that picking up a basket is difficult – for the 'fuller person – she can go halfway down but I am not sure if she can come up again!' One of the other domestic workers put it like this: 'jou maag kom in tussen jou bene<sup>45</sup> – ok, then you must tuck your tummy in'. There was laughter from both students and workers. The domestic workers were then talking about the specific products and how their employers all like to try the new ones. Maud also spoke of the Jacuzzi she has to clean – 'jacuzzi, jafusi, of wat ook al dit is – dit is 'n groot ding om te clean'<sup>46</sup>.*

*She then started demonstrating how she runs up and down the stairs holding her pants up and describing how she did it – everyone was laughing! I felt it was good for the workshop as it seemed to relax everyone a bit. Maud was then saying that 'there is a phone in every room but you can't forward calls from them – so I have to go and call them for the phone'. I reflected on how the domestic workers were drawing from the own experience and the role play seems to have entertained both themselves and the students. It is quite fascinating the way in which they develop a sense of 'tragi-comedy' and in this way, provided a new tool for the activity as well as served to 'disrupt' the division of labour and educator/ learner roles (Field notes 17 October 2004).*

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<sup>43</sup> By this I mean the 'workshop practice' of asking for 'aims and expectations' at the beginning, something that strongly represented much of the non-formal education programmes of the 1980s that I and these workers would have participated in, not the students.

<sup>44</sup> This is an Afrikaans word for a performance in which you poke fun at someone or something. This term is used often in both English and Afrikaans in South Africa.

<sup>45</sup> 'Your stomach comes in between your legs' i.e. it is in the way

<sup>46</sup> 'Jacuzzi, jafusi, whatever it is called – it is a big thing to clean'.



## **2b: The MBChB activity system: three linked, nested activities**

This section presents the three activities as an activity system as this enables us to look at system tensions and contradictions in the final part of the chapter.

### **Subjects**

As indicated in Chapter 3, I am looking at the activity system from the point of view of the *students as subjects*. In this case they are a group of seven medical students who are working on this site. Students are allocated to groups at the beginning of the course in an attempt to mix them in terms of diversity: language, ethnicity, and gender. As they are training to be medical doctors, they come into the activities with a joint identity – both as learners in higher education and as aspiring doctors. This second identity is further shaped by them being asked to be ‘public health’ oriented doctors with an interest in primary health care. I look at identity and the way it shifts when looking at division of labour below as well as in Part 3 in the section on system contradictions.

### **Community**

In all three activities, the community consists of the students, the domestic workers and worker representatives, as well as the Site Facilitator. At both the first meeting and the epidemiology presentation, the epidemiology supervisors – while not physically present – are also part of this community in the sense that they guide the students’ public health projects as well as assess the final product.

### **Objects**

An ‘object’ implies an overall direction for a project or activity (Russell 2002). In terms of the students’ curriculum, the objects have been designed with specific learning outcomes in mind as noted in the first section of this chapter.

### ***The initial meeting***

At this meeting the object was twofold:

- To get clarity on the nature of the health issue that will form the basis of their epidemiology project.
- To have a process set up through which they can identify their sample of workers to interview.

Meeting these two goals will enable them to meet their long term object, namely getting a medical degree and becoming a doctor. Linked to this however is ensuring that the needs of the domestic workers will be met too. This put pressure on the students and at times they felt that they weren't getting some of the answers to their questions:

The questions I asked included: 'What is the motivation behind the trade union representatives' will to study the prevalence of occupational health and safety hazards [for] domestic workers?' I later came to realize that the representatives themselves did not have clear reasons as to why they want such a study ... I did not receive an adequate answer to my question ... as a result I became overwhelmed by the unnecessary information that I received during the discussion (student E, journal entry 1).

In this meeting, the domestic workers seemed to have more clarity about what these objects are and play an educative role in enabling the students to feel that the project will work. It is clear that they feel confident of themselves and wish to assist the students:

*Mavis then asked again 'Where did the research project come from?' One of the students indicated that they need to do research and learn research skills but that they don't really know what is motivating the domestic workers to get involved in this project with them. One of the domestic workers then said: 'We want to know what you people need to know ... you need to do it as part of your course and we need to try and get domestic workers for you to interview' (Field notes 9 September 2004).*

### ***The epidemiology presentations***

The object of the second activity was threefold: to develop their presentation skills; to present data so as to inform the members of the union of the occupational health and safety hazards affecting their members; and to develop a plan for the health promotion

project in conjunction with the union. This meant that they had to shift their mind set from public health to health promotion, two quite different discourses. One student commented how, in shifting contexts for their presentation from campus to the union, she acquired new knowledge and skills:

Putting myself in the shoes of a domestic worker made it easy for me to decide what was important to present and how best to present it. While I realized my ability to empathise with people, I also feel it is an important skill for health professionals to acquire as it may help improve the relationship between them and their patients (student E, journal entry 2).

### ***The workshop***

In the final activity three main objects were identifiable. Firstly to offer health and safety information to domestic workers, secondly to develop primary health care skills particularly in running an intervention like a workshop and thirdly to improve the knowledge and skills of these students as trainee doctors so that they might be able to improve the health care system. This includes learning about occupational health and safety. It was clear that the students had prepared well and that a lot of thought had gone into the ways in which they came into the workshop. However what comes through in the quote below is that while one might plan for a particular outcome, these are never guaranteed and one has to be open to unexpected events.

When we implemented the workshop a lot of work had to be done. Theoretical planning is easy but when it comes to the actual implementation things become tough. Part of the implementation included organizing and attending various meetings with different people to get ideas on how to run a workshop and what information to include. One of our meetings with [an assistant of Josh] had to be postponed since he had taken ill. We had to reschedule the meeting for another day. From this experience I learnt that as much as one can plan, things don't always go according to plan and therefore one should be ready for the unexpected and have alternatives or a back-up plan. A lot of work went into preparing for the workshop (student F, journal entry 3).

## **Tools**

Here I shall discuss the tools that were evident in each of the three activities. From a Vygotskian and post-Vygotskian lens, understanding the tools of mediation is key to making sense of learning processes and practices.

### ***The initial meeting***

In the first meeting the tools mediating learning were: the public health knowledge of the students (in particular their new knowledge of statistics), and the knowledge and experience of the domestic workers. The knowledge of the domestic workers became crucial in this activity and this was shown by the process of negotiating a sample as exemplified in the meeting described in part at the beginning of this section.

### ***The epidemiology presentations***

The tools in evidence were the students' epidemiology findings based on their questionnaire data, their power point presentation slides, their developing primary health care knowledge and the knowledge of the domestic workers. The main tool, the epidemiology data, was the outcome from the previous activity. This tool set up interesting dynamics which played themselves out in roles and the ways in which different discourses were made visible. I discuss this when looking at tensions later.

### ***The workshop***

The tools in evidence here were both conceptual and practical. The workshop was the main mediating tool. It was the space that enabled the students to convert the object and ultimate outcome of their previous activity, i.e. to develop an appropriate health promotion strategy, into a tool for this next activity. Linked to this and in fact essential to it, were the experiences and knowledge that the domestic workers have. This was to prove incisive in the way in which the activities, and thus the rules, roles and division of labour, played themselves out during the event. The final tool of relevance here is the

more formal knowledge about health and safety that the students offered in the workshop.

*One of the students, student H, then ran the next session and introduced the concept of 'psycho-social' – that both the mind and the environment play a role in hazards. He has a nice manner of facilitating. The group seemed to be really listening to this session as I think it seemed to give them a vocabulary and a language of description for what they probably feel all the time at work. It seems that these more 'subtle' hazards are harder than the physical and harder to deal with or confront – again, the issue of power relations comes up here. Student H has a good manner, respectful of the women here and the reality of their lives (Field notes 17 October 2004).*

## **Rules**

For the time that they work together, members of a community of practice can be said to share some degree of joint enterprise, they are mutually engaged in the activity, and through the activity, develop a shared repertoire. Both the students and the workers are members of two very different communities of practice that come together in this project and therefore there are very different rules shaping their interactions.

### ***The initial meeting***

The students showed their uncertainty about the domestic workers' world and how to interact with the workers in the context of a meeting, as this is a very different context from their formal classrooms. Through the meeting, the domestic workers were able to bring their history of domestic work to offer some kind of challenge to the students' knowledge of occupational health and safety. They know under what conditions these women work thereby allowing them to point out to the students some of the issues they need to take into account when working with domestic workers:

*Mavis introduced the meeting and the issues. She started off by pointing out that it is not easy to get into the domestic worker context 'because domestic workers are women who are scared and fearful and who are women who have been exploited for a whole lifetime. Because of this, students need to have a lot of patience and understanding in working with them' (Field notes 9 September 2004).*

In other words, the students come in as a community of learners – both as individual and group learners and they have developed a strong sense of this identity. The academic conventions that they are familiar with, brush up against another reality, a set of norms and values that provide a challenge to these, more traditional, conventions.

### *The epidemiology presentations*

The rules operating in the epidemiology presentations were visible in the discourses present. Through the power point presentation, the students' formal discourse was very visible, including the use of epidemiological language and statistics. The context of the domestic workers was present in two ways: in the content of the slides the students had produced on the one hand, and in the ways in which the workers were able to engage with the students during the presentation on the other. This played itself out in interesting ways in the division of labour.

### *The workshop*

The third activity showed up the issue of rules in very particular ways. Unlike in the other two activities where the rules were largely determined by the learning needs of the students (even when they were challenged), the workshop brought with it an interesting set of non-formal norms, values and routines. These played an important role in shaping the interaction of the students and their tools, particularly their knowledge of health and safety and their ability to run a successful workshop. This was evident in the vignette earlier in the chapter. I also noted how rules shaped workshop behaviour and norms:

*[A student] then proceeded to break the domestic workers into two groups with newsprint and kokis. I found it interesting how familiar the workers were with the workshop mode – they immediately went into 'role' of workshop participants. One group even broke away from the main room to go into another one and both groups started talking. They were to discuss their expectations of the workshop (Field notes 17 October 2004).*

The workshop mode also made the experiential learning and identities of the workers more evident and it was clear (as indicated above) that these women were very familiar with and comfortable in this space. They used this experience to challenge, humour and

ultimately, teach the students about the contextualised nature of their working lives. There was evidence in other words, of a strong situated learning (Lave & Wenger 1991) dimension to the activity and the ways in which this understanding of practice shapes learning.

### **Division of labour**

Division of labour speaks to issues of roles, power relations and time and space. Issues of time and space were particularly important given the pressures on the students in their curriculum. What was evident across the three activities was how roles and power relations shifted in the service learning course.

### ***The initial meeting***

The students entered the first meeting with very clear objectives and were in a learner role. The public health part of their curriculum with its emphasis on statistics and research meant that they needed to interview a sample of the domestic workers. The students were required to put into practice their statistical knowledge and are pushing for a random sampling of their respondents. However, the role and experience of the domestic workers challenged this intention. They argued that given the marginalised and disempowered nature of the sector, many workers were not able to be interviewed. They thus offered to self-select workers whom they knew would be available and for whom participating in the research would not pose threat to their jobs:

*The workers continued: 'Maybe the first thing is to complete the questionnaire ... streamline the questionnaire and leave gaps, we will work on the workers ... we need workers that will work for you. Maybe we should work out questions or maybe we should help you with your questions so that we can say whether it is not too direct or irrelevant. We will get a group of workers organised for those three days and otherwise you can come to meetings with us.'*

*Another worker went on to say: 'We need to get the right domestic workers for you who are accessible and open, we need to negotiate access for you to the specific workplace, we need to work out how we are going to do this ... in the end, you want to bring something out from here' (Field notes 9 September 2004; emphasis to indicate tone)*

Through these comments the domestic workers demonstrated their knowledge of the sector and the needs, privacy and rights of workers that need to be respected. In so doing, they offer a challenge to the students on their selection of a sample and emphasise who is in control of the process:

*One of the workers then replied: ‘So actually you are at our mercy, I like that!’ Everyone laughs, the students a little nervously I thought (Field notes 9 September 2004; emphasis to indicate tone).*

This shifted the nature of the sample for research from random, which the students had been pushing for, to convenience, which the members of SADSAWU offered. By so doing it shifted power towards the domestic workers in determining the sample for the research.

### ***The epidemiology presentations***

In these presentations the division of labour was shaped very strongly by the rules of the students’ more academic, research-oriented discourse. The students came in as researchers, equipped as they were with their epidemiology report findings. They drew heavily on this more ‘scientific medical discourse’ which was strongly evident in their power point slides. This enabled them to feel that they were offering the workers evidence based on scientific data and reinforced the researcher role they were playing. The workers, however, were able to offer a slight challenge to the division of labour through humour, a strong feature of their community of practice:

*‘So, that is our presentation, that is what we found – now we are going for more of a discussion – but perhaps we can get together in a circle’*

*This shifted the discussion in useful ways. One of the domestic workers introduced herself: ‘Hello, I am still Maud...’ laughter. I observed that the domestic workers have a great sense of humour that they use in very creative ways to inject into the discussion and almost at times, this enables them to take some degree of control back and away from the students (Field notes 5 October 2004; emphasis to indicate tone).*



The division of labour and roles were also challenged when negotiations began on the topic and outcome for their health promotion intervention. I shall discuss this later when looking at the tensions that emerged in this activity.

### *The workshop*

In the workshop, the division of labour was very interesting as it did not stay constant but shifted and changed as the workshop progressed for a number of reasons. The students in this activity were in the role of both 'oldtimers' and 'novices' (Lave & Wenger 1990). They were oldtimers in the sense of being learners but novices or 'newcomers' in their role as facilitators. This dual role came out quite strongly, both in the way in which they facilitated the workshop, but perhaps more significantly, in the way in which they were re-positioned as learners when the workers corrected them on some of the knowledge and skills they were presenting.

The roles that the workers displayed here were challenging and even to some extent undermining of the role of the students. There was a combination of three roles I observed in all the activities: a 'mother/educator-activist-worker' combination. I discuss this more fully when looking at discourses and roles in Chapter 7. However these came out forcefully in two ways in this activity. In the first instance, the workers corrected some of the suggestions the students made for cleaning materials and working with poisons based on their own experience (discussed under 'contradictions' later), showing a combination of their worker and mother identity or role. Secondly, there was a big element of disruption when the workers took over one of the role plays to demonstrate the 'correct ergonomical' technique for ironing clothes and lifting heavy loads, as we saw in the original vignette of this activity. However they did this through inserting humour into the activity, a strategy often used by workers in collective action as a way of dealing with difficult issues. I discuss humour as an element of the domestic workers' identity and discourses further in Chapter 7 (also see Cooper 2005 for more on this). This made visible their activist identity.

In this activity therefore, while the workers were the participants, they were very experienced participants as well as being educators drawing on their experiential

knowledge to challenge the more formal knowledge presented by the students. Through these multiple identities they were able to feel confident in the workshop and offer a real learning possibility for those students open to it.

## Outcomes

### *The initial meeting*

The outcome of the initial meeting was both expected and unexpected. The students emerged with information that informed their questionnaire development, so they could ultimately complete their epidemiology research project report, the output for this component of the course. However the process to achieve this and the negotiation around the sample was unexpected. Secondly, they identified a process with the workers that would involve them in interviewing domestic workers. This was the hoped for outcome and as such it was a successful meeting. At the end of the meeting, the students agreed to be guided by the union representatives in terms of selecting the sample for the interviews.

At this meeting, the workers also indicated their own hoped for outcome for the project as a whole:

*When you are doctors, you must come back and show us your degrees or perhaps if some of your family are domestic workers or you are employing a domestic worker, you can come and tell us how you are treating them' (Field notes 9 September 2004).*

This outcome, while not in the students' control, was an important indicator of the nature of the engagement with the union. As Mary puts it:

The community members have often said: 'We are just happy that at long last doctors are coming to see how we live'. [By saying this] they feel that if doctors see how they live, they are going to understand them more, and maybe they'll come back to work [with them]down the line (Mary, interview 28.02.06).

### ***The epidemiology presentations***

In the epidemiology presentations, the outcomes were both anticipated and unanticipated. The students had been expecting to be asked to either run a workshop *or* design a brochure, not both. They had in fact offered a brochure as an outcome as it is one of the skills they had learnt in health promotion. When the domestic workers requested a workshop as the health promotion strategy, it was not one that they had anticipated. It was the activism of the workers that drove this outcome as we shall see later. It was evident therefore that this caused concern for the students in terms of time pressures as well as the skills to do it. As part of their health promotion course, they had learnt about this; translating this into reality however caused a large degree of tension for the students.

### ***The workshop***

The brochure was produced and presented to the union as had been agreed. An unanticipated outcome for some students was the depth of their learning. For most of the students it was clear that they realised they had gained far more than they expected – their learning extended way beyond that of learning to be doctors in the more ‘traditional, medical sense’. Two of the students’ comments on this were as follows:

As clichéd as it sounds, I will never forget this project and the lessons learned from it – even learning how to reflect and the importance of being a reflective person! But more than that I feel that for the first time since I started studying I have done something that I truly enjoy. With all its vital skills and abilities, medicine will never be able to truly approach a person as holistically as public health and primary health care can. Being allowed that privilege is the most appealing feature of medicine that I have discovered so far. As my studying journey continues, I will try and implement all that I have learnt not only to my studying career but to my personal [life] as well (student G, journal entry 2).

The only way you can really understand people, is to leave your personal problems, opinions and biases at the door. As human beings we have developed the ability to communicate how we feel using words, actions and expressions. You need to be willing to open yourself up, to really listen, to look and to feel in order to really understand (student H, journal entry 2).

For student G, it was learning about reflection, and about the importance of a 'holistic approach' to medicine while for student H, he realised that he as the doctor, needs to suspend judgement of his patients and learn to listen. He needs, in other words, to shift his own identity to understand those of his prospective future clients.

In summarising the outcomes for the whole block, Mary put it like this:

It is largely about what students can learn. It is also hoped that each project has some meaning for the organisation that it's negotiated with. But it's largely, hopefully, by taking the students there, by letting them work there they're going to become more community-oriented. On the other hand, you're hoping that the community organisation is strong enough to negotiate what would be useful for them ... even if it's minor but there is some benefit (Mary, interview 28.02.06).

### **Part 3: Contradictions within the system**

In this case study I noted two key contradictions that played themselves out in the activities. These are between tools, rules and division of labour and between rules, tools and object/outcome.

#### **Tools-rules-division of labour**

This contradiction refers to the relationship between the tools of mediation, the rules that meet up in the activity and the division of labour that emerges. This tension plays itself out across all three activities.

At the first meeting, the workers showed through their experience that the tool of a random sampling technique the students thought they would be able to use in the research will not work in a sector such as this. Given the vulnerability of many of the domestic workers, the SADSAWU representatives argued that they will select the workers for the students to interview. This move challenged the epidemiology tool of the students and shifted the roles that participants played in the research process. The reality of the domestic worker sector also does not enable the students to pilot their questionnaire before the research commenced which is one of the requirements of their

course. The students were thus unsure of who was responsible for formulating the research problem and perceived – at least at first – that the workers with whom they met did not know the issues. This makes them anxious about achieving the object of their course.

The fact that I felt that the representatives did not have a motivation for their study made me realize that it was our responsibility to come up with a motivation and set objectives for the study. I felt that there was too little time allocated for the activity and my knowledge of occupational health was limited (student E, journal entry 1).

Linked to the above point was the challenge of time and space and how this shaped roles and the activity. Time was an issue for both the students and the workers but the issues were different. For the students, this was linked to their highly pressurised curriculum and for the workers, their conditions of employment limits the mobility they might have during the day to attend meetings such as this one. This resulted in a tension around the ethos of working with the community:

It was happening again. There we were sitting in the shuttle, in the hot sun ... waiting, waiting yet again! Was it really so difficult to be on time? I wonder what the excuse is going to be this time? Would there even be an excuse? The frustration had been building up all week. Nothing had been going according to plan and time was running out (student H, journal entry 1).

Space was also important. The students were not familiar with being off campus save for being in a clinical context and so the office of the union was very new and different for them. This was obvious in their dress and their lack of familiarity with what goes on in a union office. The domestic workers in turn came to the meeting with a lot of relevant experience and confidence – both in the workplace as workers and in the struggle given their membership of the union. One of the students put it like this:

The conversations I held with representatives of [SADSAWU] gave me more insight into the many day-to-day issues faced by today's domestic workers. It was a challenge for me to engage in and maintain a conversation outside a clinical setting such as the one I was exposed to (student E, journal entry 1).

At the epidemiology presentations, this tension showed itself in two keys ways. Firstly, given that they were to present research findings to the union, the students came in very

much as traditional students with the tool of power point slides. However, the union offices as I have described provided a very different context from their lecture room on campus: there was no obvious technology, there were no blinds on the windows, and meetings were taking place in the other offices around them. Many of the students felt unsure of this. They indicated that they were unsure of what data to present and talk about and how to structure this differently from how they did the presentation on campus. Secondly they showed that they are not familiar with aspects of the workers' contexts – both in terms of the knowledge they presented as well as in some of the terms they used in their report. The workers challenged aspects of this, and this led to further anxiety for the students.

It was interesting to note how two students reflected on this experience and how different rules or conventions apply to different contexts, perhaps even shifting the object slightly. It captured not only the relevance of finding different ways to present data but also on how different tools are bound up with different norms, values and discourses (Gee 1990) and how different contexts impact quite differently both on students' learning and on their confidence and ability to deal with different (learning) contexts. The first student reflected as follows:

The [on campus] presentation of epidemiology studies by the groups was an enjoyable occasion indeed. I appreciated the academic atmosphere in which it was done ... (student E, journal entry 2).

Here the student is highlighting the fact that the university classroom provided an 'academic' atmosphere in which she felt far more comfortable presenting. Her reflection below captured quite different feelings about the presentation to the union.

When preparing for [this SADSAWU] presentation I had fear that our audience will not understand us if we are to present information in an academic fashion [like] we presented to our class. As time was against us we realized there was no time for a different style of presentation, we were [thus] compelled to present in the same way as we presented to our class. We felt the information was a lot for our audience to comprehend. So we decided to cut out some parts ... and we left what we thought was important and enough for our audience to know. (student E, journal entry 2).

In the workshop, the challenges were twofold. The first challenge to the students was the one brought by the experiences of the workers to the knowledge and skills offered by the students in the workshop. The lack of experience of students dealing with the workshop as well as occupational health and safety meant that the experiences and knowledge of the workers served as a real challenge to their own. As we have seen the workers drew on their humour and collective knowledge as evidence of their involvement, thereby bringing an agency to their presence at the workshop.

The second challenge was how to read the contexts of workers. This was not always accurate. It came up in the form of a challenge to some of the suggestions made about how to improve knowledge of cleaning procedures. One of the students suggested that they should read the labels of clothing carefully before washing them, when one of the workers asked what must be done should a worker not be able to read. I captured some of the ways in which the workers used their experience in the workshop to challenge and even teach the students:

*The student who was running this section seemed a little out of his depth and was quite nervous. Sandra then tells a joke about how she faded her husband's jeans by mistake with Jik<sup>47</sup> and then said 'I told him "don't worry my darling, you are now in fashion"'. The student then spoke of his own experience of washing his jeans by hand. From this experience he advised the workers 'try and minimise exposure, read the labels'. One of the domestic workers asked: 'For those of us who can't read, how do we do this?' The student laughed embarrassedly not realising that this could be true. A worker said: 'Perhaps you could ask a friend?' Someone else said: 'You don't want to expose yourself to a friend', while yet someone else said: 'A true friend would not make you feel exposed'.*

*Later:*

*Student F then offered some alternatives to some of the other hazards and jobs they had been discussing, for example oven cleaner: use a damp cloth and baking soda and scrape things off with a sharp knife. All the domestic workers shook their heads in disagreement – one of them said: 'No, then when you are in your room sleeping, your employer says, "oh my god, she has ruined my oven" and they come and wake you up'.*

*There was then an interesting discussion during which different domestic workers drew on their own experience in various ways. Mavis spoke of how they have developed ways of doing things because they are 'also domestic workers in their own homes'.*

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<sup>47</sup> 'Jik' is the brand name for the most common bleach for clothes washing sold in South Africa.

*Mavis used an example when explaining her experience, knowledge and preferences for doing things in a particular way: 'Madam, you don't understand. I can't use Vaseline intensive cream as I have to make Master a sandwich at lunch and then it smells like Vaseline'.*

*Student F then said: 'Perhaps you can help me with information because I might not have as much knowledge as you', indicating that she believed the domestic workers had knowledge (Field notes 17 October 2004).*

A key turning point in this activity was the moment the workers took over aspects of the role play activities, demonstrating that they had more knowledge than the students of the very contents the students were trying to demonstrate. Through this they also demonstrated the importance of humour as a key part of their discourse. This led to interesting shifts in roles of educator and learner, thus challenging power relations and the knowledge of the university in significant ways. What was significant therefore were the ways the domestic workers showed how familiar they were with being in 'workshop mode' and through this how they were able to use this tool to challenge some aspects of the division of labour between learner and educator roles at moments in the actual event. It is these complex and overlapping roles that provided for much of the tension and contradictory action in this activity.

### **Rules-tools-object/outcome**

This tension refers to the relationship between the rules, the tools of mediation and their use in working towards the object of the activity. Again, this tension led to outcomes that were both anticipated and unanticipated. In the first activity there was a tension over the object of the public health part of the course. In particular, the fact that the students were not able to select their own sample was a source of intense conflict for some students:

The process of collecting data seemed difficult and beyond our control but I realized that it was necessary to simply work with the little information [from the interviews with domestic workers] that we had. The inability to arrange appointments with our interviewees was a challenge because we relied on the union for the arrangements. As a result we waited patiently to meet with them (student E, journal entry 1).



What was highly evident in this activity is how the norms, values and habits of two very different communities clashed. The meeting shaped the interaction of the students as subjects and the tools they could use in the project, thus ultimately making them anxious about the object. This emerged as we saw in the discussion on the sample for their study. Had the students not taken this seriously, it would have meant undermining of the process of engagement with the union. The kind of frustration that students mentioned was also experienced in the actual epidemiology research process itself where the norms, values and pressures of the student community, brushed up against that of the domestic workers.

In the second instance the tension emerged as the workers drove the negotiation process around the workshop quite strongly and shaped the roles that developed. The workers felt that a workshop on health and safety would be an important event for them and useful for those that could attend it. However, given that many of their members would not be able to attend it because of their work pressures and realities they argued that a brochure would be an important addition. Many of the workers also criticised some of the terminology and findings of the report; they played more of a critique role and were confident doing this:

*Sandra from SADS AWU immediately apologised for not getting copies of the report out to others before this meeting – it was almost as if she went into a defensive yet strident mode immediately. The literature review was discussed and Sandra in particular felt very strongly about the use of language – ‘servants, maids’. The students immediately defended this saying they were quoting from a book and they wanted the right definition.*

*I felt surprised by the students not having a sense of the South African context and being able to problematise definitions. The domestic workers wanted to talk about some of the findings they had a problem with, e.g. ‘R30.80<sup>48</sup> being the average hourly wage is not correct, it is not a true reflection’.*

*Student G then took up the conversation again and said that over the next 2-3 weeks, they need to develop a health promotion project – to give them some kind of health promotion. ‘We would like suggestions about what could be a health promotion project. A workshop may be difficult to organise so how about a brochure?’ Sandra from SADS AWU then added ‘it might be better to have a workshop because then everyone can deal with the issues practically, however with time constraints, a brochure might be better’.*

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<sup>48</sup> At the time of writing this version of the chapter (November 2007) the SA Rand: US\$ exchange rate was 7:1.

*Student G then asked what the issues were that needed to go into the workshop and one of the workers said that 'perhaps they need to workshop this so that they could co-write the brochure' (Field notes 5 October 2004).*

In the workshop, the tension between rules, tools and object/outcome played itself out very clearly as I showed earlier in the chapter. There was a very real tension throughout between content and process. This tension was linked to the students' lack of experience in running such events but also indicated a tension between object/outcome, division of labour and tool. This was clearly an important learning moment in the activity system. The students were less familiar with the workshop as learning event than were the workers and they were anxious about achieving their desired outcome. This was significant in terms of the relationship between tools and outcome and emphasised how important this aspect of an activity system is.

## Summary

[I learnt that] doing the study was not doing it the way we wanted but rather what the trade union could provide us in terms of what they needed (student E, journal entry 1).

This chapter has provided a descriptive-analytic account of the nested activities making up the activity system that the medical students engaged in with the domestic workers union as part of their service learning course. I argued in Chapter 4 that service learning presents an educational context where there is an expanded notion of 'community' (university and 'other') and a dual overall object (learning and service). These two features serve to shape the activities that take place in significant ways. Based on this, the key points of contradiction lie in the relationship of the components of the activity system and in particular, between the community and the object, to the rules, tools and division of labour.

In other words, the dual object of the activities and the expanded community are dimensions of the a-priori service learning curriculum. How these dimensions impact on rules, tools and division of labour is however less predictable and constitutes the social action. Through this, we have seen how the students experience challenges to the

authority of their more ‘scientific’ discourse and knowledge, and how they begin to review their roles as future medical practitioners in the context of South Africa. One summarises her experiences in the following ways:

I found the Primary Health Care block very interesting and a very informative course. At the beginning of the course I never really thought about what I will learn from this block. I [also] got to learn about a different discipline of medicine which is Public Health. In Public Health I got an answer to some of the questions I used to have ... we learnt a lot about occupational health. I now appreciate the importance of asking my patients what job they do. Prior to my experience in this block, I used to ask patients about their job simply because I thought it a traditional practice in medicine to do so and a good way to create a rapport with the patient. I now know the real significance of asking patients about their employment (student E, journal entry 3).

For a second student, it was learning about and accepting his limitations:

As a medical student you learn quickly not to take things personally. You would never survive this course if you did. As we end this block, it is quite evident that it hasn't been about what we've done, but rather how we've gone about doing it. Most of us would have had a good idea of what our strengths were when we first started, but for some of us, it may have taken a lot longer to realise our limitations. Sometimes, you have to *break something in order to learn how to fix it* (student H, journal entry 3; emphasis added).

We turn now to Chapter 6, the EGS case study.



## **Chapter 6: Field-based research in human geography**

Chapter 2 provided some background detail to both the discipline of geography, including human geography, and the role and importance of field-based research as a tool for geographers. This chapter will be structured as follows. Part 1 will provide a broad recap of the service learning dimension of 315S which will include discussion on the partnership that formed the basis for the service learning. Part 2 presents the ‘descriptive-analytic’ account of the service learning in two ways: 2a describes each nested activity, including a short vignette of some of the social action from my field notes; 2b presents the activities as an activity system. Part 3 discusses the key contradictions that emerged. Unlike the MBChB case, these were not all evident across the system but were more prevalent in some activities.

### **Part 1: EGS 315S Interpreting the urban environment: a brief recap**

EGS 315S is a 3<sup>rd</sup> year urban geography course in the Department of Environmental and Geographical Sciences (EGS) in the Faculty of Science, UCT. The field-based human geography-oriented research project constitutes six weeks of the course, four sessions of which are in the field directly; the remaining two are classroom-based. As indicated in Chapter 2, before going into the community of Valhalla Park, students have two weeks of lectures. Before each practical session Susan, the Lecturer and Convenor of the practicals, meets with students to discuss the day’s specific field assignment. Students are divided into groups of three and four; students may self-select the groups in which they do their projects. Each group is given a map of a section of Valhalla Park to complete and they are assisted by members of the Valhalla Park Civic organisation. On the map they have to fill in the street names and, in this particular project, indicate which houses have backyard shacks. Only residents with backyard shacks are to be interviewed.

At the end of the six weeks, the students complete a research report consisting of both quantitative and qualitative data. They then present their findings to the class in a formal presentation to which members of the Civic organization as well as other members of the

EGS department are invited. In addition they have to complete four reflective journal entries during their fieldwork and are assessed on this as part of their mark for the course.

### **The project in Valhalla Park**

As discussed in Chapter 2, Susan has been using her work with Valhalla Park as a basis for her practicals since 2004. Valhalla Park is a historically ‘Coloured’ residential area consisting almost entirely of council houses built in the late 1970s and 1980s. It is located just off the national road leading to Durban<sup>49</sup> and near to Cape Town’s International airport. As part of the apartheid policies of separate development, Valhalla Park residents were moved into the houses from many different areas across the Cape Peninsula, many of which were then declared exclusive ‘White’ areas by the state. In talking to residents myself, I learned that for most of them, they were removed from established neighbourhoods, e.g. District Six<sup>50</sup> near the city centre, Wynberg and Claremont (ostensibly demarcated as ‘White’ residential areas and now largely middle class neighbourhoods) and Kensington, a racially diverse working class neighbourhood bordering on the inner city.

Susan had a pre-existing relationship with community members of Valhalla Park. In addition to this the community offered an exceptionally interesting research site due to the fact that it also provided the backdrop of a precedent-setting Supreme Court case (already referred to as the Second Grootboom Case<sup>51</sup>). In the case of Valhalla Park, the City of Cape Town brought an application for the eviction of 50 families living in the

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<sup>49</sup> Third largest city in South Africa located up the east coast in the province of Kwazulu Natal.

<sup>50</sup> This was a mixed residential area located near to the city centre and the site of some of the most brutal forced removals in the 1970s and 1980s under apartheid.

<sup>51</sup> In 1998 about 900 residents in the overcrowded Wallacedene settlement in the Cape Town had illegally occupied vacant, privately owned land that was earmarked for low cost housing. Via an eviction order to the Magistrate’s Court late in 1998 it was agreed that the occupiers would vacate the land by May 1999. One of the evicted people, Mrs Grootboom, sought relief on behalf of the residents by appealing to the Cape of Good Hope High Court on the ‘basis that their constitutional right to adequate housing and their children’s right to basic shelter had been denied’ (Huchzermeyer 2003: 86). In summary the community won the court case and a High Court judge issued an order that the Grootboom community be given protection and shelter, i.e. access to housing in the Wallacedene community. This was a precedent setting case – see Huchzermeyer (2003).

informal settlement of Sewende Laan<sup>52</sup>, a section of Valhalla Park, and the destruction of their homes. Some of the respondents in the case were living in abandoned car wrecks and one family even found overnight refuge in a school which they had to vacate at the crack of dawn to avoid detection.

The City of Cape Town wanted to demolish Sewende Laan and took up a case against the roughly 50 families whom they argued were ‘squatting illegally’ on council land. In a landmark ruling, the City lost the case, and lost again on appeal. The presiding judge found that the City was in a state of denial about its obligation to provide housing for the homeless beyond putting their names on a waiting list. In the judgement that was delivered (Selikowitz: Case 8970/01 2003) the presiding judge found that the City in fact ‘displayed and continues to display an unacceptable disregard for the order of the Constitutional Court - and therefore for the Constitution itself’ (ibid: 47)<sup>53</sup>. He said that the need for emergency provisions of the kind required by the Constitutional Court is underlined by the fact that the housing situation in Cape Town continues to deteriorate.

Following this court ruling, the Community Research Group (CRG), a community-based organization (CBO) based in Valhalla Park, decided it required data to prove that it is not only the housing situation in Sewende Laan which was dire, but that *Valhalla Park itself* was overcrowded due the number of so-called backyard squatters. Susan, as part of her work with the Anti Eviction Campaign (AEC)<sup>54</sup>, had been involved in setting up the CRG as a way of both assisting members of the Valhalla Park community develop research skills, but perhaps more importantly, to surface already existing skills. As she argues, many activists, through their advocacy and lobbying experience, have well-developed research abilities, but these have never been viewed by themselves as skills (Susan, interview 30.08.04).

The CRG was designed as a community-based research initiative to provide the VPUCF and community more broadly with data to continue their fight with the City of Cape

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<sup>52</sup> This translates as ‘Seventh Avenue’: the area was apparently named after a local English/Afrikaans television series of the same name that tells of the lives and loves of a small fictional community in South Africa.

<sup>53</sup> For full details on the case and the judgement, see reference (Selikowitz) at the end of the thesis.

<sup>54</sup> The AEC is social movement that focuses its work on access to housing for poor communities.

Town over housing and other service delivery issues. The initial case won against the City reflected the shortage of housing; however, so-called ‘backyard shacks’ were not counted in the initial research. In order to take this further therefore, the CRG designed a survey to collect data about the number of people living in backyards and the conditions that they were living in. They had already conducted the survey in about 50 households, but they needed to complete many more.

It was *this* survey, begun in 2004, which the EGS 315S students worked on with the VPUCF. Susan realised that if her students could help the CRG with their surveys it would be the perfect fit for both parties: the goals of the CRG would be met, while the students would get experience in collecting raw data and would be exposed to an interesting urban geographical context. The survey to be conducted by students in Valhalla Park was thus designed by the CRG with help from Susan. The class of 2005 – with whom I did my fieldwork – picked up from where the 2004 class had ended, using the same survey instrument.

### **The Valhalla Park United Civic Front (VPUCF)**

Historically, there were three community-based organisations in Valhalla Park: the Valhalla Park Civic Association, the Valhalla Park Tenants’ Association, and the Concerned Residents. These three organisations went through difficulties in surviving in one community and finally in 1996, an amalgamated organisation – the Valhalla Park United Civic Front (VPUCF) was formed. Patricia, who was Secretary of the Concerned Residents at the time, was elected Chair of the VPUCF, a position she holds to this day. She describes the work of the VPUCF as follows:

There’s youth organisations, and so on, but there is no other civic organisation doing the same thing that we as United Front civic organisation are doing – so we have got a really close up and good relationships with the community; and secondly, they are dependent on this organisation because as years went by we moved away from the housing issue. Our focus is still on housing but we are dealing with many more issues than that. We are dealing with maintenance, with child abuse, with women abuse, with pension grants – with all that kind of things we’re dealing now. So there’s no other place where the community can turn to. We also educate the people (VPUCF, group interview 20.06.04).



Susan describes the VPUCF and the nature of their work as follows:

The student research process and anything produced from it are part of a range of many initiatives undertaken by the Civic<sup>55</sup> within the neighbourhood itself. The Civic meets weekly and a wide range of actions has happened in the community, through which the Civic has established its credibility and capacity and generated trust among residents; for instance dramatic events such as land invasions, fighting interdicts by the council, attempts by the police and the army to remove people, a successful win in the High Court that legalized the informal settlement produced through the land invasion (Oldfield 2007a: 20-21).

Susan goes on to emphasise that any sort of delivery through a class research project or otherwise is not only shaped by the VPUCF and determined by it:

There is also a regular and regularized process through which the Civic engages with residents. This context does not mean that Civic activities are uniformly accepted or apolitical ... Civic activists have worked in the area for long and sustained periods (ibid: 21).

Perhaps most importantly the VPUCF members live in the same area as the residents and so face many of the same challenges on a daily basis. Susan describes the partnership between herself, her students and the VPUCF as follows:

In partnership with the Valhalla Park United Civic Front, a community-based organisation, the research undertaken for the course will also contribute to a development project on documenting families living in backyard shacks development in Valhalla Park. The research work will be contextualised in lectures, readings and discussions on the city, qualitative methodologies and selected critical issues in cultural and urban geography (Course outline 2005).

## **Part 2: Activity system of the students: human geography in context**

I have identified three nested activities which span the activity system: the orientation meeting and tour; the fieldwork sessions and the presentation of the findings to Susan, other students and VPUCF members. I see these as distinct yet coherent activities making up the activity system for the following reasons. Firstly, each of the nested

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<sup>55</sup> While I have used the acronym VPUCF for the organisation, Oldfield has used the term 'Civic' in her paper so I use this term where I quote her work.

activities is linked to the overall object and outcomes of the activity system, namely to learn mapping skills as urban geographers and to collect and present data to the VPUCF. Each of these objects is reflected in the final report, the outcome of the course. These activities are thus steps along the way to achieving the overall objects and outcome.

Secondly, the overall process of engagement with the Valhalla Park community remains constant across the activities. None of the activities, in other words, take place outside of this broader ‘activity system level’ community, namely the university and the Valhalla Park residents. Lastly, I see the overall service learning project as one activity system with three linked nested activities because the subjects of the system – the students – remain the focus across the three activities.

It is important to note two additional things about the service learning. Firstly, while the data collected by the students is useful for advocacy work by the VPUCF, VPUCF activists have always done research. This project is thus linked to Susan’s already existing project. Secondly, through the project with the VPUCF, Susan’s students link their fieldwork to a specific goal identified by a community-based organization and gain experience of doing research training, not in a vacuum but in the ‘real world’.

As noted in the previous chapter what will no doubt become clear is that I found it difficult to separate the activities out as I have done in Part 1: it felt somewhat false and static. This is because activity systems are not static: they are moving systems that can change and shift over time. Because of the fact that the different dimensions of the system impact on and influence each other, it seems counter to the purpose of using activity theory in the first place if one focuses on specific activities and not the system itself. However in presenting data, it is also important to develop the story, to provide the thick description before moving too quickly to analysis.

### **2a. The three nested activities**

The first two activities, the orientation meeting and tour, in addition to the mapping sessions, all take place in Valhalla Park as part of the field work practical the students have to complete on their course. The third activity, the project presentations, takes place

on campus at the end of the course. This section provides a short description of these fieldwork sessions taken from course documents and my own field work notes.

**Activity 1: The orientation meeting and tour, 20 July 2005**

The aim of the orientation meeting was twofold: to introduce the students to the VPUCF and the topic of the research, namely backyard shacks, and (perhaps more importantly) to orient them geographically and historically to the community of Valhalla Park. According to Susan, such an orientation session is crucial, as it creates a sense of geospatial issues in a very real way. It also introduces students to communities and locales off campus that many of them would never have encountered before. By way of introducing this activity Susan discussed some aspects of it in the classroom before we went out to the community. In the course handout the session was described as follows:

In this practical session we will be introduced to the Valhalla Park United Front Activists and to the Valhalla Park area with: an introductory talk by the United Front activists at the Valhalla Park library; and an orientation walk around different areas of Valhalla Park. You will need to bring with you: a street map (given out in class), and paper and pens for notes and observations (Class handout 20 July 2005).

In order to make the most of this session Susan told them to

... use your fieldwork, your own observations, your own analysis, conversations. Use your experience to connect with what other people have written about fieldwork more conceptually – fieldwork and journals are ways of recording participant observations. Reflexivity is reflection on the experience as well as what you think and feel about it. A lot of human geography starts with our observations as we need to look at and describe the built environment (Class session 20 July 2005).

I captured the following in my field notes:

*We all boarded the UCT staff and student transport called the Jammie Shuttle<sup>56</sup> and drove out to Valballa Park. We arrived and were dropped off at the library. A few VPUCF members were outside and those I recognised from last year or who recognised us through Susan greeted us enthusiastically with a hug. We moved into a room at the back of the library. About eight VPUCF members were there including Patricia the VPUCF Chairperson. All the students and the VPUCF members sat in a circle, student and VPUCF members mixed.*

*The VPUCF members look relaxed; it was the students who were looking a little bit nervous. Patricia in particular was clearly used to being in charge/having authority. The library space was neat and clean – ‘Isn’t it beautiful?’ remarked a VPUCF member.*

*Susan started the proceedings in Afrikaans – she had a piece of paper on which she had scribbled a greeting which she proceeded to read out. Susan and Patricia it seemed had made a pact that Susan would try and speak Afrikaans<sup>57</sup>. Everyone laughed at this and it seemed to help in breaking the ice somewhat. The main purposes of the meeting were then outlined by Susan after which time each VPUCF member introduced themselves and in some cases gave a short talk. Patricia then introduced herself and then all of the students introduced themselves.*

*I thought that Patricia looked very relaxed and she indicated that she was looking forward to learning from the students. Susan was clearly leaving the proceedings to the VPUCF at this point. Patricia continued: ‘I must give apologies as some people couldn’t be here. Because of unemployment, some people have got casual jobs today – sweeping the streets’.*

*She then turned to Susan and her research assistant, Rose<sup>58</sup>: ‘Our Susan, our Rose. After the course, you will be our everybody’. She indicated all around the circle, pointing to the students and everyone laughed ...*

*[T]he students had quite a lot of questions for Patricia about the role of the VPUCF now. Patricia responded: ‘It helps people get grants and everything else. The VPUCF Front has one person: Aunty Patricia’. Not only is the VPUCF run from her house, there is a public telephone outside her front door attached to her house. The power and confidence she instils as well as the determination of the VPUCF seemed to inspire many of the students (Field notes 20 July 2005; emphasis to indicate tone).*

One of the students captured his impressions in the following way and by doing so he hinted at some of the issues that emerged through the activities for many of the students, especially in terms of comparisons with the worlds many of them inhabit:

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<sup>56</sup> These 30-seater buses are bright blue with the university name and logo on the side. We are thus a huge presence when we arrive in the community. The name of the transport derives from the Jamieson Hall building on campus where annual graduation and other ceremonies are held.

<sup>57</sup> Susan is originally from the US although she has been living in South Africa for more than ten years.

<sup>58</sup> Rose and Jess are two of Susan’s Masters’ students who assist with the field work. As such they are present at most if not all of the sessions

During the introductions I am overwhelmed by what I'm hearing, not stories of defeat and despair, but of unbelievable persistence, concern, and compassion. These are the people who need all the help they can get, and yet get none and give all that they can. I hear of a community united by their heritage and driven by the same goals ... it sounds as if only one woman, Patricia is in charge of almost everything. I am forced to reflect what concerns are facing the women in my home community: shopping, coffee with friends, maybe some golf and then a PTA (Parents, Teachers Association) meeting ... the Valhalla Park ladies are definitely not the products of privileged suburbia (student B1, journal entry 1).

I observed the following in the walking tour of Valhalla Park:

*After the meeting, we went on a walking tour of VP led by the VPUCF members. We formed one big group but then also informally broke off into smaller groups. I was quite interested in one of the community health workers (CHW), Sharon, who had indicated that she is 'only a CHW' in the introduction and I walked around with her for a while. Some of the students walked together and most of them linked up with a VPUCF member as Susan had told them to. We walked and talked, and the students seemed to be taking in quite a lot, talking quietly to each other as well. I spoke to one young female student (D1) who indicated that Valhalla Park 'was pretty much as I expected it'. At various times during the tour, VPUCF members stopped to explain something to the students and this seemed to help the students feel a bit more comfortable. They are clearly very well informed about their community and some of them are clearly very well known by community residents. We walked on back to the library where the Jammie Shuttle was waiting to take us back to campus. After goodbyes and hugs, we clambered on board and drove back to UCT. The students were chatting quietly to each other as we came onto campus (Field notes 20 July 2005).*

### **Activity 2: The mapping sessions in the field**

It gives credibility to the map as a product derived from a previous group of students last year ... The VP person will give you the more detailed, specific information as this keeps the task realistic and puts the VPUCF upfront in the project (Susan, class session 26 July 2005).

There were four occasions when the students went into the field to collect data besides the orientation meeting and tour. I was only able to make three of them. As indicated in Chapter 4, I see the mapping sessions as one nested activity in the overall activity system in that the object of the fieldwork needed to be achieved over three sessions. What is also interesting is that capturing three sessions making up one nested activity provides the opportunity to see how student perceptions of experiences shift *within* a nested activity, not just *across* such activities as in the MBChB case study. Looking within an activity helps to support the argument that it is important to break up the component

activities making up one system to find the most meaningful and useful units of analysis possible (Granott 1998).

As mentioned above, this part of the discussion will cut across the three fieldwork sessions, regarded as one ‘nested activity’ in this system. It is important therefore to understand that each of the fieldwork sessions contributes to meeting the overall object of the fieldwork, namely collecting both quantitative and qualitative data to inform the VPUCF and to provide data for the students as urban geography students. All these sessions also involve the same activity system community. As I have argued elsewhere, when research is conducted based on sociocultural theory, and more specifically activity theory, the individual is not the primary purpose or object of the study. Once the activity has been identified, the researcher has to shift to understanding the motive-goal-instrumental conditions rather than observable individual behaviours and use this data to ‘understand the collective meaning-making process’ (Yamagata-Lynch 2003:104).

### ***Session 1: 26 July 2005***

The course handout describes the goal of this first session in the following way:

In this practical session, we will start the survey process. When we get to Valhalla Park, each group will be linked with a Valhalla Park activist who has a designated area in which you will work for the entire project. Today, the goal is to start the process with the VPUCF’s very simple survey form ... We don’t need to survey every house in the area, only houses with backyard tenants ... Although of course you can ask additional questions of people you speak to today, the process today is really to get to grips with the survey process and to ensure that we have a good system for recording information for the VPUCF and that we are comfortable with this systematic part of the research (Course handout 26 July 2005).

*We arrived outside Patricia’s house in Valhalla Park. The container (a shipping container serving as the community soup kitchen and advice office)<sup>59</sup> seemed to have been painted since we were last here. There were about ten VPUCF members there including Patricia. The students clambered out of the bus and were soon greeting and being warmly greeted by VPUCF members in return. Rose emerged a while later from the house, having driven Susan’s car out to meet with the VPUCF earlier. Patricia ushered the VPUCF members volunteering to work with the students into her lounge and started discussing protocol with them.*

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<sup>59</sup> ‘All meetings were at her house ... the centre for the broader VPUCF activities, as well with a container in the yard that serves as the VPUCF help office and on Thursdays, the soup kitchen for the neighbourhood’ (Oldfield 2007a: 9).

*I was invited in by Patricia and other VPUCF members. Patricia spoke: 'You will be here at 1.30 each week I am not waiting for anyone'. There were nods in agreement with this instruction.*

*The groups were divided up with one VPUCF member per group. The students had self-selected groups prior to this activity and had been given numbers. These numbers were called out and a VPUCF Guide went to join them. In some cases, there was quite a lot of excitement. I decided to join a group of a young VPUCF member, Judith, and two male students – B1 and B2. They seemed quite excited to see each other. In fact B2 had given Judith a huge hug when she came to join them. We set off.*

*Generally the students and the Valhalla Park member walked to the start of their area either up or down Angela Street, the main thoroughfare in Valhalla Park. There was much chattering as the groups set off. I walked talking to both the students and just observing. At the houses it was clear that both Judith and the students had some idea of the protocol: at each of the houses Judith would make the first call, knocking on the door. If someone was at home she would address the person in Afrikaans: 'goeie middag, ons is hier om research te doen – is dit ok?'<sup>60</sup> I was quite surprised however that Judith did not introduce herself immediately as being from the VPUCF and tell them that this was a joint project with the University. Both of the students seemed keen and eager to go ahead with the questions – B1 struggled along in Afrikaans and B2, who is Zulu-speaking from Johannesburg took notes and did observations. Judith stood around, interjecting to translate every now and again. She is very young but enthusiastic. The three of them seemed to get on quite well. At first the two students simply recorded the information, trying to get used to the process with B1 trying out his Afrikaans but neither of them venturing beyond these direct tasks. Judith too stuck with her brief of being their Guide and did not venture much beyond this role.*

*We were making our way back to the middle of Valhalla Park to go to another area when we came across another two students with an older Guide, a woman called Faldielah. I decided to join them. This was an interesting group. The older VPUCF Guide was quite shy, the two students were quite chatty and I wondered how they had managed to work together. I walked with them for the rest of the visit. Faldielah told me a bit about herself: how she is 'illiterate' but very involved in the VPUCF, that she hasn't told the students that she can't read and write 'but I just look at the map and use my experience to read it'. We went to a couple of houses before we ended up going to a fruitsellers' inside a shebeen. It was very lively and we were immediately taken for tourists. When the locals found out that we were from South Africa they were disappointed. However, the students managed to conduct two to three 'interviews' with people in the shebeen who lived nearby in houses they had to survey. Faldielah and I chatted in the corner. We headed back to where the other students had already gathered, climbed into the bus and drove back to campus (Field notes 26 July 2005).*

### **Session 2: 2 August 2005**

The aims of this session were outlined as follows:

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<sup>60</sup> Good afternoon we are here to do research, is that alright?

Continue with the survey today. But also start to explore more qualitative issues connected to living both in backyard/front yard bungalows ... also in crowded contexts in formal housing in your area. Although is it early to pin down a topic/focus for your report, put together a list of three or four more open and qualitative questions (compared to the survey) which you would like to ask. Use these questions to start exploring a possible interest in the report focus ... you could test/pilot these questions with your community link first, both to collect interview material from her/him, to test the questions and refine them, and to make sure that they understand the types of issues you want to explore in addition to the survey this week (Course handout 2 August 2005).

*This time I decided to join a group of two other students who were going with Dan, one of only two men who were involved in the project from the VPUCF. Evan, with whom I had wanted to go, was not there this week. Dan was new to the project this year and was also the deputy chair of the VPUCF. He lived in Sewende Laan. He went with two students and I joined them. I had chatted to the female student the first time we were in Valhalla Park. Dan is interesting: he was building in Sewende Laan at the time of the demolitions (linked to the court case discussed earlier) and through his refusal to stop erecting a house, Patricia came to hear of him and asked him to join the VPUCF. He was enjoying working on the project with the students and seemed very well known in the community. The students were quite shy and quiet and let Dan do all the introductions. His manner was quite different from both Faldielah and Judith. He was gentle and respectful yet determined at the same time. The students battled along bravely in Afrikaans.*

*As the afternoon wore on, the students became more interested in collecting qualitative data and this led to a couple of quite lengthy conversations with community members. As Dan knew many of them, he would lean casually against the gate post ready to clarify or even intervene gently if needs be. At one stage towards the end of the afternoon, the two students wanted to go back a few houses to chat to an older man who was tending a small baby. We were the last group back to the bus, with Dan providing fruit for all of us from his stall outside the butchery (Field notes 2 August 2005).*

I missed the third session into the field and so my next visit was on the students' last field trip, session 4.

#### ***Session 4: 23 August 2005***

The course handout for this session explains the activity.

This session is the last in the field. Assess what data you have collected so far and what sort of additional interviews would help to address the specific topic your report will analyse. Also keep in mind the requirement of two narratives from in-depth interviews and the participant-observation 'vignettes' on formal and



backyard housing conditions as well as the summarized survey data required for the report appendix (Course handout 23 August 2005).

*I decided for my last session to go with B1 and B2 again as I was keen to see how the last session with their guide Judith went. They were more than happy for me to join them. As we set out, B2 and I conversed as we went towards the particular area of VP where they wanted to do their life history interviews. Judith and B1 were walking out in front of us. We came towards a house that seemed to be an important one to interview. It turned out to be Ellen's<sup>61</sup> house. The students began to speak to her and then there was another woman standing there with her. This turned out to be Rosanna her daughter-in-law.*

*Rosanna was 26, had Grade 10 and was the mother of two young girls. B2 and I ended up talking quite a bit to her. By this time the two students had worked out the topic for their qualitative research. They were interested in understanding the survival strategies of people living in poverty and in particular, this notion of 'skuld' or a system of debt incurred with high interest rates while borrowing money for daily necessities<sup>62</sup>.*

*At about this stage, B2 asked whether he might go inside and look at her backyard shack as she lived in one with her husband and two children. Rosanna was fine with this and so B2 and I followed her inside. Inside the shack was one double bed for the whole family, two old cupboards and a couple of pretty prints up on the wall. Looking up the ceiling was zinc, patched and taped here and there with plastic and tape. B2 and I were amazed. Rosanna explained all the small protocol issues like how people living in shacks not only have an uncomfortable and cold/hot place to live in, but this sector of the population always have higher medical bills. 'Every day', she explained, 'you have to budget for the medicines – backyard children have weak chests', and the way she said it was almost as if she was saying, 'You can tell from listening to a child breathe whether he or she lived in a backyard shack or not'. It was at this stage of the conversation that B2 revealed that he also had a small daughter of two who was living with his mother in Johannesburg. For a while he and Rosanna traded stories about their children. I found this really interesting: suddenly it seemed like the whole context had more meaning for B2 when he was talking from his identity as a father. We made our way back to the university transport where the other students were waiting. After long goodbyes, we clambered on the bus and headed back to campus (Field notes 23 August 2005).*

### Activity 3: Presenting the findings, 13 September 2005

The data for this activity will come directly from my field notes and observation as none of the students reflected on this session in their journals, having completed their required journal entries before this session. It means quite clearly that the data is less 'thick' and

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<sup>61</sup> Ellen was a VPUCF member who was also a volunteer home-based care giver with the Caring Network, an NGO caring for people living at home with HIV/AIDS. Ellen had joined up with us in the field the previous week and had been at the orientation meeting.

<sup>62</sup> What I found interesting was how this term 'skuld' (direct translation = debt) was used so often and freely – it had almost become an everyday term for people and the students had heard of it so often that they wanted to better understand it for themselves.

rich here; however, there are a number of interesting issues that emerge in terms of the roles of the VPUCF members at the presentations and the ways in which Susan and the VPUCF members comment on the students' presentations. This activity takes place on campus in one of the EGS labs. The VPUCF members are invited, as are other academics in the department who teach the students.

In the handout for this session, Susan had outlined the VPUCF role in the following way:

Thank you for coming to our presentations! We really value your input. Please comment on your group's presentation in terms of some of the following issues:

- What struck you as particularly interesting.
- What struck you as useful for you as a VPUCF activist/community worker.
- What seemed important for you in the presentation.
- Please comment on anything that you thought was great (maybe a point or presentation style...)!

This is one of the first times that students have done big presentations so your comments are really useful – I'll pass them onto the groups as part of their marks and written feedback on their reports and presentations (Course handout 13 September 2005).

*It was a hot afternoon and when I came towards the EGS building, I recognised a few of the VPUCF members standing outside, a number of them smoking with some of the students. We all went upstairs to begin the presentations. The students who were in the classroom were fiddling with their power point presentations. Both the VPUCF members as well as other Valhalla Park residents seemed very relaxed and confident, a lot more than at last year's presentations.<sup>63</sup> There were eats at the back of the room for everyone and Susan then introduced the session and encouraged everyone – especially the residents – to ask questions. She said, 'You don't have to be super intelligent to do this'.*

*There were in all eleven student group presentations and the topics ranged in their focus:*

- *The dynamics of shared spaces in Valhalla Park.*
- *Sustaining a living in Valhalla Park.*
- *Negotiating personal space.*
- *Safety in Valhalla Park (with a focus on gangs and gangsters).*
- *Income families vs. non-income families.*
- *Sharing patterns and credit schemes in Valhalla Park.*

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<sup>63</sup> As indicated in Chapter 4 I had done some preliminary data gathering in 2004 and had attended this session, as had some of the VPUCF members.

- *Social networks and relationships between backyarders and house residents.*
- *Journey into the world of small places and many people.*

*All the presentations followed the same format: Fifteen minutes formal input which in all cases except one was based on a power point slide presentation. This was then followed by five minutes of questions to the students presenting. These questions came from both Susan and her assistants, as well as from the VPUCF members who were present at the session.*

*In all cases, the students spoke to both the quantitative and qualitative data in their presentations. It was clear that the different groups had thought about the division of labour quite differently as in a few groups only one student spoke and the other one or two were not involved. The data that was presented to the VPUCF was both quantitative and qualitative. The more qualitative data was based on the life history interviews and the students' observations and was the bulk of their presentation and their final report.*

*Susan, Jess and I chatted about the presentations afterwards and in particular about the strength of the community voice in a domain that is more traditionally thought of as the domain of the students. Jess then raised the fact that she thinks it is the strength of the relationship that Susan has with the VPUCF 'that travelled across the boundary of both the university and the community – this then enabled the voice to be heard in the university' (Field notes 13 September 2005).*

In summary, the students worked with VPUCF to collect data to assist them in their struggle with the City of Cape Town for decent housing for members of their community. The students, through this process of engagement, learn mapping skills, an important tool for geographers. What I shall do in the next section is to delineate the activities as an activity system spanning three nested activities.

## **2b: The EGS 315S activity system: three linked, nested activities**

We are not producing real scientific information. We are trying to get a sense of the *real* problem areas (Susan, session 1, 20 July 2005; emphasis to indicate tone).

What follows is an account of the activities as an activity system described as components of the system.

### **Subjects**

The subjects of the system are the students. They are a group of about thirty who are doing this course and they are a mixed group. Most of them are South African but there are also a number of students from other African countries, mostly Zimbabwe. For

purposes of doing their projects they divide themselves into groups and each group is assigned a community Guide.

## **Community**

The community in these three sessions consisted of the students, the VPUCF members as Guides, the residents of the broader Valhalla Park community in whose houses the students did their survey, Susan and her two field assistants. The Valhalla Park residents, however, are not directly present at the last of the three activities, the classroom-based presentation of the projects. This last activity also included other academics in the EGS department but they played no formal role in the proceedings.

## **Objects**

### ***The orientation meeting and tour***

Susan outlined the objects for the first activity, the orientation meeting and tour, in the course outline as follows:

- To learn about the VPUCF.
- To orient themselves to the community of Valhalla Park, in particular the settlement area of Sewende Laan that had been the focus of the court case against the City of Cape Town (discussed in Chapter 2).
- To meet and engage with the VPUCF members who were to serve as the guides for them during their visits to the community.
- And finally, to use this meeting as a springboard for both their learning about urban geography, as well as their role in collecting data for the VPUCF on backyard living in Valhalla Park (Course outline notes July 2005).

### ***The mapping sessions***

The main objects of the mapping sessions were twofold: to learn about and implement their mapping skills to collect the quantitative data and to carry out more qualitative interviews to learn interviewing skills. A third related object was to continue to learn about both the VPUCF and the Valhalla Park community. Two students captured it as follows:

The object of the second practical (session) is to continue surveying Valhalla Park from where the last group from a previous course left off [last year]. The aim is to establish which houses have backyard shacks and if so to record information about the property and its residents. We intend to achieve two goals: aiding the VPUCF in completing the survey and ourselves become familiar with the survey procedure, while in the process continuing our observation of the people and their area (student D2, journal entry 2).

We were asked to carry out a survey, asking simple questions on housing facilities with the main aim of finding out how many people lived in the house using the bathroom facilities and whether the house owners rented out or had backyard Wendy houses or as its known in Valhalla Park as a 'hokkie'<sup>64</sup>. The survey was very simple and straight forward and required us as the interviewers to converse and befriend the house owner and their families Obviously the main objective of this survey was to investigate whether the home owners were renting out their back yards to others to live in Wendy houses (student A2, journal entry 1).

### *The project presentations*

The object of the third activity, the classroom-based presentations, was to demonstrate the ability to collate and analyze data, both quantitative and qualitative; to show mapping skill; and finally to demonstrate presentation skills including the ability to keep within a 10-15 minutes timeframe. Presentation skills also included the ability to both ask relevant questions of other groups and to respond to questions put to them from Susan, the VPUCF members or other students.

### **Tools**

#### *The orientation meeting and tour*

A number of tools were evident in the orientation meeting and tour. The main one was the knowledge and experience of the VPUCF members as they tell the students about the history of their organization and their community. Secondly, the tour itself, and the physical environment in which it occurs were tools that are essential in the context of a geography course. In this sense then, the physical environment of people, houses,

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<sup>64</sup> Hokkie is originally an Afrikaans term for relatively informal structure. It is used in both English and Afrikaans with the same meaning.

activities and smells are significant in shaping the students' learning experiences. For many of the students, this environment was unfamiliar and led to both anxiety and excitement, while others were more familiar with these environments given their own backgrounds and histories:

Once again, on starting the walk and seeing the houses, my impression was one of ... should I say, pleasant surprise? I noticed that a lot of the houses were painted in bright colours, there were fences around some of them and they were generally in a pretty neat state. As we went along my impression of the area began to change, I started looking more closely at the houses – taking more time to look through open doors, or down the sides of some of them. I began to notice how overcrowded most of the houses were, with objects of all sorts stacked high in the front gardens of some, chickens and even horses in others ... (student D1, journal entry 1).

We also had the pleasure of taking a tour of the township with our new friends as the tour guides who happily walked us through their settlement. My first impression of it was in the form of a happy realization ... the settlement looked very much like home, where I grew up. The township I grew up in is named Katlehong<sup>65</sup>, it is situated in Johannesburg in the East Rand<sup>66</sup> ... [i]t is very similar to Valhalla Park which is characterized by homes which ha[ve] been extended and backyard shacks erected, plus of course the other characteristics of any township ... it was even so similar I even found similarity in some undesirable aspects such as the repugnant smells that grace townships across South Africa.

Valhalla Park is certainly close to home. Their loving sense of community demonstrated, by the [VPUFC] the spaza shops around corners which sell commodities to people, the zinc and cardboard housing and the basic lack of public services, are a few of the characteristics across South Africa (student B2, journal entry 1).

### ***The mapping sessions***

In making sense of the wide range of tools in the mapping sessions, I am restricting my discussion to the five key tools that impacted directly on the nature of the learning experience of the students. The first tool was *the knowledge and expertise of the VPUFC members* serving as the guides or interpreters that were crucial to the students' learning. This is both the formal knowledge about locating the houses to be included in the map, as well as the more informal knowledge about the experiences, lives and lifestyles of various residents they came into contact with.

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<sup>65</sup> An African township near Johannesburg

<sup>66</sup> This is the eastern ridge of the greater ridge that surrounds Johannesburg.

The second tool was the *maps of Valhalla Park* that were used to indicate the presence or absence of backyard shacks. These had been handed out in class and the students in their groups were responsible for making the relevant data on the maps as they went from house to house.

The third tool was the *questionnaire* itself, which had been designed by the VPUCF and had been used by the previous group of students in 2004 for the first time. This tool could arguably be considered the primary tool of this activity given that the quantitative data was gathered that was needed for both the VPUCF and the students was collected through this tool. A student commented on its usefulness:

The structured method of interview also made things easier for us in this unfamiliar environment and made it easier to strike up conversation and gain other information. The direct approach, where participants are fully aware of everything, was best suited in this situation. It gives the researcher who is unfamiliar with the situation a starting point to begin interactions with a community. The survey sets parameters for the interview and requires simple direct answers thus ensuring coherent results as the language barrier often hinders clear understanding for both parties (student D2, journal entry 2).

The fourth tool were the *interviews with residents* about their experiences of living in what were often crowded conditions. This tool is an important one in gathering the qualitative data the students needed for their final reports. While the maps were used across the three sessions, the interviews were focused on in the second and third sessions, once the students had begun to identify themes and questions for their group's research project.

The fifth tool was the *actual community environment*. This includes the houses, the people and the broader context of Valhalla Park that mediated the students' service learning and mapping experience as has been previously mentioned in a number of the journal entries.

### ***The project presentations***

At the final presentation session, the tools evident were both material and conceptual (Cole 1996). The most obvious tool visible in all but one of the presentations was power

point technology. However what was interesting was that in some cases, the slides used were not drawn from the field experiences of the students – in fact in one case, I commented in my field notes on how seemingly ‘inappropriate’ they are given the audience and topic:

*Only one student in this group came to the front and he used a stick to point to the power point slides. I found the power point very problematic. The group had decided to use photographs to represent much of their argument about shared spaces but the only problem was that these were not slides or pictures of Valhalla Park. Worse still, the pictures were of very different kinds of communities, e.g. white middle class! So when they were showing a kitchen or a lounge, they showed totally different and a-contextual pictures. I was really surprised. When the student said this, that they were not of Valhalla Park, he sort of laughed with it – maybe embarrassed, but some of the students laughed too, again maybe from embarrassment; but the VPUCF did not laugh (Field notes 13 September 2005).*

The data in their projects was thus also a tool because it was through their collected data that they were able to talk about their findings. This data was both quantitative and qualitative. For the qualitative data the students provided quotes from interviews and notes on their observations to support the claims they are making about backyard housing in Valhalla Park. By presenting their data, they were in effect demonstrating skills in mapping and collecting data from the field, a key outcome of this course. The presentations thus reflected knowledge of some of the tools of urban geographers and covered the concepts outlined in the course material.

## **Rules**

I have argued in Chapter 3 that rules are akin to discourse (Gee 1990) so what I was looking for here was the range of discourses evident in the activities.

### ***The orientation meeting and tour***

The meeting with the VPUCF showed evidence of the rules of community meeting procedures and through this it was clear that the VPUCF had a strong voice – represented by Patricia and Evan in particular. Two other rules operating here and which became more evident in the second activity are those of language and dress. UCT is an



English-medium university and while many students do not have English as a home language, it is the language of learning for them; Afrikaans, the home language of most of the residents in Valhalla Park was less familiar to them. Interestingly, most of the VPUCF members and residents spoke English as well as many of the students. The issue of dress and dress code was perhaps less obvious but still significant, and a number of students talked about it in their journals. One student reflected as follows:

I remember a girl on the street asking me if I was a teacher or something. I asked her why she thinks so, she answered it is because of the way I was dressed. This made me realize that I am being 'read', something I was unconscious of. This therefore made me different from the street person's point of view. This helped me to be conscious of how I dress so that people in the public do not see me different from them. I tried not to dress so formally ... I did this so that the subjects do not feel like they are being used by a person with high standards, a *teacher in this case* (student C2, journal entry 4; emphasis in the original).

Here we see clearly that there are rules about how teachers are supposed to dress and behave in a community like this and the similarities between this and them as students from the university. This is representative of quite 'formal rules' that, in this instance, shifted the way in student C2 decided to dress.

### ***The mapping sessions***

In the mapping sessions, there were a number of rules and norms evident. Firstly, there were the rules shaping the interaction of the students with their respective VPUCF guides, both informally and formally as required by their learning outcomes, i.e. mapping and interviewing, and which were shaped by the whole process of engaging with the VPUCF:

The consistent kindness of the ...activists made me realize the importance of life and made me aware of certain things missing in my own life. Working in the field for the first time I was very nervous but the ease at which I was accepted and welcomed by the community was very rewarding and reassuring for future field research. I learnt a lot about myself and how to work under certain conditions and with people of a totally different lifestyle (student A1, journal entry 5).

Secondly, there were the rules and norms governing interviewing procedures and methodology. The students were aware of the etiquette of interviewing yet it was the

introductions and discussions with their guides that provided them with access to the houses. This is discussed further under the division of labour. The etiquette and techniques of conducting interviews that the students were learning as part of fieldwork skills was an important rule that shaped their interactions: in some cases, students took turns in their groups thereby providing evidence of group norms; in other cases, especially where language played a role in the interviews, one student did all the interviewing. Some students really struggled with interviewing and found the whole process quite difficult as will be evident when discussing the key contradictions towards the end of this chapter.

Thirdly, language was a key factor in these sessions as well. Most of the residents spoke Afrikaans and so either one of the students struggled along in this language (I did not observe any Afrikaans-first language students), or the VPUCF guide had to interpret the questions for the members of the community. One student experienced it like this:

Language was also one of the limitations ... many of the things people were telling us I did not hear because they were speaking Afrikaans [and] my partner was also speaking Afrikaans. I know the guides were there to help us but sometimes I felt like it was quite disturbing to stop someone from talking so that the guide can interpret. [All] in all those who speak Afrikaans had advantages (student C2, journal entry 4).

### ***The project presentations***

The rules shaping the third activity were those representing the formal discourse of student presentations although the presence of members of an 'outside' community (the VPUCF) added a new dimension to this. Susan had indicated beforehand to the students that she was going to run the session a bit like a 'conference session' where she would keep strict time and where they would need to answer and ask questions. The seating arrangements therefore came to reflect this in interesting ways – the students sat on one side of the room, the VPUCF members on the other. Where they sat on the same side, they stayed within their respective communities.

In terms of having members of the VPUCF present, this meant that the rules shifted slightly. As the VPUCF members were introduced as '*part of the team*' (by the students

they worked with), they stood up and were usually cheered, and they were involved in giving feedback and clarifying issues.

*Patricia then asked who their guide was and the student indicated Pauline – she then stood up and everyone clapped (field notes 13 September 2005).*

Susan permitted, in fact encouraged, this practice of giving feedback and clarifying the issues and it was interesting to see that they responded quite vociferously at times. One of the rules of the course that seemed to operate was that it was not required of students to remain throughout the whole session. The afternoon was broken into two sessions, with a tea break in the middle. The students had provided drinks and snacks, and it was clear that by the second session, many of the students who had presented had already left. The students seemed to know when their slot was and in fact some of the students came in just before they were to present. I found this interesting and seemingly a contradiction to the manner in which Susan had led the other sessions, and wondered what impact this had on the students presenting near the end. VPUCF members too came and left a few times during the afternoon. At one stage many of them left for a tour around campus led by one of the students.

### **Division of labour**

I have argued elsewhere that the ways in which roles became evident and the division of labour emerges across the activity system are the result of the relationship between tools and rules. The contradictions evident in the system will be discussed later but for now it is important to identify these in each of the activities.

### ***Orientation meeting and tour***

At the first meeting and tour, students entered very much the role of a student with this identity firmly in place. Many of them had never been into a 'Coloured' township before and were thus placed in a position to learn from the VPUCF. The VPUCF on the other hand came into the meeting and tour as key informants, as knowledgeable community

members and activists, with a lot of confidence, relevant experience and in this way, power and authority. The students were clearly in awe of this at times during the activity:

Once inside the lecture room, everyone was quite unsure of what was going on; we all proceeded to sit in a rectangular position and then were asked [by the VPUCF] to move into a circular formation so that everyone could see each other. The silence persisted for a while until Patricia a Coloured woman of about 40 years ... proceeded to welcome us to her community.... Then all the other ladies involved in the [VPUCF] introduced themselves ... I was so impressed, as all the ladies showed such dedication and commitment towards the movement and they showed such pride in the community and its library (student A1, journal entry 1).

Patricia, as the leader of the VPUCF organization, and to a less extent Evan, the Advice Office leader, played very strong roles in the meeting; they were both clearly sources of authority and power in the community. The other VPUCF members often deferred to them and nodded in agreement when they spoke. It was clear that this division of labour amongst the VPUCF was common practice and the students were able to pick up on this clearly. During the tour, the students and VPUCF members broke up into informal groups. The VPUCF members thus in this way began to enact their roles as guides, interpreters, and 'brokers' into their community. It was this role that became important across the entire activity system and one that played a significant role in the students' learning experiences.

On the other hand the students clearly represented UCT, and as such the VPUCF members acknowledged the kind of knowledge and learning that they could acquire from them:

*'I am only a community worker in Valballa Park but I welcome you. You can help us with our problems as I am just a member of this community', Sharon, community health worker comments. 'I would like to learn a lot and go and study further' (field notes 20 July 2005).*

### ***The mapping sessions***

Across the three fieldwork sessions the division of labour was evident in the roles taken on by different participants in the activity. Firstly, there were the roles that the students played in relation to the role played by the VPUCF Guides. They were student

researchers, members of a student learning group, as well as a source of labour for the VPUCF in collecting the data they (the VPUCF) required. These multiple roles served to enhance learning and critical thinking, particularly as evidenced through the use of their journal reflections; they could also however be a source of some stress, tension and frustration for students. It is this 'disruption', this sense of not being in control of the learning process that was central in understanding how roles, identity and power play themselves out in a learning context such as this. Secondly, there were the roles of the VPUCF Guides as translators, advisors and guides, important for the students in their field work. And lastly there were the roles played by the broader community members; a more informal role perhaps but nevertheless important.

### *The project presentations*

At the formal project presentations the division of labour was very evident in terms of the roles that were played. The students were in the role as students, as presenters, as apprentice geographers and as representing the group of students of which they had been a part for their project. Susan was there as their assessor and as the course Convenor. She therefore remained fairly formal throughout, although where students' projects were either very enthusiastically presented or really pleased her, she entered into a more informal manner of responding. Her assistant Jess was there in a similar, albeit less formal, capacity, as she had no input into the final marks.

The VPUCF members' roles were interesting and the ways in which they engaged in the presentations was significant. Patricia and Evan were particularly vocal and Susan referred questions and comments to them a number of times. Having attended presentations the previous year when the VPUCF attended for the first time, I felt that this year they took on this role with a lot more confidence. In fact, in many ways they knew better what to expect of the afternoon than the students. This meant that there were a number of occasions when they challenged some of the data and analyses of the students, a particular case in point being the group that presented on the issue of gangs in the community, as well as those that spoke about teenage pregnancy. This was strongly contrasted with how I observed students talking about these more controversial issues – they appeared awkward and somehow aware of their 'partial' knowledge of such topics.

## **Outcomes**

### ***The orientation meeting and tour***

The main outcomes of the meeting and the tour were learning about the VPUCF and feeling oriented to the community. These were achieved through the meeting and the tour. To a less extent a third outcome was to provide a context to the maps that the students were to complete as outcomes for their course.

### ***The mapping sessions***

The outcomes of the mapping sessions need to be considered across the community engaged in the activity and who share the object: the VPUCF and the broader Valhalla Park community on the one hand, and the students and university on the other. This relates to the point I am making in the thesis about service learning having dual but inter-related objects.

For the students, data was gathered from the Valhalla community for their survey and through this they learnt survey and interview skills. They acquired urban geography research and mapping skills, and they built a relationship of a kind with the VPUCF members and residents of the Valhalla Park community. For the VPUCF, they now had additional data to add to that collected the previous year; they had further developed their relationship with the university; and for many members of the VPUCF, they had, for the first time, participated in such a mapping exercise and so acquired new skills. Lastly, through the work with the students, they had been visible as VPUCF members in their community. For the Valhalla Park community, particularly those participating in the survey itself, they had found an opportunity to have their voices heard and to express their feelings about their situation.

### ***The project presentations***

At the final presentation of the projects, the outcome was the students' final research report, the writing up of their presentation and the knowledge they gained through the

field work. This included the ability to present the data in ways that reflected evidence of mapping and research skills, and an ability to reflect on their own processes of learning through answering questions from the audience. In terms of presenting some of the data from their reports, it was interesting to note how students struggled to make sense of data that was on slightly sensitive topics, topics that they were unfamiliar with:

*They then spoke about teenage pregnancy in a way that I thought was quite problematic – they talked about all the kids who have babies and they kind of laughed over this issue when they spoke about it. Maybe nervousness but Patricia looked very annoyed. I feel that pregnancy is a controversial issue and it is a little out of their control to talk too much about it. I feel that perhaps Susan could have spoken to the students about issues like this and how complex they are. At the end though, she did comment. She said, ‘what counts as a high fertility rate is a subjective thing – I would like to chat to you guys [the VPUCF] about how you feel about it’ (Field notes 13 September 2005).*

This is evidence that one of the objects of the session, i.e. to be able to reflect on their own process of learning and deal with new information, challenged many of the students. This is also a reflection of the role that context plays in learning and in a course like this in particular. I look at the issue of context in more detail in Chapter 7.

### **Part 3: Contradictions within the system**

Before looking at the contradictions in each of the activities, I would like to provide reflections on the broader context in which the students’ learning took place. This is because the actual process of engaging the VPUCF and of being in a new community or learning context physically, culturally and socio-economically different, challenged the students in quite profound ways. This shaped much of the students’ experiences across the activities and was reflected in their journal entries even before they arrived in the community. In this way it sets up systemic contradictions differently from in the MBChB case study. Two students reflect as follows:

The trip began with a combination of feelings running through my body: excitement, fear, ignorance, inquisitiveness and hunger to name a few. Excitement because eventually I will be fulfilling my academic interests, these being personally and socially interactive fieldwork along with the chance to meet new interesting people of a totally different cultural heritage than myself; fear and

ignorance as I had never been into the heart of a [C]olour[ed] community 'township' before and did not know what exactly to expect and felt very naïve and vulnerable. Inquisitiveness, due to my long awaited curiosity to socialize with people of a different economic, social, and race value than myself and learn and experience their lifestyles (student A1, journal entry 1; emphasis added).

The second student spoke both about the trip to Valhalla Park as well as their arrival:

Driving along the freeway, away from the city, on the way to Valhalla Park I found myself overwhelmed by the poor conditions of the urban slums either side of the road. These images are not those I have become accustomed to living a life of relative luxury in the suburbs, afforded to me by my privileged parents. These are not the homes of the privileged. Struck by the sheer density of these living quarters, there is little surprise that garbage and litter also cover the area. *I can't help but feel 'white guilt'*, and even a bit apprehensive as I consider that maybe the people living in these areas may see me as somehow partly the cause of their dire circumstances, after all I am white, and partly Afrikaans (student B1, journal entry 1; emphasis added).

What these reflections allude to are the many complexities of learning in a context like this and reflect the apartheid history that still serves to shape students' reflections. On the one hand we see the excitement combined with apprehension that student A1 expresses but also the 'otherness' in her comment of 'Coloured community settlements' on the other. The reference to 'other', to 'white guilt' found in student B1's reflections, is an indication of the ways in which this context reflects many complex issues for the students.

In the previous case I argued that there were a number of contradictions that played themselves out across the three activities. In this case study, the contradictions were not necessarily evident in *each* activity but were rather located within *specific* activities. However, as the focus in activity theory is on the interrelationship of components in the system rather than on the components themselves, I discuss the contradictions rather than each of the activities. In the first activity, the key contradiction was the relationship between the community, rules, tools, and division of labour. In the mapping sessions, I noted two main contradictions: in the relationship of rules, tools and object; and of tools, rules and division of labour. In the third activity, the formal presentations, I saw evidence of contradiction in the relationship of community, rules and division of labour.



### **Community-rules-tools-division of labour**

Being in a new community and having to learn in this context challenged the students and their learning in significant ways. This was the key contradiction in the first activity, the orientation meeting and tour. A student reflected as follows on the first meeting and the tour, revealing some of the contradictions these activities brought for her in terms of her identity as well as her perceptions of the community she found herself in:

At first I felt a bit uncomfortable [in the meeting] because I noticed them [the VPUCF members] looking at us and talking to each other and I wondered what they were saying. At that moment I imagined them to be saying things like: 'Look at these kids – all so well dressed with their expensive shoes and jackets' but then I noticed that most of them were smiling and saying hello. Then the discussions started, first with everybody introducing themselves. It was very interesting ... the Civic Front members seemed to just want to talk and talk, with a few of them acting as the mouthpieces, and the rest just sitting quietly and listening to what was being said. After a while I began to get a bit restless – wanting to go outside and walk around, to see if my imagined view of the place matched up with reality

The first contradiction is thus linked to feeling uncomfortable in the meeting but then realising that the VPUCF members were *not* judging them as she had imagined they might have been.

As we went along, people were coming out of their houses to see what was happening – clearly a group of privileged looking students is not a common sight in Valhalla Park. I began to notice how overcrowded most of the houses were, with objects of all sorts stacked high in the front gardens of some, chickens and even horses in others ...

Next we had a tour of Sewende Laan. I noticed that there were toilets in the courtyard. Every now and then I would get flashes of introspective thoughts such as 'Man, I don't think I could ever live like this, how do these people do it and still manage to smile and be seemingly ok with life? I should really stop complaining about my silly little problems ... this really puts things into perspective!' (student D1, journal entry 1).

I have argued that the community context served as an important tool in the students' learning. Student D1 shows her own discomfort and anxiety after the tour and how it contradicted her own experiences and community. In the quote below, Student C2 raises some interesting points in his discussion of just 'being' in the streets of this new

community and the practices that are associated with being there. His sense of having to take on a different identity, to act in a different way, reflects his uncertainty and anxiety. This focuses specifically on identity, language and name:

Last week's visit influenced my identity in many ways. To deal with such a problem I had to find ways of negotiating my own identity. My identity was influenced in the sense that one of the community workers found it so difficult to pronounce my name. She asked if I did not have a nickname. My name is Sivuyile ... I wanted to change it to a simple name so that everyone [would] be able or rather find it easier to pronounce. But then something came to my mind. For once I thought 'no this is who I am, I'm Sivuyile I don't have to change my name' ... one has to be what s/he is, there is no need to change your own identity (student C2, journal entry 3).

The community context and associated rules led to a contradiction around the division of labour and in particular, the shifting role of the educator: the VPUCF and community, not the lecturer, was often the key source of knowledge and information. This resulted in some students feeling a bit unsure of whether they would achieve their object of getting out into the community:

Then the discussions started, first with everybody introducing themselves. It was very interesting ... the VPUCF members seemed to just want to talk and talk, with a few of them acting as the mouthpieces, and the rest just sitting quietly and listening to what was being said ... after a while I began to get a bit restless – wanting to go outside and walk around, to see if my imagined view of the place matched up with reality (student D1 journal entry 1).

### **Rules-tools-object**

This contradiction refers to the relationship between rules or discourse, the tools that mediate learning and the object of the activity. This contradiction was evident in the second activity, the mapping sessions. Here I found that the students' reflections and my own observations picked up two very significant contradictions, both of which centred on the two main tools introduced into this activity: the questionnaire and the interview. Both these tools challenged the students and while it could be argued they are tools familiar in higher education, the context in which they were being used acted to shape them in not insignificant ways.

In terms of the first tool, the survey questionnaire, what is interesting and significant is that unlike in the MBChB case, in the EGS case it was a tool that had not been designed by the students. As a tool of mediation, many of the students challenged its usefulness thereby setting up a contradiction between the tool and the rules of using it in this context:

[Student B1] would then proceed to ask the questions on the questionnaire while I took notes on how the interview was conducted and some other things I found interesting. We would then proceed to ask more questions which were not in the questionnaire but we felt would help in our project. We did this because we found the Valhalla Park compiled questionnaire was problematic in that it limited the scope of our answers from our respondents by asking closed questions (student B2, journal entry 2).

Some students in fact omitted or changed a few of the questions as they felt uncomfortable asking them:

Bennet (2002) [a source in the students' reader] explains it is important for the researcher to be aware of the manner in which they influence the study area. Keeping this in mind, we referred to backyard shacks as Wendy houses and also avoided asking whether inhabitants used a bucket as a toilet, but rather chose to ask how many people used the inside toilet (in the study everyone used the inside toilet). This was not only being sensitive to the inhabitants, but it also *put us at ease* (student D2, journal entry 2; emphasis added).

In this sense the rules shaping the behaviour of student D2 meant that he felt uncomfortable asking a particular question and so changed it, thereby in some senses 'breaking the rules' that were supposed to operate in this context and thereby challenging the object and ultimately the outcome of the system, namely data on backyard living.

In terms of the second tool, the interview that the students conducted based on the choice of topic for their research, many students commented on how awkward they felt about the nature of the questions to be asked even though, with Susan's help and advice, they had designed their own interview schedule. For one student it meant an awareness of his own world in relation to that of the people he was interviewing and this caused a lot of tension for him:

The need to pry deeper, a need for in-depth understandings of what cannot be seen in a few minutes I spend taking down information. Conversation begins, a first step towards creating rapport – one step becomes two as I realize that many of those [I] talk with are eager to talk and actually want to share with me, a stranger, their thoughts ... I think that I have the privilege of being compassionate; I feel a necessary tool when trying to draw the line. My own feelings of guilt and the inner conflicts I deal with in my mind as a white South African help me to respect the people I interview. I know full well the fragility of our common history, and although very different I am able to come to terms with and share compassion with these people who now need my help to respect their dignity and help in any way the best I can (student B2, journal entry 3).

Another student reflecting on her experiences had different and conflicting feelings about the whole research process. She felt anxiety and even some ambivalence towards the process of engaging the community:

We are not living and trying to immerse ourselves into the community. There is not the same degree of 'sharing', at least I don't feel the need to share too much of myself with those I interview. This is mostly because we are conducting surveys and even though one can go beyond that and ask more qualitative questions, the issue remains the same – that of housing, what conditions people live in, what income (if any) they have, and how they survive (student D1, journal entry 3).

This context also set up tensions for some students between the rules of language, the tool of the interview, and the object, namely getting data. Below are the comments of two of the students, neither of whom are first language English speakers:

My fellow classmates and I have some concerns over the language barrier as we find it hinders us from getting to know the people we are interviewing. In my view interviews of this type are meant to be conducted in a social conversation manner and not in a somewhat professional employer-employee manner. It's just not the same when done in translation as some say a lot is 'lost in translation' (student B2, journal entry 2).

Language was also one of the limitations ... Many of the things people were telling us I did not hear because they were speaking Afrikaans [and] my partner was also speaking Afrikaans. I know the guides were there to help us but sometimes I felt like it was quite disturbing to stop someone from talking so that the guide can interpret. In all those who speak Afrikaans had advantages (student C2, journal entry 5).

### **Tools-rules-division of labour**

The second key contradiction in the mapping sessions centred on the way in which roles emerged. Contradictions with the tools discussed above impacted on the division of labour and in particular on the roles and power relations between the students and their Guides. The roles and knowledge of the VPUCF Guide acted to subvert/challenge procedure and protocol of interviewing – both what to ask and who to ask. In addition, this gave the VPUCF as guide, as translator, a lot of power with the students. This then opens up the issue of what constitutes ‘agency’ in a context such as this, and for whom. I discuss the relationship between role and agency further in Chapter 7 as it was a significant outcome of the activities in both cases.

The contradiction between tools, rules and division of labour was evident in various ways. Firstly, the VPUCF members were clearly in the role as guides, interpreters, mediators and translators – of both language and customs in the community. The students were dependent on them for knowledge and guidance, and this played itself out in varying ways across the groups of students I observed. It was clear that Susan felt the VPUCF members were in the more knowledgeable roles; she had given them the authority to guide the students and facilitate their access to members of the community and their households – they were the brokers to the community.

The engagement with the students thus gave the VPUCF a great deal of power in shaping the experiences they had. While there were clear areas to map and specific households to visit, in some cases, the Guides used their knowledge and personal networks to provide students with additional or specific information. Students saw these interventions and skills in varying ways – mostly as benefiting their learning, but in some cases, as a form of ‘subversion’ or even ‘dishonesty’.

Three students reflect on the role of the community guide and it is interesting to note their different experiences and interpretations. Two students were quite positive about the roles whereas a third student was far more critical.

What I liked about Pauline is that she is old but the way she was engaging with us is like she was at our age. She was so free and open about things. I never saw even one day angry or bored during our research process ... She was quite helpful even in the context of our research; she knew exactly what to do because of the experience she got from the previous research (last year). It was quite an amazing experience working with her (student C2, journal entry 5).

It was certainly to our advantage that we could ask our guides questions and check with them that the way we were going about things and approaching people was all right. In doing field research and interviewing for the first time, one needs to have assistance – especially if one is in a foreign setting. It can be difficult trying to approach people with fairly private/personal questions and I often felt a little awkward (student D1, journal entry 5).

The third student however had a very different interpretation of the role played by the Guide with whom he and his partner (C2 above) were linked. He reflects in two entries as follows:

Pauline also slowed us down as she spoke to nearly everyone we were stopped by even when they did not meet the survey requirements ... She was quite insistent even after we outlined our project for her, she never really acknowledged it and went on talking to people as she knew them because her house is nearby, it was like she was regarding this as a purely social fieldtrip and a chance to catch up with her friends (student C1, journal entry 2).

And in his next journal entry:

When we told Pauline which residents we would like to re-interview she seemed apprehensive. She wanted us to interview her church friend who did not even reside in our study area ... I feel this is a bias as it seems that Pauline is fulfilling her own social prerogatives which resulted in one completely botched interview as, although the lady [was] friendly, she did not want to divulge any 'usable' info to us, and she never even had a backyard shack, but we stayed longer so she and Pauline could confirm arrangements for a prayer meeting later in the week and discuss the pensioner's trip to Grand West<sup>67</sup> (student C1, journal entry 3).

In this reflection there is also a challenge to the object and outcome of the system for this student.

Besides the more overt roles played by tools such as questionnaires and interviews in a context like this, there is a more complex set of often 'covert' roles that tools can play in

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<sup>67</sup> A casino complex nearby.

a community. In this way, they can give voice and agency to communities in unexpected ways:

Being in the field, we the researchers become the ‘observed’ as local residents take notice [of] us young undergrads clutching onto notebooks and clipboards. Yet, as much power as that may lend [to one self] it also lends to responses that are bound up in other events. At times it is as if we the researchers become, in some sense, a means for the Valhalla Park residents to deal with their anguish and frustrations by expressing through oral accounts their feelings of despair (student B1 journal entry 4).

Linked to the above, it is crucial to understand the roles played by members of the broader community in Valhalla Park: a formal as well as a more ‘informal’ role. The more formal role was that of respondent to the questionnaire and interviews. In this role, members of the Valhalla Park community were asked formally if they would participate; their responses were noted formally and they were included in the survey data. There was however, a more informal role played by members of the community which I feel is important to note. An example of this was in the experiences of two students, A1 and A2, who ended one of their sessions in a shebeen where a number of the residents enjoying drinks there took it upon themselves to inform the students of many grievances they had with regard to housing.

The fact that the students talked quite a lot about this incident is also an indication of the approach that Susan has adopted in her course, where it is important for students to ‘*go out, look and see what really happens in these communities*’. This reinforced the role of interviews as a tool in learning. As I had been with these students during this incident I was interested to note one of their journal entries.

As the tour continued, we came to what was supposed to be a quick visit into Faldielah’s sister’s ‘shop’ ...[T]here was a seating area where three [C]oloured men in their late 40s early 50s were sitting drinking ‘Black Label’<sup>68</sup> quarts. The seated area had two cages of beautifully looked after budgies that did not keep quiet at any time whilst we were inside ... [T]o reinforce my already glowing opinion of the Valhalla Park people we were kindly given some of the largest oranges and the sweetest bananas I had ever seen and tasted. A2, Jess and I all sat down and proceeded to be reeled into conversation with three ‘slightly tipsy’

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<sup>68</sup> A popular brand of beer in South Africa most often drunk by men as it has quite a high alcohol content and is portrayed as a ‘man’s beer’ in local advertising campaigns.

[C]oloured men ... All three men were very friendly and proceeded to spill out their life histories to myself and A2 (student A1, journal entry 2).

Lastly, what emerged quite clearly in these activities were the different rules shaping the roles of the students compared to members of the community. Many students spoke of the 'generosity, warmth, openness and friendliness' of this community compared to their own (more middle-class) communities. For most of the students, this was something they valued, respected and it made them feel at ease, apparent even at the first meeting. For other students however, it was clear that this openness and generosity was something that was unfamiliar, and in some ways, perhaps 'not authentic'. It caused tensions for one of the students as revealed in an interview with me<sup>69</sup>:

I know I felt 'I don't know these people very well.' It just felt a bit like 'why is everybody suddenly hugging each other and acting as if they know each other so well?' That was from the student side too. They feel like they are doing such good work with these community members and showing so much by hugging them. At the end of the day we don't have anything to do with them anymore. I don't know if we will ever see them again. It did feel a bit superficial (student D1, interview 19.01.06).

In summary what we see in this activity across the mapping sessions is that the introduction of tools into a particular learning context shaped by new rules of an expanded community, leads to challenges in terms of the object of the system and the division of labour that emerges.

### **Community-rules-division of labour**

The last contradiction in the system, that of the relationship between the activity system community, the rules that were operating and the roles and division of labour that resulted from this, was evident in the final activity, the project presentations. Here the students presented their projects to other students, members of the VPUCF as well as a few additional academics from the EGS department. In this case therefore, the VPUCF

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<sup>69</sup> While I have indicated that I did not set out to conduct interviews I interviewed this student after she had indicated to me in personal correspondence that she would find a follow up interview on her experience quite useful.



come into a very different community of practice, that of academic presentations and rules.

However what is significant to note is that the VPUCF, and in particular Patricia and Evan, played a strong role in the presentations and this was both permitted and encouraged by Susan. I commented on this earlier when discussing the division of labour I observed in this activity. An example of this was in a discussion on gangs and gangsterism that emerged in a presentation on issues of safety in Valhalla Park:

*There was then a long discussion about gangs and gangsters and the students at times seemed a little unsure of the answers to some of the questions they were asked. Susan for instance said that given they had not interviewed gangsters, they needed to be careful about how they report on this: 'It is more about your perceptions of how others feel about this'. She then asked them about whether gangs were supportive of people or dangerous – 'How do we make a fair assessment?'*

*Evan then answered the question and the other members seemed fine to let him, nodding from time to time as he spoke. He told us a lot about gangsters, and how young gangsters are a problem and how 'the older ones are safe because they have earned the respect of the community. As for [...] (a gang leader and drug dealer who was killed about two years ago), he is a good guy – look, everyone is a good guy when they are dead'.*

*I felt that Evan is inserting a kind of 'authority' into the discussion that could not have come from the two student presenters as they just do not have the life experience to be able to talk authoritatively about such issues.*

*Evan proceeded: 'Look we are on the subject of Valhalla Park right now, but if you look in the Strand – in all our communities – you will see cops selling Tik'.<sup>70</sup>*

*Patricia then inserted her experience, knowledge and authority to talk about the 'safety and unsafety' issue: 'Look there are people who have moved into Valhalla Park but they have never settled into the community and therefore they feel unsafe – they are the ones with the burglar bars. They have decided not to live with us. They are there ... but they are not prepared to live with us or to help us. So ... yes, there are different sets of people living here. Also, I was dumbstruck when I heard you talking about the Americans and Hard Living members. I have a record from our minutes of our meetings where we got peace. A lot of those members are still at school' (Field notes 13 September 2005).*

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<sup>70</sup> A meta-amphetamine drug that is being used widely amongst children and adults in South Africa and which many people are blaming for the increased incidences of HIV/ADS, teenage pregnancy and even crime.

It is clear from this excerpt that presenting to an expanded community, who bring with them a new set of rules for engagement reflecting their activist practices, challenged the students' traditional roles in formal university presentations such as this. It also provided another opportunity for the VPUCF to draw on their very extensive knowledge of their own community to challenge the students for a final time. Through this, they show that they are not intimidated by the new context and that they are as much educators as is Susan. What would have been interesting would have been students' reflections on these presentations, providing a means to gauge the impact of this on their own learning. However this was not required in the course.

### **Summary**

This chapter has provided a descriptive-analytic account of the urban geography course. I have described and mapped the nested activities making up the joint activity system and provided an indication of the contradictions that emerge in each activity. I have supported these with data from my own field notes as well as from student journals. Like the MBChB case, a lot of interesting and significant moments occur in the activities that point to contradictions in the system. As I noted in the previous chapter this can be understood in a large part by the fact that two very different communities of practice enter into the activities and bring with them their own values, rules and knowledge. These serve to challenge participants in the activities and to challenge the students in their learning and service experiences.

The EGS students built an interesting and complex relationship with the VPUCF organization during the course of their learning. As we have seen in the chapter, this served to challenge them in their learning on a number of significant levels. For one of the students, the challenges came very early in his experiences and set the tone for the rest of his fieldwork. In his first journal entry, he comments as follows:

Walking back to the bus a kid kicks a ball my way and asks if I want to come and play soccer with them. Wow, does he not resent my wealth, does he not curse me behind my back. Obviously not, a simple invitation to a game, the outstretched hand – ice broken (student B1, journal entry 1).

And at the end of his experience:

Over the past 3 or so weeks, I have encountered and challenged some very ‘eye opening’ scenarios and circumstances. Coming from a background of privilege and having a white skin has often left me feeling emotional, guilty and disappointed at what I have seen, although I have yet to fully understand and grasp the extent of the worries and concerns of those people I have briefly interviewed. I have nonetheless been invited into the homes of strangers, been offered tea and been welcomed ... from one house to the next I have heard stories of desperation, poverty and defeat. I have encountered bed-ridden breadwinners, unemployed adults, alcoholics and gangsters – all of whom have left a mark on the mind of me and my research partner (student B1, journal entry 3).

We move now to Chapter 7, the analysis and discussion across the two case studies, which will be presented drawing on the tools of a nexus analysis (Scollon & Wong Scollon 2002; Scollon 2004). This will lay the foundation for considering service learning as a form of boundary work in higher education in the second half of the chapter.



## **Chapter 7: Service learning as boundary work in higher education**

In the last two chapters I looked at each of the service learning courses as activity systems spanning three nested activities, which enabled me to discuss the key contradictions in each. In this chapter I extend the case-by-case analysis in a comparative way, looking across both cases and focusing on contradictions at the ‘nexus of practice’, (Scollon & Wong Scollon 2002) and on service learning as ‘boundary work’. In particular I discuss service learning in terms of the ‘boundary zone’, tools of mediation as ‘boundary objects’ and educators as ‘boundary workers’.

This chapter is divided into two parts. Part 1 provides a discussion of the key contradictions identified in the two cases, analysing them by drawing on the tools of a nexus analysis as outlined in Chapter 4. Part 1 lays the basis for Part 2 where I begin to discuss service learning as boundary work in higher education. Part 2 forms the bulk of this chapter and consists of three sections. In Section 2a, I analyse the key discourses present in the activity as well as the relationships between discourses. This enables me to discuss service learning in the ‘boundary zone’ in each case. The section on discourses, following my discussion on discourse in Chapter 4, provides the framing for the next two sections. Section 2b analyses struggles over the tools of mediation, once again looking across both cases. This enables me to then consider tools of mediation as ‘boundary objects’ in service learning. In 2c, I then consider the ways in which the intersection of discourses, linked to struggles over tools, resulted in challenges to roles, identity and agency. I end Part 1 with a consideration of the roles and identities of the two educators as ‘boundary workers’.

I end by providing a summary of the chapter where I highlight the differences and similarities in both cases. Based on my analysis in Part 2, I argue that we need to understand the complex interaction of discourses, tools and social actors if we are to develop and even transform both our service learning practices as well as the university’s engagement with the broader community.

## Part 1: Contradictions at the ‘nexus of practice’

Although our study on the occupational health and safety hazards [for] domestic workers showed that domestic workers associated some of their health problems to their work, I [had] a feeling that it [would not be] significant .... Reflecting on why I am feeling that our findings [might not have been] significant I think, is probably linked to the fact that I never linked homes with health hazards. To me, *home is a haven!* (student E, journal entry 2; emphasis added).

As discussed in Chapter 4, ‘nexus analysis’ is a development of mediated discourse analysis and as such provides the tools to analyse a piece of social action, i.e. to look at complex ‘nexus of practices’. As a form of sociocultural analysis, it seeks to clarify the complex relations between discourses, actors and tools, and mediated action or practices. The key challenge in using a nexus analysis is to take into account the main elements of social action ‘without wresting [them] from the historical, sociocultural world of real-time social activity’ (Scollon 2001a:152). A nexus analysis thus takes as its starting point that all actions occur at a complex moment or nexus of social, psychological and material trajectories. By identifying the contradictions in both systems and the ways in which discourses, actors and tools are challenged and even transformed, we can begin to understand these processes and practices in more nuanced ways. The student’s quote above shows new understandings and changed perceptions as a result of her service learning experience. Through this, she indexes a whole array of complex social realities, contexts and histories that meet at the nexus of practice. It is some of these that we will look at in this chapter.

As argued in both Chapters 1 and 4, service learning introduces two fundamental changes to the practice of learning and teaching in higher education. Firstly, what I have called an ‘*expanded community*’ and secondly, a ‘*dual but inter-related object*’. I argued that neither of these are accidental but are intentional aspects of service learning practice. In the first instance the ‘expanded community’, or what could also be viewed as two communities of practice, indicates that the university and its students are no longer in a ‘traditional’ higher education context and set of relationships of ‘teacher/educator and learner’. In addition, neither are they physically located in the ‘traditional’ university community – they are learning off campus while engaged in ‘service’ to a community.

Secondly, there is a dual but inter-related object in service learning: it is not only about student learning but about some form of *community service* as well. Both of these features have an impact on (and are reflective of) discourses, tools of mediation and roles that get enacted. I see these as the main contradictions in the two systems reflected in the following way:

- The (expanded) community-rules-(dual) object/outcome.
- The (expanded) community-tools-(dual) object/outcome.
- The (expanded) community-division of labour-(dual) object.

What this formulation represents is the observation that in service learning, rules, tools and division of labour need to be negotiated and are often challenged; they shift and are sometimes completely transformed. This is a result of ‘expansive learning’ leading to systemic contradictions, which Engeström and Tuomi-Gröhn (2003) argue happens when those involved in a collective activity begin to question elements of the existing practice. The lens of a nexus analysis therefore requires us to take the formulation above one step further:

- The (expanded) community-rules-(dual) object/outcome = *discourses ‘rubbing up against each other’*
- The (expanded) community-tools-(dual) object/outcome = *struggles over tools of mediation*
- The (expanded) community-division of labour-(dual) object/outcome = *challenges to roles, identity and agency*

Let me unpack this. In the first instance, the rules of both activity systems, which I have argued are akin to discourse (Gee 1990), are disrupted and challenged in the service learning. Through the lens of nexus analysis, we can see that discourses ‘rub up against each other’ (Thesen 1994), even if invisible or covert. The communities of practice represented by the students and their community partners, in other words, reflect quite different discourses that interact in the service learning course.

Secondly, and as a result of this, the students and their community partners challenged aspects of the tools in the activities. We saw how this happened in particular in the workshop in the MBChB case and with the questionnaire and interviewing in the EGS case. This therefore implies that there were ‘struggles over tools of mediation’.

Thirdly, linked to the point above, we have seen how roles and division of labour shifted in the activities. In both cases there were challenges to power relations as new identities and forms of agency emerged. We also saw how this in some instances challenged the object of the activity system for the students. In the rest of this chapter, I want to develop this further argument by taking each contradiction and looking more closely at it, drawing on the data from the case studies. At the end of my discussion of each contradiction, I shall look at them as dimensions of ‘boundary work’ in higher education.

## **Part 2: Making sense of the contradictions: service learning as ‘boundary work’**

Part 2 forms the core of this chapter and of the analysis of the two service learning case studies. It explores each of the contradictions identified earlier thereby laying the basis for understanding service learning as boundary work.

### **2a. *Contradiction 1: discourses ‘rubbing up against each other’***

This section will analyse the key discourses evident in the system and the ways in which they intersect causing contradictions and tensions. Drawing on the language of boundary work, I will look at possibilities and contradictions for service learning in the ‘boundary zone’ at the end of the section.

In terms of the students’ discourses, I discussed the work of Becher and Trowler (2001) in Chapter 4 who look at how academic communities of practice are shaped by different rules, discourses and practices. In making sense of this, they come up with a formulation that consists of four dimensions against which to understand disciplines:



- hard-pure, i.e. the pure sciences (e.g. chemistry)
- soft-pure, i.e. humanities and pure social sciences (e.g. geography, literature)
- hard-applied, i.e. technologies (e.g. engineering, clinical medicine)
- soft-applied, i.e. applied social science (e.g. human geography research)

Becher and Trowler argue that while this is a very crude and broad way of looking at disciplines, its usefulness lies in the attention it gives to both the ‘epistemological properties of knowledge fields’, as well as its focus on the ‘social characteristics of research groups’ (ibid: 35). These distinctions, while quite broad and starkly delineated, are useful to bear in mind as we look at the students’ discourses, including what they say and how they respond, and their relationship with very different communities and discourses off campus.

In both cases studies, the students’ discourses intersect with those of their community partners. However, as could be expected, these are not the same across the two cases. While I have argued for the students as the subjects of the activity systems and thus the focus of my analysis, one can only make sense of the student discourses when understanding them in the context of other, possibly contradictory, discourses. We need therefore to look at both the students’ and the community’ discourses in both cases to which we now turn.

#### **2ai. The MBChB case: Medical discourse in (a new) context**

It was a challenge for me to engage in and maintain a conversation *outside a clinical setting* such as the one I was exposed to (student E, journal entry 1; emphasis added).

##### ***The students’ discourses: ‘medicine beyond the clinic’***

The MBChB students come into the service learning activities with SADS AWU as fourth year medical students doing a public health and primary health care block. They thus have a medical discourse in place, with much of it represented by Becher and Trowler’s (2001) hard-pure disciplinary discourse. In South Africa the medical degree is a Faculty of Health Science degree from first year through to the final year, i.e. purely science-based

and oriented. Demand for places in the medical degree at UCT are at a premium and students needed to have done exceptionally well at school to qualify for the programme. The students therefore come into the activities with a specific formal learner role in place. As many of them have always been ‘top achievers’, the ethos of ‘being a student’ in higher education is strongly developed. They are used to competition, they know that they need to focus on their studies, and they are used to an environment of stress and tension. They therefore ‘act’ being a student in a particular way that is reflective of the discourse of the stress of medical training. This includes much formal, scientific learning and research, something they would also have experienced during their schooling as one of the requirements for entry into the medical degree in South Africa is high scores on physics, chemistry and mathematics.

In other words, as top achievers both in school and at university they have acquired the practices of formal learning, of mastering exams and working under tight deadlines. These are what they perceive is expected of them throughout their degree. One of the students reflects elements of this discourse very succinctly in his journal:

Medical students for the duration of their training, live a very unique and artificial existence compared to almost anyone else. We thrive on structure, pressure and fear. Take any one of these variables out of the equation, and we are totally lost. We constantly feel the need to be in control of whatever situation we find ourselves in. It is what we are being trained to do. In medicine, there are so many variables. It is impossible to control all of them. But we have to be in control of as much as we can as a way of compensating for those factors that are beyond our control (student H, journal entry 1).

The aspect of ‘control’, of ‘order’ that comes through here is an inherent part of a medical discourse. Student H indicates that they have no alternative and these conditions enable the students to excel. In this block, however, things shift. The students do not have full control over their learning. They need to negotiate a research project with the domestic workers, a very different community from what those that most of them are familiar with. This necessitates movement into a new and very different community of practice and working ‘outside of a clinical setting’ where ‘order’ and ‘control’ have very different meanings. Many of the students find this very challenging and at times, even disruptive. Understanding occupational health and safety – particularly in the context of

domestic workers – is very new to the students. One student reflects on this when having to choose a topic for her research:

The topic I chose explored the prevalence of occupational health and safety hazards of domestic work ... it never crossed my mind before that domestic workers could be exposed to hazards both within and beyond the household. Therefore I felt it very significant for me to explore further into the topic and learn something new. The conversations I held with representatives of [SADSAWU] gave me more insight into the many day-to-day issues faced by today's domestic workers. It was a challenge for me to engage in and maintain a conversation *outside a clinical setting* such as the one I was exposed to (student E, journal entry 1; emphasis added).

While on the one hand it could be argued that doing research is a 'habitual' part of being a student, they are relatively new to both public health and studies of populations, as well as to being off campus in a setting such as this to conduct the research. In addition, the primary health care and health promotion discourse is a very different medical discourse, requiring a very different student (and medical) role from them. It is much more of a 'hard-applied' discourse and clashes with their previous medical and university discourse – the 'hard-pure' discourse – adding to their uncertainty and frustration.

Similar contradictions were experienced by another student during the epidemiology presentations. She highlights the difficulties of making the transition to learning in a new discourse:

I found that going in to present to the union, I had no idea as to what their expectations would be and was very aware that our presentation would have to be structured in a way *not to offend or appear condescending*. I must admit that the response of the union was disheartening since there was no outstanding appreciation or dissatisfaction aired and I had expected some sort of recognition for all our hard work (student G, journal entry 2; emphasis added).

In her view, the union did not give her the same kind of response that she would have received from her academic peers and lecturers. She expresses frustration at the lack of 'appreciation' they felt after their presentation. Through her comments on 'condescending' and 'offensive', she indicates that for her at least, discourses are hierarchical and their university discourse is more recognised and has more prestige even than the workers'. We can also see evidence that for her, the world of medicine operates

on a different set of criteria for judgement than the world of the union does. Because the ‘social characteristics of the (research) group’ (Becher & Trowler 2001: 35) in this context are so different from those of her peer group on campus, she struggles with her presentation to the union:

Presenting to the union was difficult. Coming from an academic background where all presentations are marked according to technique, content and manner of presentation, a specific style is naturally moulded in order to fulfill expected criteria. Presenting to people who share your culture of academia is also somewhat easier – particularly if exposed to it for four years, as I have been (student G, journal entry 2).

In the case of the domestic workers, they would be judging the presentation on relevance, applicability to their context as workers and activists, i.e. is the knowledge useful in furthering their cause and improving their plights as domestic workers? However, because the students are unfamiliar with this new discourse, they find it difficult to change their practices and to accept different responses when they move out of the university context.

The health promotion workshop is another powerful example of how the workers’ experientially-based discourses, particularly that of humour, challenged the students on a number of occasions. This was because the workshop is reflective of this very different discourse alluded to above, i.e. one of (historically) non-formal learning and activism. However, because the students needed to work with the union to achieve the objects of their course, they needed the domestic workers’ help and needed to be able to operate within this new and uncertain discourse. This, in turn, meant that they had to re-assess their own discourses so that they could engage in new ways to achieve the outcomes they desired in the workshop, the culmination of the block.

It was thus a huge learning experience for the students reflecting many complex historical practices and events. It challenges the students on many levels and highlights the importance of understanding ‘interactions’ and ‘situations’ (i.e. learning) as ‘articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings’ in which

our experiences and understandings are actually constructed on a far larger scale than what we happen to define for the moment as the place itself, whether that be a street, a region or even a continent (Massey 1993: 65-66 in Nespor 1994: 3).

In other words when students were interacting with the workers in the immediate environment, they were also interacting with aspects of the workers' histories and practices spatially and temporally removed from them. In this way we have seen how the experiences of the medical students index a wide range of other discourses and practices (Scollon & Wong Scollon 2002).

### ***The domestic workers: contradictory discourses and histories***

The domestic workers came into the action very strongly as workers and as members of a trade union. This worker/activist/political discourse is clearly evident across the activities. It was evident in many places and actions: the decorations in the rooms where the union was located, the COSATU T-shirts that many of the workers wore, the COSATU banner draped over the main table, the posters on the wall, the slogans in the posters, the singing of the national anthem and the reference to 'Comrade'.

As I argued in Chapter 5, the domestic workers played a number of interesting roles throughout the activities, strongly reflective of the range of complex and interwoven discourses indicated above. These came through most strongly in their roles as workers, activists, and educator/mothers. I captured the following in my field notes at the Epidemiology presentations indicating how I saw these roles being taken on:

*They indicated earlier that they were 'a trade union with a difference' referring to the fact that the sector was very marginalized and vulnerable and so they had to be more specific in the ways they worked with their members. They tended to look after their members: 'No one is ever turned away'. One also needs to bear in mind that the employer-employee relationship is a particularly difficult and very different one – as they put it 'woman to woman'.*

*So you have this 'motherly' identity they seem to adopt with their members. They took on this identity with the students as well in assisting them with their project and being quite gentle with them, even when they challenged them on aspects of their projects. This motherly identity is however interspersed with huge amounts of knowledge about rights, legislation and issues of oppression and disempowerment. And so the second identity is that of organiser, activist and savvy political campaigner.*

*At numerous times during all three activities they had facts and figures at their fingertips about numbers of members, cases of poor pay and knowledge of legislation. At the first meeting, they spoke confidently about their identities, roles etc (chained to the gates of parliament) and it is clear that it has been a long and hard battle for recognition. As part of this though, they are also quick to point out their limitations and vulnerabilities, e.g. 'we made a blaps'<sup>71</sup> when we forgot to negotiate for UIF'<sup>72</sup>.*

*This identity also came out forcefully and immediately when they were given an opportunity to comment on either the students' presentation and/or their report. It also came up in the way in which the domestic workers expressed disappointment at the students' use of the words 'servants' and 'maids' in their report. They resisted this strongly, almost with one voice. In fact, while the students were rather lethargically going through their presentation, I saw one of the domestic workers scribble in the document and scratch out the offending words.*

*Then there is the third identity, that of worker and in this particular case, that of a domestic worker. This particular identity has a long and entrenched history in South Africa. I picked up evidence of this twice today. First, during the meeting when they said they had to go home and cook supper. Secondly, it came up when I took some of them home in my car. I gave Heather and Maud a lift and I heard snippets of the conversation between them. They were talking about their employers and always referred to them as 'madam says this' and 'madam says that' ... It was clear that there is still a really complex relationship operating for many women here (Field notes 5 October 2004).*

The following excerpt reflects the complex ways in which these discourses are intertwined:

*Myrtle then identified that for both groups – the students and the domestic workers – it was the first time and there was nothing like this in SA so they must see it as an important pilot for improving conditions for domestic workers. She added that 'we are both going to learn and we need to accept that there could be snags – it is difficult to get access to domestic workers and because of fears – it is going to be hard work – you will get a degree and maybe we will too'. There was some laughter after this last comment. One of the workers then said, 'We want to know what you people need to know ... you need to do it as part of your course and we need to try and get domestic workers for you to interview'.*

*Another worker went on to say, 'We need to get the right workers for you who are accessible and open, we need to negotiate access for you to the specific workplace, we need to work out how we are going to do this ... in the end, you want to bring something out from here' (Field notes 9 September 2004; emphasis added to indicate tone)*

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<sup>71</sup> Colloquial expression used to mean a 'mistake, an error'

<sup>72</sup> UIF – Unemployment Insurance Fund

Here we see them first as workers: they talk about difficult issues that the sector faces and that this would be the first time something like this research happens. They also show elements of an activist role and discourse in indicating that they know the workers that need to be included in the study, i.e. they know the workers who would not lose their jobs if their employer found that had been involved in the research with the students. Lastly, they indicate a more motherly and educator discourse in indicating that they understand what the students need to do for their research.

However, given their marginalised status, the discourses of the domestic workers came out in somewhat contradictory ways across the activities. On the one hand, the language and discourse of activism were visible in many activities, e.g. they sing the South African national anthem at the workshop, called each other ‘Comrade’, talked of their own experiences of struggle and disempowerment. Yet on the other hand, the language they used to refer to their employers or their ‘madams’ – while they made attempts to challenge it often through humour – was visible of their status as workers. We also saw this in the ways in which they discussed their experiences in the workshop.

A final and significant dimension of the workers’ discourse is that of humour. This came out very strongly in the epidemiology presentation as well as in the workshop and it defines their interactions in particular ways. This discourse of ‘humour embedded in practice’ is an important element of much of the struggle history in this sector and others as I have argued for in this and previous chapters. In her study on the nature of pedagogy, learning and knowledge in a trade union context, Cooper (2005) draws on the work of Bakhtin (1965/1994) and his writing on ‘folk humour’ to analyse activities in the trade union context. For Bakhtin, the tradition of folk humour is a “complex system of meaning existing alongside and in opposition to the ‘authoritarian world’ of dominant orthodoxy” (Bakhtin 1965/1994: 194 cited in Cooper 2005: 162).

The key feature of folk humour is its deep ambivalence: it parodies the ‘other’ while also being critically ‘self-reflexive’, thereby functioning to both ‘combat fear’ and to celebrate ‘temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and established order’ (ibid: 162). Humour can therefore take on a ‘subversive’ character and challenge ‘official authority’ and ‘established order’. This includes elements of exaggeration as well as ‘a sardonic form

of self-mockery' that can serve to both acknowledge as well as challenge 'the socially hegemonic constructions of workers' identities' (Cooper 2005: 162).

In this case study, we have seen how the workers use humour in various ways: to both acknowledge *and* challenge the students and their 'scientific, formal knowledge' – the 'official authority' and 'established order' – as well as to challenge the ways in which they, as domestic workers, have been constructed both by the students themselves as well as by their employers. It was evident in both the epidemiology presentations as well as in the workshop. In the epidemiology presentation we see how they used it initiate proceedings:

*The Domestic workers were sitting with copies of the students' reports. At times during the presentation the students seemed to lose their way and had to ask classmates to help them out. One of the students then spoke: 'So, that is our presentation, that is what we found – now we are going for more of a discussion – but perhaps we can get together in a circle'. This shifted the discussion in useful ways and the dynamics. One of the Domestic workers introduced herself: 'hello, I am still Margie'... laughter. The Domestic workers have a great sense of humour that they use in very creative ways to inject into the discussion and almost at times, this enables them to take some degree of control back and away from the students (Field notes 5 October 2004).*

This was a powerful move which shifted power relations and agency which I shall discuss later. However it was in the workshop as we saw in Chapter 5 that humour was most evident when it was used to act out a skit which disrupted the workshop at a particular point. Humour is therefore an important dimension of the discourse of being a worker and can be used to both challenge power but also to bring people together as we can see from the excerpt above. I shall look at this again when discussing roles and agency in 2c. We turn now to the EGS case and look at the ways in which discourses were evident here.

### **2a.iii. The EGS case: Human geographers, context and development**

Naturally I did not have the background knowledge and contextual information of her life, but by listening and enticing her to carry on talking to us about her life I was able to paint a picture, even if it was a fairly naïve picture. I was able to place [...]’s life into a space, time and context by just listening to her explain her unhappiness. I did not provoke her in any way and thus believed she entered the



conversation with a sense of security as she had the ability to end the conversation when it became too personal. The interviewer is always in the middle of a life history and thus cannot fully contextualize the life history one had entered mid-way. The interviewer must try and contextualize the interviewee's telling in the best way possible but due to the openness and loose ended beginning and ending point ... one can misinterpret aspects of the stories. This space, time and context will hopefully be reinforced and thus my understanding will improve and my misinterpretations, if any, will (be) minimized (student A1, journal entry 4).

The role of 'context' is thus an inherent part of geography students' learning and discourse, and it becomes a particularly important means of understanding the nature of geography in this case study. We can see how student A1 reflects on this in her journal and indicates that her lack of some contextual knowledge could (negatively) affect her interpretations of what she was experiencing and observing. We look at some of these issues in more detail in the section that follows by exploring the discourses of the EGS students and the VPUCF members.

### ***The students: geography discourses in context***

The 30 third year EGS 315S students came to the community as part of their geography course to learn mapping and their learning was shaped by specific learning objectives and curriculum. As in the MBChB case, it could be argued that doing research in the social sciences is recognized university practice and part of the discourse of being a student. However in this particular learning context the EGS students were forced to think and learn in new ways. They were required, in other words, to make the transition from the soft-pure social sciences discourse that many of them are familiar with, to the more soft-applied discourse that is evident in field-based research. In particular, they needed to come to terms with the role of 'context' in their field experience and see it, not as a barrier to their learning, but as an inherent part of it.

The students are also shaped by being South African and, on the whole, privileged students at a prestigious research-led university. Being in the field, and in particular in a context like Valhalla Park, was a new practice for many of them – in terms of both the task *and* the context – and this new practice impacts on their identity as students in

complex and contradictory ways (Nespor 1994). There was evidence of this in many of the students' journals reflections.

The students therefore had a range of perceptions about contexts like Valhalla Park: their language referred to 'the other', and to the 'dislocation' they experienced, particularly in the beginning of their field work. Two of the EGS students captured these feelings of difference, of 'otherness', very well in their journals when reflecting on their first experience of Valhalla Park:

To be absolutely honest, today I was very nervous before entering Valhalla Park to carry out surveys on the residents' housing facilities. The nerves were present because I did not know what to expect, who to expect and that I was out of my comfort zone (student A2, journal entry 1).

Once again, on starting the walk and seeing the houses, my impression was one of ... should I say, pleasant surprise? I noticed that a lot of the houses were painted in bright colours, there were fences around some of them and they were generally in a pretty neat state. As we went along, people were coming out of their houses to see what was happening – clearly a group of privileged looking students is not a common sight in Valhalla Park (student D1, journal entry 1).

A third student's observations reflect some of these complexities in his relationship to and understanding of the context of this research. In interesting and graphic ways, he reflects on what he sees as similarities between the context of Valhalla Park and his home, Katlehong, in the north of the country near Johannesburg:

The township I grew up in is named Katlehong, it is situated in Johannesburg in the East Rand. It is very similar to Valhalla Park which is characterized by homes which have been extended and backyard shacks erected, plus of course the other characteristics of any township really it was even so similar I even found similarity in some undesirable aspects such as the *repugnant smells that grace townships across South Africa* (student B2, journal entry 1; emphasis added).

A fourth student commented on different feelings, reflecting a range of emotions:

Getting off the bus, I'm introduced to Eric: firm handshake, followed by a manly hug and massive smile. Immediately my nerves are calmed and I'm reminded of the *notorious hospitality of the Cape Coloured people*. Suddenly I feel excitement ... not fear (student B1, journal entry 1; emphasis added).

These excerpts highlight four key points about learning and context. Firstly, this was a new space outside of the ‘comfort zone’ and discourse of many of the students. Secondly, this made some of the students very aware of their privilege and difference, i.e. of their class status. We see student D1 reflecting this in her ‘surprise’ at what she encounters, clearly not what she had been expecting. Thirdly, however, this could also be a new and exciting context for learning and development, and these differences and insights can both challenge *and* support learning. This is reflected in the third student’s comments.

Finally, as we can see from the last student, relationships to contexts are very particular. This student’s use of the term ‘notorious hospitality’ is particularly interesting in that the ‘Coloured’ community is known for two things in the Cape Town area which he puts together: their hospitality, sense of community and solidarity despite their poverty on the one hand, and their ‘notoriety’ as a community where gangsterism is a large part of many people’s lives and struggles for survival under dire conditions. The fact that the students are encouraged to reflect on these issues, and in fact are rewarded for this, is reflective of a social science discourse which values an awareness of context.

In the EGS case the students are thus encouraged to understand the context in which social action, including learning, takes place, and to see it as part of the learning. This is evident of a ‘soft-applied’ social science discourse (Becher and Trowler 2001) where Susan has structured the EGS course in very particular ways, i.e. to bring context into the heart of the curriculum. In particular, she does this by indicating to the students that the knowledge and experience of the VPUCF is crucial to their learning.

*Susan indicated that the VPUCF person will give them the more detailed, specific information; this ‘keeps the task realistic and puts the VP Civic upfront in the project’ (Class session 26 July 2005; emphasis added).*

In this way, the actual project with the Valhalla Park community reflects this more ‘soft-applied’ discourse where the traditions of how one does research are challenged and recontextualised. ‘Putting the Civic upfront in the project’ and conducting research in a ‘real’ context is an intentional and important feature of the course. One of the students reflects on his own understanding of this:

Working in an area like Valhalla Park was also interesting; what made it more interesting is the research I was doing. The issue of backyard shacks I had usually [heard] about but I've never experienced it or rather been in the actual area and inside those shacks ... working in Valhalla Park broaden[ed] the above mentioned issues and made me more interested in Human Geography than I have ever been. Seeing and hearing things from the people on their own terms, was quite an interesting experience. I have to admit that some stories people told us were touching and could easily cause one to cry (student C2, journal entry 5).

In this quote the student reflects on the importance of research but also of context in studying human geography. Context helps him to understand the reality of people's lives and how they cope with many of the challenges they face. In addition, student C2 'indexes' aspects of the social sciences discourse where feelings of uncertainty, of empathy and of community are an accepted form of response (Scollon 2002). Through his observations we see evidence of his emerging understanding about the nature of urban development and communities' struggles for survival.

The EGS students therefore come into the relationship with the VPUCF as social science students with the goal of doing research with the civic organisation. In order to do this, they need to develop an understanding of what it means to do research *in this context* which, in turn, requires them to familiarise themselves with the geographical and social context of Valhalla Park. Susan has fore-grounded the work and discourse of the VPUCF in her course and this both facilitates the students' learning and leads to some students feeling uncertain in this new learning context. The relationship between the VPUCF, the students and this context is thus complex and often contradictory.

### ***The VPUCF: activist and community discourses***

And if you knock on somebody's door, you just have to say, 'I've been sent here by Patricia,' or 'I've been sent here by the United Front' then they will accept you with open arms (VPUCF interview, 20.06.04).

The members of the VPUCF come into activity as part of their role in the Civic and as residents of Valhalla Park. In addition, most of them have already been involved with Susan as part of the CRG as I discussed in Chapter 6 and had worked with Susan's students the previous year (2004). As a consequence, they have an ongoing relationship

with Susan, if not with the university. Coming in as community activists, they bring a discourse of development and activism and are very involved in their community. Patricia and Evan, in particular, are strongly representative of this activist discourse and the years of experience they have of working in the community comes across in their engagement with the students. We saw this particularly in the first meeting and orientation tour as well as in the project presentations.

The civic members who were the Guides for the students are familiar with talking to people in community. This is the habitual practice and discourse of a community activist and is linked to other aspects of their role and history, e.g. mobilizing for grants and other services linked to assisting with community action. The Guides are thus well established in their community and have a lot of authority in the work that they do. As we saw in the previous chapter, they play their roles confidently and through this, they exert a form of individual and collective agency. One of the students reflects on how his increasing knowledge of the lived experiences of the Guide with whom he and his partner were working, assisted in developing his own understanding and confidence.

We discovered [that] our assigned [Guide] was in the same position as those people we were interviewing. The information and opinions they offered us were thus largely from direct experience, not just observation or speculation. As we were guided from house to house I experienced a strong sense of community and camaraderie which was enacted by our community activist (student D2, journal entry 5).

In terms of the VPUCF Guides themselves, there were different amounts of power visible in different Guides' actions. As we have seen, Patricia and Evan were powerful, strong, more experienced, more confident than some of the others and the students picked up clearly on these power dynamics. For many of the students, the VPUCF 'was Patricia'. A student reflects on the role of the VPUCF and the discourse of activism he reads into their activities:

The VPUCF consists of a group of women predominantly in their forties and fifties and it was formed to fight for the rights of the community. One lady in particular, Patricia, leads and relentlessly battles to gain basic rights for the community. She also acts as an intermediary between the community and the outside, so much so that in emergencies she is contacted first and asked to contact the police or ambulance service. She has been evicted from her own

home three times. Inspired by her own plight, her mission is to stand up for others who are too afraid to stand up for themselves (student D2, journal entry 1).

This is clear evidence of the power the students' perceived Patricia had and how important she is to the Valhalla Park community. The activism of the VPUCF is thus directly linked to community-based, local issues where they take up the struggle on behalf of the Valhalla Park community.

### **2aiii. Service learning in the 'boundary zone': discourses, contradictions and possibilities**

Nothing had been going according to plan and time was running out. Why would anyone want to belong to a union? Was this the way other unions functioned?

After 40 minutes of waiting along came out union representative. Ok, it wouldn't be long now till we started. Just a little drive out to Constantia<sup>73</sup> and then we could get down to business ... two and a half hours later, we still had to do our first interview! As it turned out, since the domestic workers were only available during their lunch break, we could only conduct interviews during that one hour. So why did we leave at 11am?! (student H, journal entry 1).

This quote by a medical student captures some of the contradictions and tensions that emerge at the intersection of two very different communities of practice. Through this he is indexing a discourse related to issues of control brought about by time constraints. In the case of the students, he is showing how medical students feel need to be in control because they have little time and how, as emerging medical doctors, control and time takes on even more significance. When working with the domestic workers, time is not in their control anymore, leading to frustration and critique of the workers, the union as well as this particular course's timetable.

Following Tuomi-Gröhn and Engeström (2003) the boundary zone is the place where the object of an activity system can be negotiated which results in new opportunities for learning.

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<sup>73</sup> Constantia is an extremely wealthy upper-middle class suburb of Cape Town.

Because it is a hybrid, polycontextual, multi-voiced and multi-scripted context, the boundary zone is considered as a place where it is possible to extend the object ... [I]n that way, the activity itself is reorganised, resulting in new opportunities for learning (ibid: 5).

This quote implies that the boundary zone is quite a benevolent place where new learning opportunities are made possible via a familiar and uncontested discourse. While this may be the case in some contexts, in my two cases the boundary zone functions differently. Firstly, in both cases, it was more contradictory, challenging and disruptive than the definition above implies, i.e. while potential for learning was there, it was not always realised. Secondly, when looking across the two, one sees that in each case study, the students, the activities and the learning was positioned and shaped in very different ways.

Following Becher and Trowler (2001) we have evidence of a blend of hard-pure (clinical medical discourse) and hard-applied (primary health care and public health) intersecting with a trade union political/activist discourse in the MBChB case, and the blending of a soft-pure (social science) and soft-applied (applied social science in the research project with the VPUCF) social science discourse intersecting with a community development/activist discourse. These intersections of discourses make for differences across the two cases.

I would argue that the boundary zone in the MBChB case was more fraught and disruptive than in the case of the EGS course. One of the reasons for this is that the differences in the discourses of the medical students and those of the domestic workers are far starker than in the EGS case. This is due to the fact that the medical curriculum (in South Africa at least) is far more highly structured and regulated than the EGS and the students are under a lot of personal and professional pressure as a result of this. This is indicative of the natural sciences/social sciences divide where knowledge for the medical students is understood as 'impersonal and value-free', but for the EGS students as inherently 'personal and value-laden' (Becher & Trowler 2001).

In addition, in the medical curriculum there is what Anna refers to as a 'lack of vertical integration' (Anna, interview 09.11.04) which makes the process of negotiating a project even more complex. By this is meant that the students do not re-visit the discourse of

public health and primary health care: this part of their curriculum is a block on its own with no direct links to what came before it and what comes after it in the curriculum. This also means that the kind of learner the medical students needed to be here was very different from in the rest of their curriculum: after they have completed this block, the students go back into a far more traditional medical curriculum and they do not encounter this kind of learner role again.

During this block they have become ‘researchers with a conscience’, aimed at understanding critical issues that impact on the health of their prospective patients and working out strategies to solve them. They have in a sense therefore, been ‘activists’ during this block. However, while this new discourse challenged the students and provided new insights for some of them, the roles they took on did not impact on or directly improve the lives of the domestic workers. All the students can express is empathy for the lives they have learnt about:

When we finished the [epidemiology] feedback session that day, we’d be getting on our pre-arranged shuttle, we would be dropped off at our pre-arranged destination and continue with our pre-arranged lives. We would no longer be playing the role of investigators of injustice driven by our social conscience. Rather we would once again become a group of very ordinary medical students focussed on getting through the last few weeks of the year. ... The [domestic workers] on the other hand, were living the lives we had analysed the week before. How were they going to get home? Had they budgeted for transport for that day? Were they late for work because we had run over time with our presentation? How were their employers going to react? Would they have to make up the time they had taken off? When were they going to do their shopping, or buy lunch, or do whatever they would normally [have] done had they not given up that time to be at the meeting? (student H, journal entry 2).

While these issues are stark in the MBChB case, the issues are important to note for the EGS students as well. We have seen how the EGS students were also anxious at times about their learning and about being successful; however there was more room for negotiation in the zone through the curriculum and its activities. Through the ways in which the partnership was negotiated and the curriculum designed, meant that there was a more ongoing (or at least extended) relationship with the VPUCF. This enabled a ‘third space’ to be created for many of the students (Gutierrez & Stone 2000). Following Gutierrez and Stone, this third space provided the mediational context and tools



necessary for future development and learning. In particular, it provided the context to develop an identity to understand learning across boundaries. Student B1 reflects on this:

[S]ocial geographers have the opportunity to go where no one else goes (or wants to go), a chance to look below the surface and contemplate, identify and quantify those issues constricting the advancement of the developing nation. Social geography is the key to the betterment of our society – and in some sense it is only through the study of these and other issues that we will be able to someday alleviate poverty, attack discrimination and secure a better future (student B1, journal entry 5).

This opportunity for reflection is facilitated by the course design – a design aimed at enabling students to understand boundaries and even negotiate crossings.

*Susan then talked about the role of reflection. She said that it is about self-reflection as well as the process of reflection – what worked or did not work in the group. ‘Use your journals to think: is there a better way to do this? Are there questions you would rather have asked?’ She indicated that to work out which areas have already been done from last year, ‘Take the general map and the specific map and transpose’.... She continued: ‘We are not producing real scientific information – we are trying to get a sense of the real problem areas’ (Field notes 26 July 2005; emphasis to indicate tone).*

By making the community voice and agency an inherent part of the course both directly through the readings she chooses, as well as indirectly through the processes she sets up for the students to engage with members of the Valhalla Park community, Susan minimizes the chances of the boundary zone becoming a barrier to learning. She therefore shows how the boundary zone, and the practices that are reflective of this, can provide opportunity for community voice and thus agency in service learning – for both students and community partners.

## **2b. *Contradiction 2: struggles over tools of mediation***

In this section I discuss the potential of tools of mediation as boundary objects that can facilitate understanding across the boundary or in the boundary zone. The roles they played were different across the two cases.

In the MBChB case, this came out most strongly in the workshop, the tool of the third activity. Here we saw how the domestic workers felt more confident in the workshop, were able to insert many elements of their own experience and in fact took over parts of the workshop. The workshop also enabled them to challenge some of the students in terms of the occupational health and safety content. This resulted in much disruption in the workshop enabling the workers, who were more familiar with the workshop mode as a tool for learning, to use it as a space to challenge and ultimately teach the students. They were able to do this by inserting their more collective, experientially-based discourse through humour and role plays which in turn enabled them to challenge roles and identities, and exert new forms of agency. I discuss the role of humour in more detail later in the chapter when looking at the relationship between tools and roles/power relations.

Contestation and struggle was also evident in the epidemiology presentation where the power point slides served as tools of mediation. We saw this in the reflections of student G in the previous section. The students felt unsure of their presentation, of what to include and how to present to the workers. Thus whereas on campus their slides were representative of knowledge recognised as representing the outcome of their quantitative, epidemiological research, in the context with the workers, the slides weakened the students' position and knowledge – both because they were challenged, but also because slides and presentations such as these are not as valid for the workers as are other kinds of activities, e.g. a workshop, a policy document.

In the EGS case, struggles were evident over the tools of both the questionnaire and the interview but these happened in slightly different ways. The students and the VPUCF Guides were involved together in administering the questionnaire and completing interviews and this led to some of the challenges. In the case of the questionnaire, because it had been designed by the Civic, it gave them a sense of ownership over the data that emerged through it. I have discussed how Susan deliberately set up the project in this way. In one case, this led to two of the students, D1 and D2, changing the tool by omitting some of the questions as they felt they were 'imposing' on people. One of the two students, D1, explains it like this:

Today our partners and ourselves met with our assigned activist and we started the survey process in our designated area ... we did a total of 16 surveys. At first I found it a bit awkward asking people the survey questions ... not being accustomed with performing interviews, it felt somewhat imposing. I felt especially uncomfortable asking whether or not the backyarders used a bucket or pit toilet. My partner felt the same so after the first interview we decided to leave those questions out as the previous question on whether everyone used the inside toilet, seemed to be sufficient (student D1, journal entry 2).

This reflects a language of respect as well as one of uncertainty which leads to a contradiction with the tool of the questionnaire. The way D1 chooses to deal with the tool in this context was to change it. I managed to follow up with Student D1 early in 2006 as I was interested to discuss this decision that she and her field work partner had made during the course the previous year. In an interview she responded as follows:

There was one question I remember on that survey which I didn't like asking, which was, 'If they didn't have any facilities for a toilet, whether they used a bucket?' I didn't like asking that. I thought it was a bit putting them on the spot and making them feel very uncomfortable. I know that they agreed to put those questions down but some of them I felt to be a bit imposing. It was mostly that question about the toilet. The people were proud of their homes and I think they felt we were youngsters and here we were asking them about a very personal issue like that. I felt very uncomfortable so we agreed not to do that ... We were the ones experiencing it so I felt that it wasn't any use in going to Susan to ask. I don't think making those kinds of decisions was going to in any way jeopardize the survey. We collected all the data that was necessary. It was just that one question that we decided not to ask (student D1, interview 19.01.06).

What is significant here were the comments on how *they* as students experienced the questionnaire and decisions *they* took, particularly given that the tool had been designed by the VPUCF members themselves. This reflects a contradiction between the tool and the object. By changing the tool and leaving out some of the questions, the data collected by these students would have an effect on the overall object – at least for the VPUCF. However the students did not perceive it as such as they felt that they had all the data *that was necessary*.

Through this action student D1 reflects a soft-pure social sciences discourse by questioning the nature of the tool and by indicating that *they* – and not the community residents – were experiencing the tool. This is evidence of an attention to particulars, to

the personal (Becher & Trowler 2001) that is characteristic of the social sciences. Thus, unlike in the MBChB case, the discourse of social science implies, at least for this student, that exact, quantifiable results are less important than the relationships built up and the way one conducts oneself during the research. In a sense therefore, there seemed to be a 'way out' of the struggle over the tool.

The interview was also a site of struggle in ways both similar and different from the questionnaire. In terms of the interviews linked to their own research project topics, there were cases where students felt challenged by delving into other people's lives. One of the students reflects on the protocol of using an interview as he has come to understand it through his course:

We have constantly been very careful not to impose ourselves on anyone and tried to adapt the research and survey in the most sensitive manner. I have attempted, and hopefully succeeded, in protecting the privacy of interviewees where appropriate ... the objective is to gain research information, to do this the researcher needs to be trusted if people are going to open themselves up and tell the truth pertaining to certain issues (student D2, journal entry 3)

At times, the Guide took over asking the questions or getting respondents for the students. Some of the students found this helpful while others not, causing a lot of tension and contradiction for them. Student D1 reflects on the positive elements of working with their Guide, both at the beginning of their research as well as realising the importance of this role in her final reflection:

Dan was very helpful – explaining to the people what we were doing and often repeating our questions in Afrikaans if they did not fully understand us. I think it helped that they knew we were working with the Civic. ... I suspect it wouldn't have gone as smoothly, I think people may have been a little more uncomfortable in our presence (student D1, journal entry 2)

In doing field research and interviewing for the first time, one needs to have assistance – especially if one is in a foreign setting. It can be difficult trying to approach people with fairly private/personal questions and I often felt a little awkward (student D1, journal entry 5).

Student D1 shows how this role of their Guide helped her to understand the conventions of interviewing in an unfamiliar context. For student C1 however, the tool

of the interview, together with the confidence of the Guide, caused frustration, uncertainty and ultimately anger, resulting in contradictions in the system for him and questions about the tool itself as well as the nature of the partnership with the VPUCF:

On the way to Valhalla Park in the bus we decided on which residents we would like to ask about their life histories (as a methodology I think it's biased as we choose our favourites) [but] when we told Pauline which residents we would like to re-interview she seemed apprehensive. She wanted us to interview her church friend who did not even reside in our study area. I feel this is a bias. I mentioned [this] to her and [she] said we should do it anyway as we'll get cake and tea ... we went and got cake and tea. Personally I don't [believe] any information can be collected objectively when one is only shown certain aspects of a community, while the rest is being obscured from you ... I feel it boils down to lying, activists lying to us about what is really going on in Valhalla Park (student C1, journal entry 4).

Here we see evidence of the power and confidence the Guide has and how she was not intimidated by the interview – in fact she is familiar with the tool from her years of activism and so can challenge the interview as tool in this context. Secondly we see how the student questions the 'objectivity' of the tool when put to use in particular contexts. This is reflective of a more university-based discourse where objectivity in research is highly valued and research tools need to be able to achieve objectivity in the contexts and practices of using them. This illustrates an important contradiction in the system where student and community activist understand the tool in different ways, and also shows a very different response to tools compared to student D1 above. This further reinforces how the tools of mediation were sites of (different) struggle for (different) students.

### **2bi. Tools of mediation: 'boundary objects' in service learning?**

As discussed in Chapter 3, boundary objects are tools of mediation that serve to co-ordinate the perspectives of various constituencies for some purpose, e.g. joint activity. They thus potentially enable people to connect specific functions/roles/tasks across a wide range of constituencies (Bowker & Star 1999). Not all tools are boundary objects. To the extent that they belong to multiple practices, they are the nexus of perspectives (junction) and therefore carry the potential of becoming boundary objects *but only if through them, various perspectives can be co-ordinated*.

Boundary objects are objects which are both plastic enough to adapt to local needs and the constraints of the several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites. They are weakly structured in common use, and become strongly structured in individual site use. These objects may be abstract or concrete. They have different meanings in different social worlds but their structure is common enough to more than one world *to make them recognisable, a means of translation* (Star & Griesemer 1989: 393; emphasis in the original).

In other words, it is at the meeting of different perspectives, at the nexus of practice, that tools obtain their meanings as boundary objects. On their own and outside of a specific context, tools are not inherently meaningful or powerful (e.g. a workshop, a questionnaire) but when put to use in a specific context, they take on very strong, often contestable, meanings. In what ways did the tools in each case take on the role of a boundary object? And how was this role enabled?

In the two cases we saw quite different practices which resulted in different outcomes. In the MBChB case, three of the tools were largely determined and shaped by the requirements and demands of the medical curriculum: the sampling techniques, the questionnaire and the epidemiology presentation<sup>74</sup>. The workshop, while a requirement of the course, was a tool that was not familiar to the students even though it was something they had learnt about in their PHC course. In this case study, I understand the potential of the tools as boundary objects in the following way.

The epidemiology sampling technique together with the questionnaire did not play a role as a boundary object as it was an object very much in the control and domain of the students and thus the university. The presentation itself did not play this role either as the slides were the same ones (although reduced in number) as those used for the on-campus presentation the previous week. This meant that they spoke far more to the medical discourse of epidemiology than to that of assisting the domestic workers to understand what they had found through their research. The workshop on the other hand, played quite a significant role and in many ways it had the potential to be a boundary object. It was an important part of the students' learning about primary health care and was the means through which they engaged with the domestic workers on occupational health

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<sup>74</sup> It is important to remember that using power point slides was the choice of the students, not a course requirement.

and safety issues. It was also a familiar mode of learning for the workers. The fact that it was contested and challenged was because as a tool, it has quite a specific history. It is much better understood in non-formal educational contexts such as those that many domestic workers would be familiar with. This is particularly in a curriculum like the MBChB one<sup>75</sup>.

However a potential role for the workshop as a boundary object exists only when it is valued *together with* valuing the experiences of the domestic workers. Following Star and Griesemer (1989), while in general a workshop is weakly structured in common use it becomes very strongly structured in this specific context. While it was a site of struggle, it did have meaning for both the students and the domestic workers as it was through the workshop that the overall object of the activity system was achieved. However, I would argue that its potential as a boundary object was not fully realised in the curriculum.

This is because the workshop itself was not assessed and neither the Epidemiology Supervisors nor the overall Site Co-ordinator, Joan, were present at the event (whereas Susan was present in the field during the EGS course). This is significant as the Supervisors are the overall assessors of the students. Rather, it was left to the students to assess the role of the workshop through their own experiences:

The health promotion workshop turned out to be interesting and satisfying. Through the planning and implementation process I as an individual (and I think the group at large) learnt a lot. When I reflect on the whole project it was *not only about promoting health amongst domestic workers; it was about promoting health in everyone who does housework* including ourselves.

The session that I ran was on alternatives that can be used instead of chemicals and the various ways of prevention. When doing this session, one thing that I learnt is that we never stop learning and we can learn from each other no matter who the person is or what they do. What I know I teach to others and vice versa. I say this because *one of the points that I mentioned during my talk was corrected by one of the workers since she had more experience than I did* (student F, journal entry 3; emphasis added).

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<sup>75</sup> I am referring to the 'old' curriculum here. As discussed in Chapter 2, a new MBChB curriculum was introduced in 2002 with a much stronger emphasis on primary health care and health promotion. Those students reached this fourth year block in 2005, the year after I collected my data.

Overall therefore, the workshop provided opportunities for ‘translation’, for meaning across the boundary zone (Star & Griesemer 1989). However, while it had meaning for individual students, its full potential as a boundary object was limited because it was not viewed by the university in the same formal way as it is by the domestic workers.

In the EGS case on the other hand, the engagement with the VPUCF was very different and thus so were the struggles over tools. The main tool, the questionnaire, was designed by the VPUCF and used previously by them. It was thus familiar to them. The students were also familiar with a questionnaire as a learning tool even though some of them challenged it. It could therefore be argued that this tool, more than all the others in both cases, was most likely to be shared and to operate as a boundary object. Importantly, because it was designed by the Civic and supported by Susan, it was most likely to be the place where power could shift and students could learn the most about the community. We saw how it was fore-grounded in the curriculum and how Susan emphasised it throughout the activities.

The interview schedules, on the other hand, were drawn up by the students based on the particular topic they were interested in exploring, e.g. ‘negotiating personal space’, ‘sharing patterns and credit schemes in Valhalla Park’. However given their lack of knowledge of the community and of Afrikaans, the dominant language in Valhalla Park, the Guides had a lot of agency and power in the interview process. I have shown how they often translated the questions and in some cases, even led the interview. In other cases, as we saw, they themselves selected certain community members and houses to survey which were not necessarily part of the designated area.

In the EGS case the questionnaire thus served as a boundary object. While it could be argued that outside of context this tool is not in itself a boundary object, once it was put to use in the engagement with the VPUCF, it took on very strongly structured uses with meaning for both the students and the Civic. In addition the role played by Susan and the credibility she gave to the VPUCF and their knowledge and experience, meant that this tool was recognisable as a means of translation across the two worlds. The interview was less of a boundary object in that it was designed by the students and they thus had more control over how it was designed.



However, together with the power and agency of many of the VPUCF members, even the interview at times acted as a boundary object, e.g. where students were directed to particular people for their interviews or where questions were asked by the Guides for the students, especially where language was an issue. Understanding tools as boundary objects therefore requires one to understand them *in the context of their use and as linked to other issues such as roles, power relations and agency*. We turn to looking at these issues in the next section.

### **2c. *Contradiction 3: challenges to roles, identity and agency***

In this section, I shall discuss how the intersection of discourses and the struggles over tools of mediation led to challenges over roles, power and agency. This will be done in relation to the students and the community partners. At the end of the section, I shall consider the roles of the two higher education educators, Anna and Susan, and their roles as potential ‘boundary workers’ in service learning.

I have argued that ‘being a student’ in higher education means a lot more than just learning a discipline. It represents an opportunity and context for the acquisition of particular discourses as well as for the development of identity (Becher & Trowler 2001; Nespor 1994). If this identity and its corresponding roles are challenged or changed in any way, it can cause contradictions in the system resulting in tensions for learners. Looking at roles and identities therefore can enable us to talk about agency and power – the ways in which practices, reflective of discourses, might enhance or inhibit particular kinds of actions<sup>76</sup>. A number of social theorists have paid attention to these issues and to the development of identity from a social practice perspective.

In looking at the experiences of students, Nespor (1994) argues that learning is neither an ‘internal psychological process’ nor simply the product of activities in the face-to-face interaction between students, disciplines and educators. As he argues, we need rather to understand learning ‘interactions’ and ‘situations’ as ‘articulated moments in networks of

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<sup>76</sup> While I realise the notions of ‘role’ and ‘identity’ are not synonymous, I am using ‘identity’ in the sense of ‘social identity’ akin to role. Role I understand to mean the ways in which identity is enacted in particular contexts. Agency is therefore a reflection of the way in which a particular social identity gives power to act or not in a particular context.

social relations and understandings' in which students' experiences are constructed on a 'far larger scale than what we happen to define for the moment as the place itself' (Massey 1993: 65-66 in Nespor 1994: 3). Consequently we need to understand that identity, roles and subsequent power relations are reflective of more than just the present set of activities and that they are rather a reflection of a range of historical processes, activities and discourses.

The work of Dorothy Holland is particularly illuminating in this regard. Researchers in this field of 'new ethnographies of personhood' (e.g. Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner & Cain 1998) have begun to ask new questions about the relationship between identity and social practice. According to Holland et al (1998), these new researchers show/describe how

specific, often socially powerful, cultural discourses and practices both position people and provide them with the resources to respond to the problematic situations in which they find themselves (ibid: 32).

Identity is therefore seen as developing at an interface between

social and embodied sources of the self – in 'self-in-practice' – [and thus it] occupies the interface between intimate discourses, inner-speaking and bodily practices to which people are exposed, willingly or not, in the present (ibid: 32).

From an activity theory perspective Roth et al (2004) argue in a similar vein. For them, identity is a product and by-product of activity, i.e. through their agency, people in an activity not only produce material outcomes, but in the process also produce and reproduce themselves and others as participants in the relevant community. Identity is thus not something that can be taken for granted as an a priori constituent of activity – it is something that is made and remade as activity is enacted. This happens particularly when individuals participate in multiple activity systems as people often bring cultural resources from one system to another one. As they put it:

Identity is much more than embodied thoughts, actions and histories, although dispositions to be a particular way are an important part of self. *To understand identity, we must consider the tools, object, community, rules and division of labour associated with the primary activity system.* We also must consider other activity systems that the individual is and has been involved in and take into account those activity

systems (distributed over space and time) in which others from the primary activity system are involved (ibid: 68; emphasis added).

What is important for me therefore, is realising that the ways in which people act out their identities through joint activities and take on specific roles, is a reflection of the practices they are involved in at the present, as well as those they might have been involved in, in the past. The issues of roles and identity are now considered in relation to the students as well as their community partners across both the case studies.

### ***Student identity: professional and personal development***

For both groups of students their learning experiences were shaped by the fact that they were learning as students *and* as emerging professionals. On the one hand therefore, the dual object of learning *and* service required them to take on new learner roles, i.e. as ‘expert formal learner’ and ‘novice professional’. In addition, the role of ‘novice formal learner’ was also evident given the new and very different learning context and objects. On the other hand, as emerging professionals, they had to make sense of ‘being a doctor, being a geographer’ in a very new context from what they had been exposed to previously and which they might have imagined was the context they would work in as professionals. I shall look at each group of students in turn.

Because the MBChB, i.e. the medical profession, has a stronger emphasis on professional development than the EGS course, i.e. geographers, the MBChB students struggled with the dual learner-professional role far more. This struggle, as we saw in the activities with the workers, inhibited their agency somewhat. We also saw very interesting shifts between roles in both the epidemiology presentations and the workshop. The epidemiology presentations required quite a formal learner role of the students, yet this identity was not easily transportable into the presentations with the domestic workers as we saw reflected in the students’ journals and in the discussion earlier in this chapter.

The second presentation (to the trade union) required that the students shift from a presentation more reflective of the hard-pure discourse of medical research to one of hard-applied scientific discourse more reflective of a public health and primary health

orientation to research. This new learner role was further challenged by the fact that the domestic workers questioned aspects of their findings, making the students feel uncomfortable. My own observations captured this difficulty:

*Sandra from the trade union immediately apologised for not getting copies of the report out to others before this meeting – it was almost as if she went into a defensive mode immediately. They discussed it. The literature review was discussed and Sandra in particular felt very strongly about the use of language – ‘servants, maids’. The students immediately defended this saying they were quoting from a book and they wanted the right definition. I felt surprised by the students not having a sense of the South Africa context and being able to problematise definitions. The domestic workers wanted to talk about some of the findings they had a problem with (Field notes 5 October 2004)*

In the workshop the issue was similar and different in some respects. It was similar in that the workshop required different roles from the students, more of a facilitator than a researcher, as they needed to draw on the knowledge obtained from the research and recontextualise it through a workshop or learning event. However the difference lay in the fact that the domestic workers had more experience of workshops than the students themselves and this gave them a role to play during the actual event. We saw how they took over in the workshop when a (male) student was showing them the ‘correct ergonomical’ procedures for ironing and lifting a laundry basket, giving the workers a new source of agency.

Through this the workers made it clear that the students were not familiar with the practices of domestic work. This links to Hodges’ (1998) observation that in a community of practice one can also experience ‘non-participation’ or ‘dis-identification’ as some of the students did in the workshop. Identity and roles are thus not given; we need to understand the social and situated nature of learning and identity: identities are places of struggle where, as I argued in Chapter 3, certain contexts afford more value to some identities than to others.

In the EGS case, students grappled with a different but related issue. This was the notion of ‘situational identity’ (Myers 2001) which refers to how we selectively reveal aspects of our social identities to others, particularly in new contexts, and how we are challenged through this process. As a social science course, the EGS curriculum provided

opportunities for the students to reflect on issues of roles and identity and their relationship to learning and context. ‘Situational identity’ was a concept introduced via their course readings and the students were required to draw on it in their journal. Two students reflect on this in terms of their experiences in the community and the challenges this posed for them in terms of their identities:

Last week and the other week’s visit influenced my identity in many ways. To deal with such a problem (influence) I had to find ways of negotiating my own identity. Throughout the walk in public space I tried by all means to look as normal as possible to the villagers. The only way (for me) of doing this was to be friendly and warm-hearted. I am not a smiling person – this does not mean I do not love other people, at heart there is love. But throughout the streets ... I felt like I was forced to smile all the time so that the researched might feel free and comfortable when speaking and answering my questions. Being introvert in other words is part of my identity (who I am); because of the reasons I gave above I had to change my identity a bit (student C2, journal entry 4).

We alter who we are, letting out and hiding some aspects of ourselves in order to facilitate social interaction. I spend R100 a week mostly on alcohol but I could not share this fact when one of the respondents made an implication that ‘we’ UCT students and staff had loads of money (student B2, journal entry 3).

In the first instance, student C2 is pointing to the fact that altering his identity, taking on an identity of a ‘smiling person’, enabled him in this situation, to look ‘as normal as possible’, i.e. to take on an appropriate identity in this context. For student B2 on the other hand, the issue was more about ‘selecting’ aspects of his identity to reveal or not to the residents given the contexts of poverty the students were working in. For these two students therefore, being a student has taken on a new meaning. Becoming a geography student requires grappling with context as well as with one’s identity and role in a very different space. In this sense, the context of Valhalla Park challenged their ability as learners, developing a new awareness of some of the requirements of fieldwork, which for both of them, was a new experience.

Social identities are thus linked to discourses and it is clear that the activities and social action that are part of their field work experiences have a huge impact on the EGS students. While this may lead to tension, many of the students’ personal discourses and thus their identity, was adapted to fit the perceived requirements of this new learning context.

Student B1 reflects on how the identity of *social science researcher* in the context of doing interviews with residents challenged and reminded him of his own complex and multiple social identities, and how context shapes both learner and emerging professional roles for him. In the first instance, it enabled him to see himself as a novice learner in this context:

In the context of the interview I am constantly reminded that I am the outsider. Therefore I must be the one to make the effort to show that I am here not in an authoritarian light but rather as a listener willing to hear whatever will be said. I approach each house with humility in the hopes that whoever greets me will realize that I am not just another white male in search of gain. I listen, I compliment where necessary whilst all the time displaying positive body language. I urge the interviewee to know why I am there and further explain my research purpose. I for one realize the need for respect and restraint in the achievement of the goals included in my qualitative study (student B1, journal entry 3).

This in turn enabled him to see his role as emerging human geographer taking on a lot of significance, together with a rejection of elements of his previous learner identity:

The potential geographer needs to take a step away from being overly immersed in books, readings and journals. For it could be said that no matter how much one reads or listens intuitively to the professor, there is still something missing. Leaving [university] many students become disillusioned with the world of the academic – one begins to see no end to the dreary, tiresome and often mundane process of regurgitating theory. At last, a chance to move away from the monotony of UCT's lecture venues, and towards the colourful unpredictability of the physical world. And Valhalla Park is most definitely the real world – a true product of South Africa's sordid past, a working model, an actual community constrained by the many forces at play responsible for the forms of poverty characterized by the evening news (student B1, journal entry 5).

The more traditional learner role that higher education and academia constructs is thus not as useful in this context. Student B1 had to construct a new one, more reflective of the new geography discourse he encountered in the research process. This in turn, enabled him with a sense of agency during his fieldwork experience. We see this reflected in the personal connection he was able to make with the community and the authenticity he encountered. For him therefore, geography in this new context was different from, and possibly 'more real' than, geography in the traditional university context. The importance of the 'colourful unpredictability of the physical world' was critical to his acquiring this new discourse, even if at times it challenged his identity as we saw in the

first quote. This led to development and change for him, one of the key outcomes of contradictions in the system (Engeström 1999).

For the EGS students, therefore, there were challenges to their learning but there was also a sense in which the context provided opportunities for new learning and forms of agency. As I have argued, this has a lot to do with the fact that social science research foregrounds context as part of the process of research and thus students were provided with the opportunities of reflecting on it as part of their own learning. In this specific case I would argue that it is also due in part to the role that Susan gave the VPUCF formally in the project and how she made the students aware of this role throughout the course.

We turn now to looking at the issues of roles, identity and agency from the point of view of the community partners across the two cases.

### ***Community as educator: roles enabling agency***

In both cases we have seen how the community partners played significant roles for the students. These roles were not only as members of their particular communities of practice (the trade union and the Civic) but as *educators* and guides as well. It was through these roles, in this particular context, that they were able to exert new forms of agency.

In the MBChB case, we saw the complex set of experiences and discourses the domestic workers bring with them into the activities – experiences that mirror in many ways the complexities of the South African context (Fish 2005). Drawing on my own field work observations, I have discussed a complex set of roles and discourses that the workers brought with them: the role of worker, the role of activist and the role of mother/teacher. Engaging with the students through these roles enabled forms of agency that are reflective of the power and knowledge they had and could use to challenge, educate and even make fun of the students at critical moments across the three activities.

In a recent paper which looks at domestic workers in the South African context, Grossman (2004) argues that the relations between domestic workers and their

employers reflect complex sets of (often overlapping) power relations. These power relations are not captured in many of the accounts we read of the sector, nor of the ways in which we understand the workers in it. By analysing the experiential accounts of domestic workers, Grossman argues that we often misinterpret the actions of domestic workers as we don't understand their worlds:

There is a qualitatively different, richer and more humane cleverness, dignity and beauty which is intrinsically embedded in the everyday life of survival and resistance ... domestic workers, denigrated for their ignorance by employers and others have actually been simulating ignorance to deal with those employers and others ... Domestic workers sometimes assert a patience tied to compassion and kindness which is about protecting, through assertion, their own humaneness and dignity in a world which systematically brutalises, dehumanises and denigrates them (2004: 1).

Through his observations, Grossman shows that we need to be vigilant about the ways in which we interpret and read contexts as well as the social actions within them and understand that 'apparent silence is not the absence of voice but the presence of strategic and tactical thinking' (ibid: 1). This strategy, Grossman argues, 'fundamentally challenges the notion of worker simply as victims and employer as the person empowered to give in the relationship' (ibid: 1).

This analysis helped me to develop a more acute and nuanced understanding of the nature of both identity and agency in this particular context<sup>77</sup>. It also helped me to understand that given the complex nature of the relationship with their employers, domestic workers have developed practices like humour, code-switching<sup>78</sup> and role playing through which they can exercise agency, which can at times, help them to combat fear and feelings of powerlessness (Cooper 2005). Their many years' experiences of working for 'White' families has arguably given many domestic workers knowledge, strategies and a kind of confidence and agency with the medical students. This is because in many ways, the medical students represent their own employers and the workers thus know how to challenge them – their humour in particular, acts as a purposive and

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<sup>77</sup> I am grateful to Jonathan Grossman for taking the time to explore this issue with me and for sending me a copy of his paper.

<sup>78</sup> This technique refers to the ability of one person to move between two or more languages in one conversation. We saw this many times in the meeting and workshop.



deliberate strategy to cope with what are often very difficult working conditions. They transferred this strategy therefore into their engagement with the students.

In the EGS case there was evidence of agency as well; however what is interesting is how different students interpreted and experienced it. The VPUCF Guides played significant roles in not only guiding the students in the field but at times actually directing them to various people and houses during the survey and interview process. In terms of the interviews, some of the Guides took over asking the questions – partly due to language but also because the students struggled with the interview technique. While developing interviewing skills is part of university research courses, when put to use in particular contexts these skills take on a momentum of their own. This includes the fact that in some cases we saw how the Guides either did the interviews for the students or added people and questions to some of the interviews. They did this in both English and Afrikaans, evidence too of their ability to code-switch.

Code switching, in both of the cases, is another way of exerting agency and some degree of control over the activities, as none of the students in either case were able to this to the same degree. It was clear that there was an important role the Guides played in assisting them in their learning:

Having a member of the Valhalla community present during this process allowed me to access many houses which might otherwise have been less willing to let us in (student B1, journal entry 2).

However it was not always as simple at this. In a few cases students felt that these roles were problematic and that the Guides were using their power and knowledge in inappropriate ways. One student saw this role as negative, almost subversive, and counterproductive to their project:

Pauline was assigned to us, our chaperone, she's nice, many people in the area know her and this facilitated processing the surveys, but also slowed us down as she spoke to nearly everyone [whose house] we stopped by, even when they did not meet the survey requirements ... she was quite insistent even after we outlined our project for her, she never really acknowledged it and went on talking to people as she knew them because her house is nearby, it was like she was

regarding this as a purely social fieldtrip and a chance to catch up with her friends (student C1, journal entry 2).

In a later journal entry, C1 also felt that the Guide was ‘fulfilling her own social prerogatives’ (student C1, journal entry 4) in the role she was playing. However, this could also be read as agency and as having quite a lot of power over the students in terms of her knowledge of the community and its members. This kind of agency was given space by the VPUCF’s engagement with the students and was achieved by using students as vehicles for community voice and through subversion and challenge over the tools of mediation. I noted this agency in my field notes during the last session in Valhalla Park when I was walking with students doing interviews.

*We were then led to an old woman who was sitting on the pavement, chatting to a number of her neighbours. The students started interviewing her and finding out about her living conditions. Another younger woman, a neighbour of the older woman, also started talking about her experiences. All the while the students were getting the interview data. The chatting was quite fierce now and coming from all sides, including Sandra who kept chipping in. In between, Sandra and I were also talking. It turns out that the older woman is her mother and we were documenting her story. It was clear that it was one Sandra wanted told and she was clear that we had to hear it as she felt that her mother was being badly treated through this arrangement. I found this interesting that while Sharon was not telling her own story she had enormous amounts of agency in getting ‘the story’ out – the one she feels is important to tell. Thus the students’ presence there it could be argued, was a vehicle for bringing out the community voice. After this interview, we slowly made our way back to the bus and to the other students (Field notes 23 August 2005).*

The students had thus become vehicles for community agency, an important aspect of establishing new kinds of power relations between the university and the community.

I have tried to show in this section how particular the contexts in which students and communities engaged in both the cases through service learning, created new possibilities for agency for particularly the community members while also creating contradictions and struggles for agency for many of the students. As Holland et al (1998) and Roth et al (2004) put it, specific contexts, cultural practices and discourses both position people as well as provide them with the resources to respond to situations in which they find themselves. The ways in which those resources are put to work could then be considered a form of agency. In order to understand the form this takes, however, we also need to take into account other activity systems, other communities of practice that actors are

involved in or have been historically, which could act to shape their action and agency in the present.

### **2ci. Educators as ‘boundary workers’ in service learning**

In the previous section, I looked at the challenges to roles and identities for both the students as well as their community partners. In this last section of Part 1 I shall focus on the roles played by the two primary educators, Anna and Susan. These particular roles are important to understand for two specific reasons.

Firstly, as university educators, they are positioned very differently in relation to the higher education-community boundary than the community partners. It is this positioning that I am interested in making visible, showing how ‘socially powerful, cultural discourses and practices ... position people and provide them with resources’ (Holland et al 1998:32). Doing this will also make visible Roth et al’s (2004) claim that identity is much more than ‘embodied thoughts, actions and histories’; making sense of identities is also to make sense of and understand

[T]he tools, object, community, rules and division of labour associated with the primary activity system ... [as well as the] other activity systems that the individual is and has been involved in and to take into account those activity systems (distributed over space and time) in which others from the primary activity system are involved (ibid: 68).

Secondly, Wenger (1998) argues that the role of the boundary worker (or broker in his language – see Chapter 3 where I discuss definitions in more detail) is a common feature of the relationship of a community of practice with the outside world, i.e. with other communities of practice. Boundary workers can make new connections across communities of practice, they can enable co-ordination and, if they are experienced, they can open new possibilities for meaning and therefore for learning.

This is a complex role however and involves mediating processes of translation, co-ordination and alignment between perspectives. It is complex because doing this successfully requires enough legitimation on both sides of the boundary to influence the development of a practice, to mobilise attention and to address conflicting interests – in

other words, to assist with learning by introducing elements of one community of practice into another. Because they need to address often conflicting interests of more than one community of practice, Anna and Susan as potential boundary workers need to carefully manage the ‘co-existence of membership and non-membership’ of a particular community of practice (Wenger 1998: 110): they are both ‘in’ and ‘out’ of the practice simultaneously. Because of this, boundary workers can often feel individually inadequate in their roles and lacking credibility and power. We look at both in turn below.

***MBCbB case: Anna as ‘activist educator’***

*At the end of the first meeting with the domestic workers, Anna summarised by saying ‘we need to build together our understanding of what is going to happen. We might even offend each other along the way because we don’t fully understand each other’s worlds, i.e. what’s valued in different places, academically and in organisations’ (Field notes 5 October 2004).*

Anna as the Woodstock Site Facilitator played an important role as a boundary worker or mediator. She negotiated the project and given her base at the university and the fact that she has a background in facilitation, her role was significant. The Site Facilitator role in the Health Sciences has historically been a complex one (see Cooper 2001 for further discussion). There have been struggles over their location, their conditions of service, their status (academic or non-academic posts) as well as the criteria for their appointment for a number of years. As Alperstein (2001: 1 in Cooper 2001) argues, Site Facilitators

have equivalent experience and training [to other lecturers], but not necessarily a degree or diploma ... however most importantly, they [are] integrally involved in or live in the specific community chosen. They [are] well informed of community dynamics ... involved in community structures and ... able to operate effectively as the liaison person between the university and the community. This appears to be a crucial requirement for sustainability of site development.

However they are not recognised in the same way as the Epidemiology supervisors are and none of the Site Facilitators have academic posts. They are perceived as being ‘community-based’ and as having a knowledge base that is less formal and scientific than their epidemiology peers. Anna puts it as follows:

[We] have to be better interpreters in order to negotiate ... *the expectation is that facilitators need to be adequately skilled to address all of those shifts in spaces and discourses and all the interpretations that need to be happening.* We need to be up-dated with the debates in how you need to understand what epidemiological research requires of the student. You need to be able to speak in the epidemiological environment and the community environment. You need to understand project planning and how to guide students through the project planning. You need to be able to function and interpret information across different learning approaches. Before you secure the project you need to speak about sample size, people accessing it and numbers and all of those things. You need to know what it means for the project if you do or don't secure certain things, and you won't unless you have a little bit of an understanding of research methodology (Anna, interview 09.11.04; emphasis added).

Anna shows that Site Facilitators need knowledge of both university *and* community contexts in order to *translate* or broker (Wenger 1998) across the boundary zone. They need scientific, medical and epidemiological knowledge as well as community knowledge and experience. In describing these roles, Anna uses a language of both anxiety and competence, reflective of a discourse of translation. In the first instance, anxiety comes from the lack of recognition and status of the job of Site Facilitators. In the second instance, there is a huge amount of competence evident in her discourse as she shows that she understands two very different worlds, and how to work within this nexus. It is these roles and kinds of expertise that, while specific to the MBChB course on one level, could also indicate more broadly the kinds of knowledge and expertise boundary workers need to move across and between two very different contexts.

Together with this role of 'translator', are the roles as educator and as activist. Anna argues that she sees herself more as an educator than an academic. As such, given that educator skills are not always valued in the university, she argues that she does not have the power and credibility that discipline-based academics do on the university side of the boundary:

Education as such is not really something that a lot of academics are trained in. They are specialists in the area but they have never really had training as educators whereas it seems like all the site facilitators have an adult education training. The community perceives me as a representative of the University. In the University I get a sense, and I don't know how right I am, that the Site Facilitators are very much considered community/field workers (Anna, interview 09.11.04).

Disciplinary knowledge however is valued highly. As I have indicated, the Epidemiology Supervisors assess the students' research projects even though they are not present at the community site. They have the disciplinary knowledge and the formal qualifications in the field of public health that Anna lacks and they get to assess the final epidemiology projects; they are thus what I am calling an 'invisible but present' authority throughout the block<sup>79</sup>. This further weakens Anna's position at the University.

Then there is the identity of an activist. Anna argues that while she herself doesn't have an activist background she shares that identity with the other Site Facilitators through the similar work that they do:

If there is anything that the site facilitators have in common is the valuing of the activist role as a [Site] [F]acilitator. What is really valuable and exciting for us is when the students become health activists in the process and where that is their major learning that they understand they can play a role as a health activist. They are not just there to heal people through their practical skills in a curative sense but they can actually engage communities and they can engage processes to change health on a broader level. They can engage with communities in a way that empowers both themselves and the group that they are working with to actually make a change around health for themselves and get an understanding of how to do that and how that works (Anna, interview 09.11.04).

We get a sense of the high value that she and the other Site Facilitators place on this role and how they carry this identity into their work with the students. Transforming the students into activists is therefore something that Anna and her colleagues see as one of their main tasks.

However, together with her role as activist, Anna shows a third, more motherly and protective role and discourse in her work with the students. She is clearly very aware of what I have argued above is a potentially 'disruptive' boundary zone and so she takes it upon herself to protect and care for the students:

Different students will take on different values or not within that discourse and change their discourse accordingly or not, depending on how possible it is for

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<sup>79</sup> During my research I became fascinated with what I have called 'present but invisible' source of power and authority. This has much relevance for service learning given the new and different contexts in which it takes place involving new and different (potential) sources of authority. I shall explore this further post thesis.

them to be a flexible learner, or how secure they can be in that identity. If they can't be they will sift it out all the time so they can stay focused, otherwise they become too lost and at sea. Those will be the students that won't take on the discourse; they will write their journals in a very specific way all the time that doesn't draw on those things. You also get a very clear sense that you must not push them beyond that

I sometimes caution myself [that] you can't change them into activists because it is damaging to do something like that when they have to go into the next block and be the kind of learner that they have to be in the rest of the curriculum, a kind of learner that has to accept that they are experts and that you don't question certain things. If we are schooling them to become questioners and challengers in this block it is really damaging to them in the rest of their studies when it doesn't get valued there and they get victimized for being that kind of person/learner. The goal is huge (Anna, interview 09.11.04).

Together with the challenges brought about by these multiple and complex roles, there is also the challenge offered to their work by their *community base*. This is complicated and can clash with their University base<sup>80</sup>. Although Anna herself is not a resident of Woodstock, the three other Site Facilitators have lived and worked in the communities in which the students do their projects and this sets up a range of very complex dynamics for them. Margie, the Site Facilitator in Mamre<sup>81</sup> who has lived in that community for many years as a resident and a community health worker, supports this argument. She puts it like this:

Most of the time the community see[s] us as people who can help them ... My neighbours saw me with the students or associated me with the clinic. Yes. The people I stay with look at me for answers. They see me as a resource person [However] I am not always a member of that community because it depends on where I am working (Margie, interview 01.10.04).

Margie argues that sometimes when she is upholding research ethics protocol from the University, the community perceives that she is not being honest to them. There is thus pressure from the community:

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<sup>80</sup> The role and job description of the Site Facilitator has a long history (see Alperstein [2001] and Cooper [2001] for detailed discussion of this). What is significant is their jobs are not graded as 'academic posts' but administrative even though there is lot of teaching involved.

<sup>81</sup> A small community that was one of the first Lutheran mission stations in South Africa about an hour's drive from Cape Town up the West Coast.

Giving the questionnaire to the stakeholders is pertinent to what is expected from the research ethics. We give the proposal as well as the questions we are going to ask. Observing and maintaining ethics in terms of research is vital. When you give feedback people say ‘We don’t remember the particular question being asked’ (Margie, interview 01.10.04).

Following Wenger, Anna, as a Site Facilitator, does not have the same amount of legitimation on both sides of the university-community boundary. This impacts on the influence she has in shaping the practices of the students and, perhaps more importantly, on the curriculum. There is a sense therefore that because she does not have university authority and credibility, her role as translator, and ultimately as boundary worker, is weakened as well. This is an important consideration in terms of the potential of this site for transforming university educational practices over the longer term.

***EGS case: Susan as ‘activist academic’***

*Susan then explained about fieldwork research. She said that many people had a different goal for it: ‘Mine is that everyone has a good experience but you need to switch around roles in your groups so think about a division of labour. Also, don’t think that you can’t speak to people about other stuff as you are visiting their house. It is important to introduce yourself “I am a student and I am learning how to do field research”’. Susan indicated that the VPUCF Guides will give them the more detailed, specific information, this ‘keeps the task realistic and puts the Valhalla Park Civic upfront in the project’ (Field notes EGS class session 26 July 2005).*

The case of Susan is different. Unlike Anna who in some ways plays a more directly facilitating role in the activities, even mothering the students at times, Susan plays more of an observer role once the EGS students are out in the field. She allows the VPUCF members to guide the students and advise them. In other ways, however, she is also very present: she knows both the community and the university and so is able to be both a strong and credible presence in the community.

Given that she wishes to combine her teaching, research and activism through this activity, Susan’s involvement with the VPUCF is a very intentional action and is linked to her long experience in both activism and academe. As we have seen from the quote above, she shows her familiarity with the community context in many different ways, e.g.



providing feedback on student journals and presentations and helping them to gain insight into the community in new ways, and in her use of ‘code-switching’ at the first meeting. Susan discussed the course and her role in very clear and direct ways.

In 2003 Susan wrote about her teaching. What was interesting was that she chose to foreground her activist-oriented teaching in her application, something which is not common practice – particularly at a research-intensive institution like UCT:

Helping students develop such [field-based research] skills and dedication ... is crucial in our South African and southern developmental context. In order to achieve these objectives, I prioritise working in teams, not only with other lecturers in my department, but also with community-based organizations and activists outside the university, through mutually beneficial projects with my undergraduate courses and post-graduate student thesis work (Teaching Philosophy Statement 2003:1).

In terms of the service learning course, a critical part of her role is making students aware that

communities have all sorts of knowledge and that knowledge is all over the place ... knowledge is not [just] something that’s found up here ... this is very important value. So [while] it’s the experience of the students and the skills of the students, it’s [also about] knowledge of situations in all sorts of places and which is articulated in lots of different ways’ (Susan, interview 15.10.05).

Field-based research plays an important role in helping students understand some of the theoretical constructs they encounter in their course. In reflecting on how she understands her own teaching role, she believes in trying ‘to build a commitment to my discipline (geography) and to precise social science’ (Teaching Philosophy Statement 2003:1). In addition, her own teaching practice and identity is enhanced through working and learning in teams, and working and learning with off-campus communities. She argues that her engagement and relationships with these communities not only inform her research but serve to sustain relationships critical to her practice and by so doing help to construct what she terms ‘robust urban knowledge’:

The questions and commitments that underpin my research are thus not only academic, but also social and political, focused on the content of what we teach and how we create in our students engaged and rigorous researchers. Underlying these interests, however, is a political commitment that as researchers we engage

with and contribute to those with whom and on whom we do research; in my case, social movements and community activists struggling in poverty ... [T]he academic work we produce grows and is sustained and nurtured within these 'other' processes, building on the relationships that they generate (Oldfield 2007b: 23).

Through this quote Susan indicates that she knows and understands the work of the university but that she also wants to challenge it and knows how to do it. She argues that we need to understand and nourish the nexus where research, teaching and activism can overlap because

[I]t is a theoretical strength that adds depth, reflexivity, and, in the relationships built, the construction of robust urban knowledge. In our developing, unequal, fragmented context where policy, practice, politics and knowledge intermesh in complex ways, our challenge is to theorise 'back' to the centre (Murphy 2006) from this rich and complex base (ibid: 24).

Susan is also perceived by her students as having the experience to deal with this course and they value her insight. I asked student D1 in my interview with her about the role she thought Susan played in the service learning and her relationship and credibility with the community:

There wasn't this feeling of this woman from the university going in there and just getting things out for herself or for research purposes. You could see that there was more of a relationship going on there other than work. She is not just being an academic; she is really going out there and dealing with communities that are struggling and making them feel a lot better and giving them a lot more hope and drawing them into her life and not just making them feel that they are a part of her life (student D1, interview 19.01.06).

Through both her teaching and her research therefore, Susan has shown the degree to which she has agency as an academic and as a boundary worker and that this agency is not diminished by engaging with communities; working like this in fact enhances her agency. As a result of this her role and authority as a boundary worker in the context of service learning is substantially enhanced.

From this we can begin to see that the role of educators as 'boundary workers' is challenging, demanding and often contradictory. Success in the role is related to the

degree of formal recognition and status within the academy and in the community, as well as the knowledge base from which educators operate. The potential for educators to be boundary workers thus lies in whether they have credibility on both sides of the boundary. If credibility is in question or even diminished on either side – as I would argue is the case with Anna to some degree on the side of the university – then some of the transformatory potential of this role is diminished. Or at least, it makes it more difficult for Anna to be the creator and driver of change, compared to the case of Susan. This credibility needs to include the ability and authority to re-design tools of mediation. Transforming tools in this way can play a role in shifting how students view and accord authority to new and different kinds of communities of practice – communities where knowledge has different ‘epistemological features’ and where ‘knowledge communities’ have different ‘social characteristics’ (Becher & Trowler 2001). Given that knowledge is a significant source of power and authority, developing ways of recognising new and different sources is surely the beginning of transforming the ways in which universities engage with communities.

### **Summary**

This chapter set out to develop a framework for service learning as boundary work in higher education by arguing that we need to understand the impact of an expanded community and dual, but inter-related object, on the rules, tools and roles in an activity system. In order to develop this framework, I drew on the tools of nexus analysis. Through this lens I analysed the discourses, tools and roles that were challenged through the service learning experience and called this ‘contradictions at the nexus of practice’. From there I added the final layer – service learning as boundary work in higher education. This included a discussion of relationships between discourses in the boundary zone, of tools of mediation as boundary objects and of challenges to roles, identities and agency. Here I looked at the roles of educators as brokers or boundary workers and I focused specifically on the roles of the two higher education educators, Anna and Susan, and looked at their roles as the primary boundary workers.

What emerged was the following. Both the MBChB students and the EGS students encounter very different contexts and discourses as they engage with their community

partners in their service learning experience. Their discourses of being students rub up against those of community members. However in each case it was slightly different. The MBChB students had perhaps the bigger challenge and most contradictions. In this case, a medical discourse rubbed up against a political/trade union and activist culture of domestic workers and this was very difficult for many students to understand. In the case of the EGS students, their social science discourse positioned them to better understand the discourse of community activism they encountered in their engagement with the VPUCF. While challenging for many, the context was made central to the curriculum by Susan and their activities and this served to mediate the context in different ways from the medical students.

I have argued that the tools in the EGS case were closer to being boundary objects than those in the MBChB case. They could be put to use in a very challenging context and lead to achieving the dual but inter-related object: both learning and service. Not only did the EGS students learn from using the interview and questionnaire, but the VPUCF had a big stake particularly in the questionnaire, enabling them to use it for their own ends. With the interviews as well, we saw how the Guides were often in very powerful positions here, partly due to the fact that Susan had positioned them as such in the project, but also partly because they are familiar with the practice of talking to and interviewing residents in their capacity as civic members.

In the MBChB case the epidemiology slides and the workshop were not valued and understood in the same way across the two communities of practice. The workshop had more potential as a boundary object but this will only be fully realised if it is valued together with the knowledge and experiences of the workers. While individual students learnt from it, the tool itself was never positioned as a boundary object in the course. I argued that understanding tools fully as boundary objects however means understanding their potential in relation to how roles and power dynamics play themselves out in the same context, in particular, to the roles played by the key brokers/translators or 'boundary workers'.

In terms of how roles and identities were challenged, and how agency took shape, we saw how this happened in both cases albeit in slightly different ways. In both cases we

saw that the community partners found new opportunities for agency and were able to challenge roles and power relations. This caused disruption for some students although we also saw how this provided some of the foundation for new found respect and insight for others. We also saw how service learning positioned Anna and Susan in very different ways in their roles as educators and as boundary workers related to the degree of credibility they had on both sides of the boundary. This in turn impacted on the degree of power and authority they had, and thus on their ability to leverage change.

In conclusion, service learning as boundary work in higher education is therefore about understanding the complex intersection of boundary zones, boundary objects and boundary workers. If we can begin to understand this intersection and map or analyse our service learning practice in this way, it opens up the opportunities for transforming it. This in turn can improve the learning of our students, and the ways in which we as universities engage with communities – a critical dimension of the role of any university in any society.

We turn now to the concluding chapter where I shall summarise the key findings of the study and raise some questions for thinking anew about our practice.



## Chapter 8: Conclusions and future research

This final chapter has two aims: to summarise the arguments and key overall findings, and to raise some questions for further research. In discussing the findings, I shall indicate in addition what my thesis did not cover – both intentionally and, on reflection, unintentionally. A thesis is by its nature a limited and focused piece of work and it is important to note the limitations of a project such as this.

### Part 1: Summary of key findings

In order to proceed with this summary, I return to three quotes introduced in Chapter 1 as a way of linking the opening to the closure of the study. Having presented the data and analysed the two service learning case studies, it is useful to re-examine them as they reflect much of what has been presented in Chapters 5, 6 and 7 and support the arguments that I have developed throughout the thesis. They are related to the process of engagement, to service learning practice and to forms of pedagogy and learning.

In the first instance service learning is about a *process of engagement*:

It is this synergy, this *emergence of surprising outcomes through interactions of difference*, that lies at the heart of the argument for engagement for communal discourse; for a communicative ethic that not only allows us to cross boundaries in our search for what might be termed ‘inclusive well-being’ but impels us to do so (Bawden 2000: 6; emphasis added).

Secondly, following Vygotsky and the post-Vygotskians’ understanding that all consciousness is mediated through reality, I have argued for a focus on *social practice*, on what students do, and why and how they do it:

Service learning is *about doing, about action*, about learning from experience, and using the knowledge and skills learned. It is about having assumptions challenged through confronting new perspectives or puzzling experiences and learning to sort out complex, messy real-world situations. It is *about knowledge in use*, not just about acquiring and being based on facts (Eyler 2002: 9; emphasis added).

Thirdly, I have shown that it is the *activities across contexts*, or *at the boundary*, that are important:

The border metaphor invites us to identify and map the multidimensional boundaries that simultaneously enable and constrain students' service-learning experiences ... It allows us to *see our students as active agents in constructing new kinds of knowledge and relationships through their service-learning experiences* ... In contrast to simply developing students' abilities and motivation to engage in 'helping' relationships, a border pedagogy asks that we problematise such relationships and use them as opportunities for challenging and transforming inequities of power and authority (Hayes & Cuban 1997: 76; emphasis added).

What these quotes express for me are the following. Firstly, it is an understanding that engagement and, in this case, service learning, does not mean dissolving identity and looking for homogeneity. Rather it implies that we are open to *surprising outcomes through interactions of difference*. We have seen this in both the cases presented. While these differences very often challenge and even disrupt, they are inherent when an expanded community is present in a boundary practice like service learning.

Secondly, we need to understand that service learning is crucially *about doing, about action, about knowledge in use*. Again, this we saw in the cases and it was captured through the idea of looking at joint activities, at social action as the unit of analysis. These joint activities are then often the site of the contestation and challenge which can lead to the surprising outcomes through interactions of difference. These 'interactions of difference' call attention to the dual but inter-related object of learning *and* service that I have argued for in service learning.

Finally, looking at service learning through the metaphor of border, of boundary, can help us to view students not as passive receivers of facts, of knowledge, but *as active agents in constructing new kinds of knowledge and relationships through their service-learning experiences*. As we have seen however, this does not diminish nor deny power relations – in fact, it puts power relations at the centre of the picture. It enables us to see students as having the potential to create new possibilities for their own learning and for the learning and serving of others. What these three have in common is, as Bawden argues, this *synergy through difference* that impels us to cross boundaries in search of what he calls a



communicative ethic that is aimed at ‘inclusive well-being’. This however is not without tensions, contradictions and elements of disruption and I have argued that the expanded community and dual but interrelated object play an important part in this.

How then has this story been developed in the thesis?

In Chapter 1, I provided a background context against which to read this study. I did this by introducing some of the debates in higher education as linked to responsiveness but focused mainly on locating this study and my research question against the backdrop of the field of service learning – in terms of both issues of practice and research, as well as in terms of gaps in the field. This enabled me to indicate, at the end of Chapter 1, how I saw my study contributing to the field of service learning research and practice. Following this, I introduced the two case studies of service learning in Chapter 2: the 4<sup>th</sup> year MBChB public health and primary health care block, and the 3<sup>rd</sup> year human geography field-based research course. In so doing, I provided some background and history to the departments and disciplines where they are located, outlining the nature of the service learning, and touching on the community partner. The details of the partnerships I left for the two data presentation chapters, 5 and 6. I introduced the cases early as I wished to put the background context and sites for the research upfront before proceeding to the conceptual chapter to provide the reader with the background against which to understand and evaluate the conceptual tools developed in Chapter 3.

Chapter 3 outlined the development of my conceptual framework and the tools I drew on to make sense of the service learning practice I had observed in the two case studies. I particularly argued for a social practice orientation to my frame, and drew on situated learning, the work of Vygotsky and activity theory to develop this lens. I feel that it is a useful one given that I was encountering context-embedded and historical practices intersecting at the boundary of the university and community. I argued for service learning as joint activities at the interface and, as such, as a form of boundary work in higher education. I identified the concepts of ‘boundary zone’, ‘boundary objects’ and ‘boundary workers’ or brokers as comprising my notion of boundary work.

Chapter 4 then outlined my research design and methods of data collection and analysis. Following on from the conceptual frame in Chapter 3, I made the argument in Chapter 4 for responsive, engaged research where mediated action is the unit of analysis, primarily joint activities and social action. The lens of mediated discourse analysis, and in particular, nexus analysis, reflected this approach. I also paid attention to the limitations of the study, to the ethical issues in conducting the research and the ways in which the analytical frame developed as I immersed myself in the data.

Chapters 5 and 6 dealt with each of the two cases studied through what I termed a ‘descriptive-analytic approach’; in order to provide a rich and nuanced account of the service learning, description and analysis needed to be seen as part of the same story. I have argued that it is difficult at times to separate these out in qualitative studies such as this that attempt to capture social action as it happens. These two chapters together with the analysis in the following chapter, Chapter 7, are the substantial part of the thesis and account for the main contribution to re-theorising service learning practice. Chapters 5 and 6 did three things: they provided descriptive vignettes of the service learning activities; they then outlined the components of each ‘nested activity’; and finally they identified the key contradictions that emerged in and across the system.

This enabled me to analyse the two case studies further in Chapter 7 and I did this in three ways. I summarised the contradictions in each case. I then drew on these to do a nexus analysis in which I analysed the three key contradictions I observed across both cases. The first one I called the ‘rubbing up of discourses’ which was important to analyse – both in terms of the discourses themselves, but also as the relationships between discourses shaped the other two contradictions I identified. These were ‘struggles over tools of mediation’ and challenges to roles, identity and agency. At the end of each contradiction, I looked at service learning as boundary work. This included a discussion on service learning in the boundary zone, tools of mediation as boundary objects and the two higher education educators as boundary workers. I then concluded by suggesting that ongoing work with service learning educators, based on the experiences of Anna and Susan, is an interesting and important area of research to take forward.

Developing a set of conceptual tools that views service learning as a form of ‘boundary work’ in higher education helps us to answer the question I asked at the beginning of my study, i.e. what happens when the university meets the community? The first step is to recognise that in service there is an ‘expanded community’ and a ‘dual, but inter-related object’. Acknowledging these two features enables us to make sense of the relationship between different discourses, or rules in the system, and the ways in which these impact on the tools of mediation and the identities, roles and forms of agency that emerge. In the final section I provide some questions linked to this lens for future research into service learning practice.

### **Part 2: Questions towards researching practice**

It is clear from some of the discussions in the last chapter that the roles and challenges for the educator in higher education wishing to embark on a practice like service learning are many. This is particularly so if educators wish to provide students with a challenging and new kind of educational practice, something that is important in higher education generally but particularly so in South Africa.

In order to begin to think anew about practice, I have identified questions that provide possible ways to further deepen research in the field of service learning, something a number of authors argued is important in Chapter 1.

Firstly, in working towards developing a better understanding of the nature of the service learning engagement, the question to address here in terms of service learning is:

- *What is the nature of the ‘interface’, the ‘boundary infrastructure’, the ‘transaction zone’ in service learning?*

Addressing this question could assist us as service learning researchers/practitioners better understand the nature of the *expanded community* I argued is present in service learning. Drawing from the evidence in this thesis, additional questions include:

- In what ways is the boundary zone ‘contradictory’ or dangerous? And for whom?
- In what ways is the boundary zone important as a transformative space in higher education? Is there the possibility of a ‘third space’?

Secondly, there is the issue of the service learning curriculum. In reflecting on the curriculum, we need to consider what the tools of mediation we wish to use in our teaching and our students’ learning. The question we can ask in this case is:

- *Are the tools of mediation used in our service learning ‘boundary objects’? Can they inhabit multiple contexts at once, and have both local (within one community of practice) and shared meanings (in the activity system at the intersection of two or more communities of practice)?*

This thesis has suggested that if tools are positioned as boundary objects, the chance that they can play a transformative role in teaching and learning is enhanced. By designing them for ‘boundary work’, we are providing an opportunity to enrich both the learning *as well as* the service dimension of service learning, i.e. *the dual but interrelated objects* of such a practice. Additional questions are:

- If our tools are not boundary objects, what will it take to design them as such?
- What impact do such tools have on service learning pedagogy?

Finally, it is important to consider the role of the educator in service learning. Through looking at the experiences of Anna and Susan, we can see that it is complex. However, it is also open to new possibilities. In order to better understand this role, we could ask the following question:

- *Who are the boundary workers in service learning? Why do we see them as boundary workers?*

An important first step in understanding this role is to identify the key people who play this role. It might be obvious in some cases but not in others. As this thesis has shown,

boundary workers, for a whole range of complex reasons, are equipped with various kinds of knowledge and experiences and various degrees of power. It is important therefore to ask some additional questions:

- What are the knowledge, values, attitudes and authority required to play this role of boundary worker successfully?
- What are the challenges in playing the boundary worker role?

Addressing these questions implies taking our practice of teaching and learning seriously and committing ourselves in higher education to reflect on our practices – to become critical reflective practitioners. Given the challenges facing higher education globally and the push towards more managerial and corporate notions of the university (Subotzky 1999), finding support for reflective practice is not an easy task. However, it must be done if we are to serve our students and our communities in informed and transformed ways.

### Conclusion

*Medicine cannot be practised in isolation.* Not good medicine anyway (student H, journal entry 3; emphasis added).

*Social geographers have the opportunity to go where no one else goes (or wants to go), a chance to look below the surface and contemplate,* identify and quantify those issues constricting the advancement of the developing nation. ... I now know a completely different side to my country (student B1, journal entry 5; emphasis added).

As this thesis has shown, service learning is challenging work – understanding it fully perhaps even more so. The quotes from two students above attest to this reality but also to some of the insights that are to be gained from such a practice.

I set out to explore service learning as a form of ‘boundary work’ in higher education where the university engaged with off-campus communities in a South African context. This has been done through investigating qualitatively two case studies of service learning practice. In the process, a range of conceptual tools have been developed, both as a contribution to theorising practice as well as to research it. The notions of service

learning as joint activities and as ‘boundary work’ were two of the key conceptual frames developed through this thesis. The use of mediated discourse analysis and a nexus of practice approach to the research, enabled me to look more closely at service learning practices as they are enacted at the interface of the university and the ‘world out there’.

From this, questions were raised that could help researchers look at their own practice in order to reflect on so as to make a difference in the lives of both our students and our surrounding communities. This is what I would like to be an outcome of this project: more reflective and better informed service learning practice. As Susan so succinctly put it in the previous chapter, we need to remember that ‘knowledge is all over the place ... which is articulated in lots of different ways’.

My final point is this. We need to ensure that we draw on these different sources of knowledge in order to constantly refine our practice and the practice of others we engage with through our service learning work. We need to develop sensitive and nuanced ways of researching our practice to account for the complexities we have seen through these two case studies. Doing this helps to strengthen our practice and construct new kinds of knowledge. In a recent paper, Susan argues that we need to understand and nourish what she calls the nexus where research, teaching and activism overlap because

it is a theoretical strength that adds depth, reflexivity, and, in the relationships built, the construction of robust urban knowledge. In our developing, unequal, fragmented context where policy, practice, politics and knowledge intermesh in complex ways, our challenge is to theorise ‘back’ to the centre (Murphy 2006) from this rich and complex base (Oldfield 2007b: 24).

I hope that this thesis has made a start in addressing this challenge. The final word however, belongs to Patricia, Chairperson of the VPUCF:

So ... it’s quite a story for people [who] do not know the way that we are living here. Nobody will know what is going on in our area by riding through with a bus ... but [the students] ... they were in the houses, in the backyard shacks ... (VPUCF, interview 20.06.04).

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