# CHAPTER 3

# PHILOSOPHY AND FRAMEWORKS

*By taking action to change conditions, one is personally changed in the process*
(Marx, 1963).

In this chapter I describe my study as self-study practitioner research within the context of a collaborative action research project. In so doing, I provide a reflexive account (acknowledging my influence on observations and descriptions) of the philosophical (ontological and epistemological) and methodological underpinnings of this research; and I show how my values are central to my inquiry into my practice as an academic. More specifically, I show how my practitioner research conforms to the characteristics of a living theory action research project, which is described by Whitehead and McNiff (2006) as a form of self-study practitioner research. A detailed discussion of the research design (which contains both the R@I project as well as the self-study research) appears in chapter four. I furthermore discuss the concepts of identity and agency as they relate to my role as co-researcher and facilitator.  Towards the end of this chapter I consider the possible relevance of this study within the academic debate on the relationship between universities and local communities. I do this by discussing the R@I project in terms of the three generic tasks (teaching, research, community engagement) of universities and explain the concept of *turning resources into assets* as a central theme in this thesis.

## Practitioner research

This research can be regarded as practitioner research (Anderson & Herr, 1999; Bruck, Hallett, Hood, MacDonald, & Moore, 2001; McAllister & Stockhausen, 2001; Sankaran, Dick, Passfield, & Swepson, 2001; Zeichner & Noffke, 2001) in that I inquire into how my academic practice as a university lecturer and faculty member changed during my membership and facilitation of the R@I project (described in chapter two). I draw three distinctions in examining my academic practice: my research practice, teaching practice

and community engagement practice. These distinctions are based on the three core tasks of universities (Brulin, 2001), which I discuss in more detail toward the end of this chapter.

McWilliam (2004) cautions against efforts to reduce practitioner research to the level of method as it tempts the researcher to choose a particular method (i.e., action research *or* discourse analysis *or* case study *or* ethnography) and then look for a problem to apply the method to: "Thus the overwhelming tendency remains that of working backwards from a method ('I'm going to do a case study on something') to a do-able problem as defined by that method" (McWilliam, 2004, p.120). My research of my academic practice (practitioner research) developed out of my involvement in the R@I project (collaborative action research) rather than the R@I project growing out of my attempts to research my own practice. In this study I report on the results and process of the R@I project as well as the development of my own academic practice within the context of this project. Where I report on the R@I project, it is from my perspective as a member and facilitator of the R@I workgroup. Therefore this study can also be seen as self-study research (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001; Lasonde, Galman & Kosnik, 2009; Middle State Commission on Higher Education, 2007) in that I studied myself in relation to the other R@I workgroup members. The specific relationship between self-study research and action research as forms of practitioner research is clarified in the following section.

**Self-study research and action research**

Foucault (in Collin, 1977) offers a rationale for self-study work: "If one is interested in doing historical work that has political meaning, utility and effectiveness, then this is possible only if one has some kind of involvement with the struggles taking place in the area in question" (p.64). Feldman, Paugh and Mills (2004) suggest that the *self* as a focus of the study is a "distinguishing characteristic of self-study as a variety of practitioner researcher" (p.953). In this vein, Feldman et al. (2004) offer three identifying criteria for self-study research: (1) the importance of the self of the researcher; (2) the experience of the researcher as resource for the research; and (3) a critical stance by the researcher towards his or her role. Self-study researchers "problematize their selves

in their practice situations" with the goal of reframing their beliefs and/or practice (Feldman, 2002, p.971).

Self-study research has a close relationship with action research (Samaras & Freese, 2009): in both genres of research, the researcher "inquires into problems situated in practice, engages in cycles of research, and systematically collects and analyzes data to improve practice" (p.5). Action research can be distinguished from self-study research by virtue of the focus being on *action* rather than *self* (Feldman et al., 2004). An action research project therefore focuses on reflections and decisions that led to certain actions as well as the intended and unintended consequences of these actions taken.

I report on the actions we took as an R@I team to improve our situation as well as the personal transformations that took place as a result. This action research perspective is presented in chapter five. In chapter six, I focus and report on my own role as facilitator and member of the R@I workgroup and the personal transformations that took place in my identity as researcher and academic. The latter process conforms to the genre of self-study research. There is therefore a constant movement between the self-study and the action research project – the personal and the interpersonal. This requires a framework to set out what the subjects of study are and how knowledge can be gained about these.

To answer the question, "how have I as a researcher influenced and been influenced by the research process?" requires a focus on this influence process and an ontological definition of self vis-à-vis this study. In the following section I discuss a reflexive process as a means to inquire into the influence that my ontological and epistemological assumptions had on my facilitation and participation in the R@I project. I also outline how I defined the *self* when inquiring into my practice as researcher and reflective practitioner (Schon, 1983), both in relation to the other workgroup members and in relation to the context in which this study took place.

**A reflexive process**

The reflexive process involves an in depth look at how *you* (the researcher) are influencing what you are observing, how you are making sense of what you are observing and how you choose to report on what you have observed and come to know (Nightingale & Crombie, 1999; Ryan, 2005). Gergen (2000) notes that the particular importance of reflexivity derives from the recognition that "because observation is inevitably saturated with interpretation, and research reports are essentially exercises in interpretation, research and representation are inextricably linked" (p.1027). Reflexivity allows researchers to reveal their work as 'historically, culturally and personally situated" (Gergen, 2000, p.1028). The presence of a reflexive process (reflexivity) is valued in qualitative research, as indicated by Sandelowski and Barroso (2002, p.216):

> Reflexivity is a hallmark of excellent qualitative research and it entails the ability and willingness of researchers to acknowledge and take account of the many ways they themselves influence research findings and thus what comes to be accepted as knowledge. Reflexivity implies the ability to reflect inward toward oneself as an inquirer; outward to the cultural, historical, linguistic, political, and other forces that shape everything about inquiry; and, in between researcher and participant to the social interaction they share.

A *reflexive process* can be distinguished from *reflection* (verb) or a *reflective process* (noun). Ryan (2005) describes a reflective process as involving a focus on the various elements (e.g., verbal, nonverbal, feelings, thoughts) following action. Therefore, this process of reflection can be said to involve thinking about how various elements of an observation are related to each other. Furthermore, reflective knowledge (knowledge as a result of the reflective process) has to do with "a vision of what ought to be" (Coghlan & Brannick, 2005, p.7) and how the actions of the researcher and participants contribute towards this vision. A *reflexive* process, on the other hand, implies that the *influence* of the many facets of the observer (on that which is observed) is included among the elements to be reflected on. Nightingale and Crombie (1999) distinguish between *epistemological* and *personal* reflexivity. They regard epistemological reflexivity to involve reflecting upon "the assumptions (about the world, about knowledge) that we have made in the course of the research, and it helps us to think about the implications of such assumptions for the research and its findings" (p.228). These authors consider

personal reflexivity to involve reflecting upon the "ways in which our own values, experiences, interests, beliefs, political commitments, wider aims in life and social identities have shaped the research...[and]...how the research may have affected and possibly changed us, as people and as researchers" (Nightingale & Crombie, 1999, p.228).

Reflexivity may therefore be construed as a second-order process of reflection – it entails reflecting upon the recursive and personal influence of our reflections upon themselves. Reflection is one of the steps in the action research process. Reflexivity introduces an additional element that acknowledges the influence of the values and biases of the researcher, and represents the principles inherent in a social constructionist epistemology. In the following two sections I engage in a reflexive discussion on how my previous experience, interests, beliefs, political commitments, social identity as well as my ontological and epistemological assumptions may have shaped this research. The change that this process effected on my self is explored as part of my living theory in chapter seven.

**Personal reflexivity**

*Prior experience*

The research I conducted for my Master's dissertation (Louw, 2000) was a self-study (first person) action research project on the development of my identity as a psychotherapist and psychologist. This experience predisposed me to choosing action research as research approach for the current study. I received my training as a psychologist and psychotherapist at the University of South Africa, in a psychology department that strongly favoured "new paradigm" research (defined in Bond, Harvey & Salvin-Baden, 1999; Reason, 1988). As such, for two years I was immersed in a training programme based on a postmodern paradigm and ecosystemic epistemology (Auerswald, 1971, 1985; Flood, 2006; Keeney, 1979, 1983). This had a significant influence on my view of relationships of any kind and what can be known of these.

*Professional interests*

Two main professional interests significantly influenced the shape of this research project. The first relates to action research as an emancipatory exercise, where the ultimate goal is not an increased understanding or resolution of a practical problem, but a "raised awareness in people of their own abilities and resources to mobilise for social action" (Bhana, 2004, p.235). Learning about my own resources and abilities, and facilitating this learning (in the form of my educational influence) in order to mobilise us to social action, became a focus of the research project.

A second professional interest is the idea that universities have an obligation to serve their local communities and that this calls for a mutually beneficial and reciprocal relationship. (The origins of this interest are explored in the following section.) According to Greenwood and Levin (2000), universities continue to serve only the social elite, and state resources are spent on creating knowledge that does not benefit the large majority of society. They advocate a reconstruction of the relationships between societies and universities and suggest action research as one way to do it. Brulin (2001) advocates similarly that universities serve their communities and encourage academics to form networks that will enable resources to be turned into energising assets. These networks could act as a form of social glue that "facilitates access to important resources and it turns such resources into energising assets" (p.441).

*My political background and commitments*

I grew up as a white[6] South African during the last decades of the apartheid era. I am a descendant from Dutch and other European ancestors who settled in South Africa in the late 17th century, and my mother tongue is Afrikaans – commonly considered the language of the oppressive regime that institutionalised apartheid in South Africa (Giliomee, 2003; Vice, 2010). As a result I declare a certain amount of 'white guilt' – the sense that belonging to an ethnic group that oppressed another ethnic group makes you responsible by association and bestows on you an imperative to contribute to redress of past wrongs in some form or other (Vice, 2010). Vice (2010, p.323) refers to the "taint" of

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[6] The term 'white' in the South African context usually refers to South Africans who are descendants of European settlers and European immigrants.

the Afrikaner identity, and her article speaks eloquently of the complexity of being a white South African in the post-apartheid era. My cultural and political heritage is particularly relevant to this study in that the research problem is contextualised in a historically black[7] university embedded in a community (Mamelodi) that consists mainly of African people. My commitment to *community engagement* and the *creation of locally relevant knowledge* is perhaps at least in part motivated by my experience of 'white guilt' and the consequent responsibility to contribute to redressing the wrongs of apartheid. This is balanced by a commitment to self-determination of all people and awareness that the so-called 'empowerment' and 'upliftment' of the 'previously disadvantaged' are fraught with issues of maintaining power and elitism and the temptation to decide for others what is good for them and how they should live. I resolved this dilemma by suggesting that the R@I project focus on improving Itsoseng Clinic (which served the local African community) and increasing the local relevance of our research. My commitment to community engagement was in part also elicited by the apparent disparity of the geographical context. This context included the Mamelodi campus, populated with students from socioeconomically and educationally disadvantaged backgrounds, which was surrounded by communities of people living in sometimes abject poverty and deprivation. Less than fifteen kilometres from the Mamelodi campus one enters the affluent eastern suburbs of Pretoria, where abundant, elegant and world-class shopping, housing and infrastructure can be found. This contrast elicited an awareness of privilege and a value dissonance in me.  The idea of creating of locally relevant knowledge in partnership with community members went some way towards addressing this dissonance. As a result the R@I project became a vehicle for me to generate opportunities for local knowledge creation, in part to address my awareness of privilege and social disparity.

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[7] In South Africa, the term 'black' usually refers to descendants from the Bantu and Khoi San people living in the southern African region long before the time of European settlers. Black is also divided into ethnically black and black by virtue of the fact that you were excluded from political life e.g. Indian or mixed-race (Coloured) South Africans. It often referred to anyone who was classified as belonging to a race other than white (otherwise known as 'non-white', the latter being a term used by the apartheid machinery).

*My beliefs*

The Oxford dictionary (2010) defines belief as "something one accepts as true or real; a firmly held opinion". There are at least two personal beliefs that strongly influenced this research project. The first is the relativistic and socially embedded nature of reality, reflected in the social constructionist tradition (Gergen, 2003). This belief allowed me to imagine and nurture opportunities for the social creation of alternative realities in conversation with others (the participants in my study) who shared a common concern. Secondly, I believe that we all have the right to decide for ourselves what it means to live in a good way. In the context of the R@I project, I believed that we were able to co-create our future on the Mamelodi campus by engaging with the challenges as we understood them. This entailed nurturing and encouraging efforts to design and deliver presentations to the senior management of the incorporating university of our vision for the Mamelodi campus. In this way we exercised our right to decide as a group of academics what it meant for us to live and work in a good way.

*My values*

Tim May (1999) asserts that any judgement or decision on a course of action that a researcher takes is based on the values of that researcher (May, 1999). During my participation and facilitation in the R@I project I became aware of three values that likely had a significant influence on my judgements and decisions.

The first value relates to *self-determination*, based on my belief that we all have the right to decide for ourselves what it means to live in a good way. Self-determination necessitates a defining of the "self" as a distinct entity that is able to express agency. I use the term "self" with the understanding that it is a socially contextualised and relational self (Andersen & Chen, 2002; Gergen, 2006), but is nevertheless a self that is able to contribute to and make decisions as well as act on these decisions. For me, to value self-determination means to value open, active, reciprocal and circular opportunities for conversation between the self and the contexts of influence so that one's identities can continually be created and recreated through this process; and so that movement can occur towards what we regard as good. I deal with the concepts of self, identity and agency in more detail in the section on ontology below.

The second value relates to the *synergistic combination of individual efforts towards a common goal*. Synergistic action refers to the notion that the effect of our combined individual efforts exceeds the effect of our separate individual attempts. In the context of the R@I project, I valued conversations in which we combined dreams, ideas and plans in a synergistic manner as opposed to conversations in which we shared ideas and dreams for the sake of sharing and for the sake of a feeling of community and belonging only (with no visible actions resulting from the discussions). The common goal does not refer merely to the solution to our practical problems, but also to a process of transformation. This transformation relates to an increased awareness of hidden and untapped resources (interpersonal, intrapersonal and contextual resources) available to us. For me, to value synergistic action means to nurture opportunities for combining dreams, ideas and efforts in a manner that increases the potency of our individual efforts.

The third value is the generation of *locally relevant knowledge*. I regard this knowledge as the product of synergistic action (my second value) in the service of self-determination (my first value).  In the context of the R@I project, locally relevant knowledge refers to knowledge about how we could improve the functioning of the Itsoseng clinic and how we could increase our research output. Knowledge is not only an answer to these "how to" questions; it  has a further emancipatory quality in that we also gained additional knowledge about our abilities and resources that mobilised us to action (Bhana, 2004) towards what we regarded as a good way of living. In the project and in our understanding of the term, "locally relevant" refers not necessarily only to our hopes and dreams as academics, but also to the needs of the community – that knowledge is not merely created to help us be more relevant to the community, but to help the community answer questions they themselves may have.

My values are in constant interaction with my assumptions about my being in and toward the world (ontology); my assumptions about what counts as knowledge (epistemology); and my assumptions about how knowledge can be acquired (methodology).  Terre Blanche and Durrheim (1999) define these terms as follows:

Ontology specifies the nature of reality that is to be studied, and what can be known about it. Epistemology specifies the nature of the relationship between the researcher (knower) and what can be known. Methodology specifies how the researcher may go about practically studying whatever he or she believes can be known. (p.6)

In the following section I articulate these assumptions.

### Ontological assumptions

Ontology can be described as a theory of being in the world, which influences how we perceive ourselves in relation to our environment and other beings in it (Van Vlaenderen & Neves, 2004; Whitehead & McNiff, 2006). It refers to "the nature of reality that is to be studied, and what can be known about it" (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999, p.6). This theory of being can also be described as *the stance we take towards* what we regard as the nature of the world (Van Vlaenderen & Neves, 2004). As such, two central elements of ontology appear to be (1) our interpretations of the world we live in; and (2) the stance we take towards these interpretations. The focus on our interpretations of the nature of the world and our stance towards our interpretations in itself shows a particular ontological orientation – namely, that we only have access to our interpretations of the world.

From a social sciences perspective, the researcher's ontological assumptions are said to influence how the researcher views people and their relationships with each other and the world (Susman & Evered, 1978). A first distinction can be drawn between reductionism and holism (Smuts, 1926) as two distinct and dichotomous ways of studying phenomena. From a reductionist perspective or ontology, the world is regarded as a complex system that consists of nothing more than its constituent parts with each phenomenon to be studied in terms of a linear cause-and-effect equation between the simplest constituent parts of the phenomenon (Flood, 2006; Willig, 2001). The assumption is that phenomena can be fully understood once the nature of the constituent parts and their relationships with each other part are known (Auerswald, 1985). Holism, on the other hand, proposes that the world as a complex system is an integrated whole that is more than the sum of its parts (Willig, 2001). Holism is a central tenet of systems thinking. Phenomena cannot be understood by reducing them to their

smallest constituent parts as every definable system has some influence on each other definable system. Instead, "phenomena are understood to be an emergent property of an interrelated whole" (Flood, 2006, p.117). How these separate systems which emerge from the whole are defined becomes a question of the boundaries that the observer draws. The effect of the observer on drawing the boundaries of the phenomena under investigation reveals a second ontological dichotomy, namely the relativist and realist ontological positions (Willig, 2001). A researcher operating from a realist ontology would maintain that the 'external world' (a world that exist independently of the observer) contains objects, structures and systems with knowable natures and cause and effect relationships between them. A researcher operating from a relativist ontology questions the existence of an external world that can be known and emphasises the multiple interpretations that are dependent on the observer. This is the link between systems theory and constructivism: what Anderson and Goolishian (1988) call human systems as linguistic systems. Language is central to a relativist ontology: texts can only refer to other texts (Derrida, 1997). Precisely because the researcher can make varied interpretations of the same phenomena, it begs the question: why this interpretation? My solution to this problem is a reflexive account of what influenced the researcher during the processes of observation, reflection, planning and action. This reflexive account does not provide an 'essential truth', but rather the possibility of multiple truths that are constructed within relationships.

*My ontological assumptions: A holistic, relativist position*

In my invitation to my colleagues to join me in an action research project to establish a research forum with the aim of synergising our daily work activities, I held certain assumptions about the world we live in, what we as people are capable of as well as the effects we could have on our world.  My ontological position can be summarised as a relativist, systemic position in that I acknowledge the subjectivity of my observations and interpretations in collaboration with others. I view the outcome of this study, my living theory, as emerging from the sum total of all the known and unknown influences present during the study and acknowledge the influence of my role as participant and observer on that which I claim to improve – my academic practice.  My assumptions flowing from this position align with the ontological assumptions of action research as outlined by

McNiff and Whitehead (2006), which are that "action research is value laden and morally committed" and that the action researcher "is in constant relation with everything else in the research field" (p.26). Consequently I assume that my research project is influenced by my *core values*. It is *morally committed* in that my own learning with others is to improve my practice and ultimately my ability to provide a better quality teaching, research and community engagement. Also, as a researcher I perceive myself to be in *constant relation with reciprocators*[8] and self-determining[9] agents as well as with the social contexts in which we live (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006). As a result, I describe my evolving academic practice as it emerges from the interrelation between myself, my reciprocators, the action research project, as well as the sociopolitical, historical, geographical and educational contexts.

Reason (1994) sees people as self-determining, meaning that persons have the potential to be the cause of their own actions. I regard myself and my co-researchers / reciprocators as agents who are able to take active decisions in matters that influence us directly. The term "self-determining" is potentially problematic in that it fails to appreciate the mutually reciprocal nature of influence, and suggests a linear process rather than a collaborative one. However, it is used here with the understanding that although no individual is fully able to determine any outcome, they are able to set out in a chosen direction. Reason (1994) asserts that we "can only truly do research *with* persons if we engage with them *as* persons, as co-subjects and thus co-researchers" (p.10). Steier (1991) suggests the term *reciprocators* as an alternative to participants or respondents, for he argues that it is in the act of reciprocation – them hearing and responding to me – that a "me" can emerge as an "I" who does research. The R@I project can be viewed as a regular meeting of six (or sometimes fewer) persons, who each reciprocated with and towards each other, allowing multiple "I's" to emerge – an "I" with identity, agency and voice.

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[8] This term is explained further on in this section.
[9] A better term might be "self-constructing", as "self-determining" recalls a linear, "deterministic" relationship. Here, however, I have used the original term as referred to by Whitehead and McNiff (2006).

McNiff and Whitehead (2006) emphasise relational and inclusional values (defined below) in describing the ontological assumptions of action research. In this respect I investigate my own practice in relation with others, their ideas and practices and in respect of the shared environment we live and work in. I neither regard myself as a researcher who conducts experiments on other people, nor as a passive observer of my own and other people's behaviour.  I acknowledge the constant mutual influence that happens between me and the reciprocators of my research project.  This speaks to the transformation of my identity as researcher in relation to what I study. Although the focus of my self-study inquiry is on my own development, it relies on and confirms the importance of other people's perceptions and reflections on my influence on their lives. In this way **interrelatedness** (Flood, 2006; Whitehead & McNiff, 2006) is inevitable and forms a core ontological assumption.  I have furthermore made every effort to develop an **inclusional** (Polat & Kisanji, 2009; Whitehead & McNiff, 2006) methodology that nurtures respectful relationships and values a process of egalitarian communication and joint decision-making power in every step of the research process.

### The "self" and identities

The concepts of self and identity are by no means uncomplicated. The existence of the International Society for Self and Identity (ISSI), complete with its own journal (*Self and Identity*; see http://issiweb.org/default.aspx) dedicated to interdisciplinary debates and research on the concepts of self and identity, attests to this. Identity is defined by the Dorland's Medical Dictionary for Health Consumers (2007, no page) as the "aggregate of characteristics by which an individual is recognized by himself [sic] and others". Whether this aggregate of characteristics exists within the person or in the socially constructed space between people is one of the psycho-philosophical debates about identity.  Some social constructionist theorists (e.g., Gergen, 2006; McNamee & Gergen, 1999; Sampson, 1993a) question the existence of a self that is located within the individual. As early as 1934, Herbert Mead suggested that personal identity is constructed through social relationships (Borchert, 2006). Gergen (2006) offers rather the concept of a "relational self" or "socially contextualized self" (p.119). In a similar vein, Stead and Bakker (2010) and Sampson (1985; 1993b) refer to the construction and fabrication of selves within a complex matrix of social discourses.  In the self-study aspect of my

research, I focus on the development of *my* academic practice as it unfolds and is constructed in the company (matrix and social discourses) of my workgroup and in the time and places of the R@I project. In my discussion of my research practice (as one of the aspects of my academic practice) in chapters six and seven, I specifically comment on a transformation that took place in my socially constructed *identity* as researcher within the social matrix of my workgroup, but also within the larger academic context. In the context of this research I use the concept of identity as a subset of a socially constructed self, so that when I refer to my research identity, I mean those aspects of myself that relate to my experience of myself as a researcher. Although it might be suggested that 'identity' has more to do with a social role such as gender, race, et cetera, it cannot be seen to be separate from 'self' because the self is also considered to be socially constructed (T.M. Bakker, personal communication, July 8, 2011).

*Agency*

Ansoff (1996) argues that an ontological commitment is necessary in order for any discussion of agency to take place:

> Where there is no ontological commitment to divide the whole...into parts, there can be no agency. Put differently, without an ontological commitment to partition, there is no way for the whole universe of "whatever is" to move and thus exhibit agency, because by definition the whole universe of "whatever is" has no place else to go. (p.541)

An ontological commitment allows me to draw the boundary between myself and the rest of humanity and thereby make possible a description of movement between myself and humanity. My ontological commitment to a systemic worldview is further refined by the notion that whatever I regard as real is socially constructed in language and constituted by history, culture and relationships – a position also known as social constructionism (Gergen, 2003). When a systemic and social constructionist view is applied to my research, I acknowledge the interrelation between the various members of the workgroup and context, and that "whatever is" is a negotiated reality in language. I further regard the ideas we hold of ourselves as academics and researchers as socially constructed and situated within a historical, cultural and interpersonal context.

Practitioner research is often conducted in an attempt by practitioners to improve their learning and ultimately their practice (Whitehead & McNiff, 2006). This improvement could only be possible if practitioners regard themselves as distinct selves able to relate to and with each other and with the context. This assumes an element of personal agency, which had been a problematic concept in social constructionism debates (see for example Ansoff, 1996; Fisher, 1999; Kenwood, 1996). However, Gergen (1999) states that social constructionism does not abandon the concept of agency or self-determination, but merely questions the taken-for-granted assumptions about agency. Gergen adds that "agency... is neither 'in here' nor 'out there' but is realized within the doing of a relationship" (Gergen, 1999, p.114). For the purpose of this research I clarify my view of agency as the display of intention and volition through purposeful action. I acknowledge that how I comment on my own and other's intentions, volitions and actions is influenced by my multiple personal, interpersonal and contextual factors. I therefore offer my comments as my version, for which I stand accountable.

**Epistemological assumptions**

A discussion about epistemology usually centres on what counts as knowledge, and how we can acquire knowledge (Edwards, 1967). Epistemology concerns itself with the nature, sources and limits of knowledge (Klein, 2005). Of the many forms of knowing, this thesis is most concerned with knowledge as relativist, socially relevant and socially constructed. This resonates with recent developments in philosophy that acknowledge contextualism as an alternative to normative and naturalistic epistemologies (Klein, 2005; see this author for a more in-depth discussion and definition of these concepts). This epistemology is aligned with my ontological assumptions of relativity, interrelatedness, and inclusion.

I discuss knowledge resulting from a self-study research in the context of a collaborative action research project, where timely action was primary. I comment on the nature of knowledge and the knowledge creation process as well as the requirements for the validity and legitimacy of knowledge in self-study action research and collaborative action research.

*The action turn*

Reason and Torbert (2001, p.1) argue for an "action turn" to complement the "linguistic turn" in the social sciences. They identify and discuss four important epistemological dimensions of transformational action research, namely, the primacy of the practical; the centrality of participation; the requirement of experiential grounding; and the importance of normative theory (theory that guides inquiry and action in present time and offers a vision of a better state).  In order to achieve transformation by utilising the four key dimensions mentioned, Reason and Torbert (2001) suggest three broad strategies for action research. These are: first person research or practice to encourage a practitioner to foster an inquiring approach to his or her own life; second person research or practice to engage a face-to-face group in collaborative inquiry; and third person research or practice to establish inquiring communities which reach beyond the immediate group to engage with organisations, communities and countries.  They furthermore suggest an integration of first, second and third person research in ways that

> increase the validity of the knowledge we use in our moment-to-moment living, that increase the effectiveness of our actions in real-time, and that remain open to unexpected transformation when our taken-for-granted assumptions, strategies, and habits are appropriately challenged. (Reason & Torbert 2001, p.2)

This is sound advice: the three broad strategies espoused here are in line with the values that drove me to initiate and facilitate the R@I project, and, I believe, were shared by my team members. This was evident in the excitement and vigour with which the aims of improving our practice and producing locally relevant knowledge through collaborative and creative work were pursued. The spirit of open enquiry and tolerance for debate and difference indeed created possibilities for what Reason and Torbert (2001) refer to as 'unexpected transformation' – it transforms not only our work, but also turns what may often be dry research into an opportunity for enchantment and surprise.

*The nature of knowledge and the knowledge creation process*

McNiff and Whitehead (2006) identify three key epistemological assumptions of self-study action research that rests on the values of interrelatedness and inclusion. Firstly, *the object of the inquiry* is the "I"; in other words, *the kind of knowledge* that is sought is

48

knowledge about one's developing sense of the self as a responsible and accountable person in relation to others and one's environment. The challenge here is how to distinguish between one's own accountability and that of the team members in a collaborative research endeavour, where ideas are generated in a collective context; a kind of primal matrix where influence is not only mutual but recursive. Within a relativist, socially constructed epistemology, the focus is on the "knowledge community" (Warmoth, 2000) which holds the authority and the authorship (even ownership) of knowledge. An example is the initiation of the R@I project. Prior to inviting my colleagues to the first meeting, I had several conversations with all or some of them (and they with me) in a variety of contexts. These conversations led me to believe that such a project would be possible, and the idea germinated and developed in this shared linguistic reality. Consequently, at the first meeting it was very easy to "sell" the idea of an action research forum because it had already taken some form and come into being, albeit only in thought, through our conversations. In this instance I consider myself accountable in that I called the first meeting and first proposed the idea; however, I cannot claim to take sole responsibility for what arose as a result of the events and ideas that grew from my participation with others. And so, in describing how I developed as an accountable and responsible person – and about how my practice and thinking developed – I consider my best effort as being to account fully and comprehensively for my records and my interpretation of this process, and for checking this with my colleagues as I go; as well as to account for my contributions to the conversations.

Secondly, McNiff and Whitehead (2006) posit that *the nature of this knowledge* is uncertain, meaning that this knowledge is tentative, open to modification, and represents one possible answer out of many. Furthermore, this knowledge is created and not discovered. These authors add that this knowledge also contains the possibility of paradoxes and dissonance. These notions fit with the relativist ontological position of social constructionism. The nature of the knowledge that I collected in this study evolved continually. I kept records of our intentions, actions and plans without any idea of where this might lead to. I submitted the records to my colleagues after every meeting and asked for corrections, amendments and feedback. I still see the results as only one

representation of what happened during these meetings, rather than an absolute truth, even if it is a co-constructed truth.

Thirdly, McNiff and Whitehead (2006) state that the *creation of knowledge* is a collaborative process. Even though the object of the inquiry is the "I", it is an "I" in relation to others and the environment (see also Bradbury-Huang, 2010; Heron & Reason, 2006; Reason & Bradbury, 2006). I stand accountable to what I could unravel as far as possible as being my contribution to the socially constructed reality; and in my report I make an artificial distinction between the self-study aspect (living theory action research) and the collaborative AR project. The effort of creating these distinctions is expressed in the methodological assumptions I adopted. These are explained in the following section.

## Methodological assumptions

Methodology refers to a general approach to research and should be distinguished from method which refers to techniques of data collection and analysis (Willig, 2001). Methodological assumptions are usually informed by, and logically flow, from the researcher's values, ontological and epistemological assumptions. Indeed, another term for methodology might be applied epistemology (Agassi, n.d.). They represent assumptions about what attitudes, actions and methods will best lead to the kinds of knowledge that are sought.

In this section I discuss how the R@I project reflects characteristics of action research and how the self-study aspect of my research conforms to a living theory action research approach. I begin this section by introducing key features of action research as presented by some of the eminent authors in this field (e.g., Brydon-Miller, Greenwood & Maguire, 2003; Chandler & Torbert, 2003; Dick, 2004; Fals Borda, 2006; Greenwood, 2002; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000). I conclude the section with the methodological assumptions of living theory action research as discussed by Whitehead and McNiff (2006).

*Action research*

Action research is described as an approach to research rather than a single academic discipline (Brydon-Miller et al., 2003; Reason & Bradbury, 2006). It is an approach where the "dichotomy between theory and practice is mediated, in which multi-disciplinary and multi-stakeholder teams are central, and in which objectivity is replaced by a public commitment to achieving liberating, sustainable, and democratizing outcomes" (Greenwood, 2002, p.125).  Brydon-Miller et al. (2003) regard the common themes and commitments found among action researchers to be a shared commitment to democratic social change; the integration of theory and practice; the importance of creating and maintaining relationships for learning and action; transforming educational practices to incorporate democratic, participatory and experiential methods; and the tendency of action researchers to be hybrid scholar/activists who do not avoid messy situations (complex, multidimensional, intractable dynamic problems) and are prepared to face the challenge of improving social practice. According to Chandler and Torbert (2003), social science research conducted in the present and for the future by co-participants (second person voice and practice) is a critical kind of research that remains largely unexplored. The R@I project can be considered an action research project that was conducted in the present and for the future by the members of the workgroup.  In discussing how I have improved my own academic practice (first person practice), I use the first person voice to report on my facilitation of and participation in the R@I project (past actions).

Psychology as a discipline has largely ignored action research, with most psychological research based on experimental or quasi experimental and quantitative survey designs (Dick, 2004). The R@I project can be seen as action research within the discipline of psychology as we (the workgroup) attempted to increase our (psychological) research output. This project embodied principles of critical psychology, which challenges psychologists to make psychology more active in responding to grassroots needs in South Africa (Hook, 2004a). Tolman and Brydon-Miller (1997) further support participatory models of psychological research in the pursuit of goals of social transformation. In the R@I project, we attempted to improve the interface between the psychology department and the local community. We did this through providing free psychological services to the community and collaborating with a community agency on

a locally relevant research project. I discuss this interface in more detail later in the section on the relationship between higher education and local communities.

Fals Borda (2006) calls on action researchers to give greater account and regard to "grassroots groups, the excluded, the voiceless, and the victims of dominant systems" (p.358). He furthermore cautions against activism for the sake of being different: "The Greeks have given us a good rule for this: direct praxis should be complemented by ethical phronesis. That is, simple activism is not enough: it needs to be guided by good judgement in seeking progress for all" (Fals Borda, 2006, p.358). These sentiments are frequently promoted as an approach to research in the field of critical psychology (see for instance Hook, 2004b). Borchert (2006) pulls together theory and praxis by noting: "When epistemologies are deeply social, recommendations for inquiry will often be applicable to communities or institutions rather than to individuals" (p.86).

The R@I project was situated in a third world setting (Mamelodi township) in South Africa. In some respects, the incorporation of the Mamelodi campus into to the University of Pretoria introduced the possibility of feeling excluded from important decisions about our future, with a resultant loss of voice. The R@I project provided an opportunity for us to counteract these feelings or experiences by providing a forum for inclusion and allowing a voice. In addition to these benefits, we not only sought to improve our research output, but strove also to ensure the local relevance of our research and enhance service delivery of our psychology clinic. These goals can be regarded as praxis complemented by ethical phronesis.

Greenwood (2002) strongly criticises certain kinds of action research practice in terms of the complacency of some action research practitioners towards fundamental issues of theory, method and validity. He argues that "'doing good' is not the same as 'doing good social research'" (p.117). Greenwood gives his view of the essential elements of research, and measures action research against these criteria:

> Going out to collaborate with a group of people in solving an important
> problem is not by itself tantamount to doing research. Collecting and
> analysing data by itself is not research; it is just collecting and analyzing

data. To my mind, conducting research means *developing habits of counterintuitive thinking, questioning definitions and premises, linking findings and process analyses to other cases, and attempting to subject favourite interpretations to harsh collaborative critiques. Throughout these processes the collaborative process of reflection* is the guiding thread that integrates the work. (Greenwood, 2002, p.130; my emphasis)

The R@I project was not merely an attempt to improve our individual and collective situation; it was also an attempt to do valid research that contributes to the field of psychology and/or higher education in some way. This thesis both represents and reflects our attempts at collaborative reflection. Some of this process is visible in the meeting records (see Appendix E); further reflections and my analysis is presented in chapter five; and a meta-analysis of the research process occurs in chapter seven.

Several common themes run through all these descriptions of action research. First is that knowledge is created with others through carefully considered actions and reflections upon these actions in order to bring about a change in an immediate concern. This knowledge creation process happens in recursive cycles of reflection and action. The knowledge that is created is acted upon to test its usefulness and the results are fed back into the knowledge creation process. The process is an emergent one, meaning that the outcomes (changes in knowledge, attitudes, behaviour, structures, policies, commitments, etc.) and direction of the research process evolve and cannot be predicted. The ownership of the knowledge created is negotiated among the participants; however, the ultimate outcome is not abstract knowledge about a process, but a change in practice as a result of learning with others. When writing about action research projects to an academic audience, various distinctions can be drawn to illuminate the particular aspects of the process that were emphasised in the project.

My research falls within the ambit of action research because I set out to create knowledge with others through carefully considered actions and reflections upon these actions. I did this in order to bring about a change in an immediate concern, which was the improvement of my practice (community engagement, teaching and research) as an academic. This knowledge creation process happened in recursive cycles of reflection

and action. The knowledge created was acted upon to test its usefulness and the results were fed back into the knowledge creation process. This process was emergent, meaning that the *outcomes* (changes in knowledge, attitudes, behaviour, structures, policies, commitments, etc) and *direction* of the research process evolved in ways I could not have predicted.

The ownership of the knowledge created was negotiated among the participants; however, the ultimate outcome is not abstract knowledge about a process, but rather a change in practice as a result of learning with others. I provide evidence of this change in practice in chapters six and seven.  In writing about this action research project to an academic audience and submitting it to examiners to be evaluated for a PhD thesis, I have chosen to draw various distinctions to illuminate the particular aspects of this action research process in line with the standards of judgement required for a PhD as well as self-established criteria of judgement outlined in chapter four.  One prominent aspect of this research is the self-study of my academic practice. In the next section I discuss how my inquiry into my academic practice conforms to the characteristics of a living theory action research approach.

*Living theory action research*

The self-study aspect of this thesis relates to my inquiry into my academic practice in the facilitation of the R@I project. In particular I address the research questions "How can I facilitate a peer support research initiative?" and "How can I improve my academic practice?"  I provide an answer to the first self-study question in chapter six. The second self-study research question represents a meta-question; the answer to this is presented as my living theory in chapter seven.

Whitehead and McNiff (2006) articulate a particular approach or model to first person action research or practitioner research in which the research results are expressed in the form of a living theory (Whitehead, 1989; Wood, Morar & Mostert, 2007), which represents the practitioner's account of what happened when a serious attempt was made to answer the research questions. Living theory action research has become a recognised means for practitioners to research their own practices with a view to

improving it as well as present the knowledge gained in the form of doctoral dissertations (e.g., Charles, 2007; Lohr, 2006; Spiro, 2008), Master's theses (e.g., Mc Ginley, 2001; Roche, 2000; Shobbrook, 1997) or articles (e.g., Levy, 2003; Whitehead, 2008a, 2008b; Wood et al., 2007).

Living theory action research was originally developed by Jack Whitehead (1989) to explain the educational influences on a person's learning.  The learning of the practitioner is aimed at improving a situation where the actions of the practitioner are in contradiction to her or his values. In such situations the practitioner is likely to experience themselves as a living contradiction.  McNiff et al. (2003) conceptualise the impetus for beginning a personal study as coming from experiencing oneself as a living contradiction.  Whitehead (1989; 2006) describes a living contradiction as the experience of containing two mutually exclusive opposites within oneself. It is the experience of holding certain values that give meaning to one's existence as well as the experience that these values are being negated in practice.  This experience acts as a creative catalyst to activate a practitioner's imagination to find ways to address this contradiction.  The living theory approach is an attempt to resolve this living contradiction through cycles of action research processes aimed at producing a 'living theory' of how the practitioner was able to increasingly practise in accordance with their values. A living theory is therefore the product of responding to this experience of oneself as a living contradiction (Whitehead, 2006).  Such a living theory is heavily bound to context, situation and practitioner; consequently, it is open to constant change due to continual shifts or transformations in the context, situation or learning of the practitioner. Because of this, the living theory is regarded as living in that it transforms and grows with the practitioner.

Action research provides a means to generate living theories by virtue of the fact that the actions taken to improve situations are *informed* by an understanding (as a result of continual reflection) of that which would most likely lead to an improvement of the situation.  Praxis represents *committed* actions in the sense that the values underlying the decisions taken during the project are examined and declared. Praxis is further defined by McNiff et al. (2003, p.13) as "informed, committed action that gives rise to

knowledge as well as successful action".  A living theory therefore represents personal, embodied and context specific knowledge that was gained as a result of informed and committed actions with the recognition that this knowledge is open to refinement and reinterpretation (Levy, 2003).  Whitehead (2008) describes the key qualities of a living theory methodology:

> There are … distinguishing qualities of a living theory methodology that include 'I' as a living contradiction, the use of action reflection cycles, the use of procedures of personal and social validation and the inclusion of a life-affirming energy with values as explanatory principles of educational influence. (p.9)

In this research I inquire into my academic practice by looking at what happened when I tried to improve my academic practice. My facilitation of the R@I project stemmed from my experience of myself as a living contradiction as my values of locally relevant knowledge creation, synergistic action and self-determination were contradicted by my everyday practice as an academic. My academic practice did not reflect my values relevant to my academic practice. In my facilitation of the R@I project I made use of action reflection cycles, a social validation process (member checking) and used my values as explanatory principles for the decisions I took during the research. In this way the self-study aspect of my research conforms to the characteristics of a living theory action research approach.

My living theory of how I improved my academic practice did not develop in a vacuum. It evolved within the context of the R@I project as much as it contributed to the R@I project. My living theory grew in the interactional and conversational spaces between the rest of the R@I workgroup members and myself. The R@I project and my living theory unfolded in the geographical context of a university campus psychology clinic in Mamelodi during a particular sociopolitical period in South Africa (with particular reference to the transformation of higher education). The potential significance of my living theory therefore reaches beyond solving my living contradiction and improving my own academic practice. The R@I project and my living theory developed in the interfaces between academic-and-university and university-and-surrounding-community. As such, a further potential significance of this research is a commentary on the social responsibility of universities to their local communities.

In the following section I provide a framework for discussing the relationship between universities and surrounding communities, which I refer to again in chapter seven when I discuss the potential significance of this research in more detail.

**The relationship between universities and surrounding communities**

In this section I take a macro view of the relationship between a university and surrounding communities and discuss three discernable mandates or tasks that universities fulfil: teaching, research and community engagement. I provide a brief overview of the origin of the three tasks and discuss the third task (community engagement) within the South African context in more detail, as it pertains to the potential significance of this study.

*The university: Its mission and three tasks*

Universities have been part of western societies since the 13th century (Fallis, 2004; Greenwood & Levin, 2000), and originally specialised in a single field: for instance, Salerno was known for medicine, Bologna for law, and Paris for theology (Fallis, 2004). Gradually the numbers of universities increased and new faculties were added. Eventually a typical structure emerged with four faculties: arts, law, medicine and theology. Study in the arts faculty was regarded as necessary preparation for later study in the latter three faculties, which were regarded as the higher faculties (Fallis, 2004). The *teaching* of knowledge can be regarded as the first and original function of a university, as explained by Cardinal J.H Newman (1852/1999):

> The view taken of a University...[is that it]... is a place
> of *teaching* universal *knowledge*. This implies that its object is, on the one hand, intellectual, not moral; and, on the other, that it is the diffusion and extension of knowledge rather than the advancement. If its object were scientific and philosophical discovery, I do not see why a University should have students; if religious training, I do not see how it can be the seat of literature and science. (p.xvii)

Research or knowledge generation based on the scientific method was subsequently added as a second function or task for universities, leading to universities that offered

both teaching and research opportunities for students and staff. This form of the university, which is most familiar to us in the present time, was designed and championed by Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835) (Greenwood & Levin, 2000). Von Humboldt is credited with the union between research and teaching: "University faculties were able to both study and conduct research because university teaching was to be based on research, rather than on untested doctrines" (Greenwood & Levin, 2000, p.87). The ideal was one of "a remote, socially disembedded community of students and professors, happily bound together in a unity of teaching and research" (Krücken, 2003, p.19). The attainment and teaching of knowledge (even in the absence of an application for knowledge) was seen as a worthy task of universities: "Knowledge is capable of being its own end. Such is the constitution of the human mind, that any kind of knowledge, if it be really such is its own reward" (Newman, 1999, p.94). Universities were not initially tasked with a social responsibility other than to create citizens and to be centres of advanced knowledge (Greenwood & Levin, 2000).

The university and society are both parties to a social contract and in each era, this social contract must be renegotiated (Fallis, 2004). Many parents want their children to simply receive a professional qualification that will ensure employability and financial self-sufficiency. Professors and lecturers want to minimise teaching responsibility to allow time for research and publication. As a result, knowledge can become fragmented, esoteric and unconnected to the needs of society (Fallis, 2004). For universities to adapt their mission and tasks in order to stay relevant to the society they form a part of, a certain amount of continual change is necessary. Change, however, seems to come slowly to universities:

> About eighty-five institutions in the Western world established by 1520 still exist in recognizable forms, with similar functions and unbroken histories, including the Catholic Church, the Parliaments of the Isle of Man, of Iceland, and of Great Britain, several Swiss cantons, and seventy universities. Kings that rule, feudal lords with vassals, and guilds with monopolies are all gone. These seventy universities, however, are still in the same locations with some of the same buildings, with professors and students doing much the same things, and with governance carried on in much the same ways. (Kerr, 2001, p.115)

Each university negotiates its own mission and core tasks to fulfil this mission. Fallis (2004) evaluated universities from different continents and different eras and found that it is possible to formulate a "general mission" of universities:

> It is the mission of all universities to provide liberal education for undergraduates, to conduct research, and to contribute to society including the economy and culture. It is the responsibility of all professors to teach, to conduct research, and to provide service to their university and to society. (p.14)

But what exactly does "service to society" mean for each university and for each society? According to Brulin (2001), a university has three tasks to fulfil its mission, namely, to educate; to conduct research; and to serve the local community *through collaboration with practitioners in the community near the university* to support development processes. In order for a university to serve its local community, universities should enter into joint knowledge creation partnerships – partnerships between university research staff and practitioners in the surrounding community. For Brulin, the crucial factor to enable universities to serve their communities, other than recruiting and nurturing local students, is the development and shaping of joint knowledge creation partnerships with practitioners.  Mutuality, however, is not easily achieved, as Brulin (2001) states: "It is a very banal fact that universities and their nearby communities first have to learn to know each other; some sort of 'social glue' has to be shaped between the two spheres" (p.441). This social glue is described by Porter (1998) as personal relationships, face-to-face contact, a sense of common interest and 'insider' status. It is furthermore this social glue that facilitates access to important resources and "turns such resources into energizing assets" (Brulin, 2001, p.441).

*Turning resources into assets*

To take this further, the idea that important resources can be *turned into* energising assets implies that knowledge of and access to resources is not enough. A transformation of resources has to occur to enable them to become assets. When relationships and conversations with people are seen as important resources, then  the 'social glue' – the quality of the relationships forged along a common interest – facilitates the transformation of resources into assets, or put differently, transforms *contact with*

*community members* into *knowledge creation partnerships*. In the context of the R@I project, it was not enough to meet once a month to discuss our ideas about the functioning of Itsoseng Psychology Clinic or our research output. The meetings can be seen as a resource that required the forging of knowledge creation partnerships to turn the resource into an asset. The same principle applied when we worked towards forming a knowledge creation partnership between the R@I team and staff members of the SOS Children's Village to conduct a programme evaluation in the year 2005 (see chapter five).

*Community engagement as the third task of a university*

Greenwood and Levin (2000) note that, apart from strategic industry partners, many community groupings do not have any significant impact on the focus of university research and have no easy access to universities for assistance with solutions to their most pressing problems: "Community members, small-scale organizations, minorities, and other powerless or poor people who want assistance with broad social change issues are looking for solutions to everyday problems in particular contexts: poverty, addiction, racism, environmental degradation and so on" (p.90). These authors believe that social research that is not applied cannot rightfully be called research.

On their website, the Council on Higher Education of South Africa released a document titled "South African Higher Education in the First Decade of Democracy" (Council on Higher Education, 2004). Among other things, this document discussed the need for community engagement that "implies a less paternalistic, more mutual and inclusive community-higher education relationship" (Council on Higher Education, 2004, p.130) than that implied in the historical term of "community outreach". The following excerpt on *service learning* has a direct bearing on community engagement as a third academic task. It also illustrates the South African Council on Higher Education's vision in the year 2004 for the future of the higher educational landscape in South Africa.

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**Service-learning**

South Africa's Joint Education Trust (JET) has defined service learning as 'a thoughtfully organised and reflective service-oriented pedagogy focussed on the development priorities of communities through the interaction between and application of knowledge,

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skills and experience in partnership between community, academics, students, and service providers within the community for the benefit of all participants'.

Service-learning programmes (also called academic service-learning, academic community service and community based-learning) engage students in activities where *both community and student* are primary beneficiaries and where goals are to provide a service to the community and, equally, to enhance student *learning* through provision of this service.  Reciprocity, mutual enrichment and integration with scholarly activities are central characteristics of service-learning.

Unlike other categories of community service, service-learning is entrenched in a discourse that proposes the development and transformation of higher education in relation to community needs.  Proponents of service-learning argue that it reconnects higher education to society by making its academic mission more responsive and relevant to the pressing contemporary problems of society.

(Council on Higher Education, 2004, p.132)

South Africa's move to align academic aims with community needs was not a new idea in the international community. In 1997 Sweden passed a law stating that the knowledge production of universities (as a result of research) should be relevant to the community in which the institution is embedded (Brulin, 2001). This is known as the third task of universities. Although the idea of community service is not a new one, the general practice seems to have been that the extent of one's research obligation to communities is to share what one has (supposedly knowledge and expertise) with the have-nots. This is often done through the dissemination of knowledge at conferences – not exactly places frequented by the have-nots.  Other forms of giving back to the community occur, for example, through various intervention programmes such as life skills programmes or support groups. Such programmes aim to uplift communities but, without an invitation or participation from the target community, community members remain effectively disempowered and unemancipated as the university retains ownership of knowledge, resources and skills. The implication here, as Brulin (2001) points out, is that cooperation between universities and communities has hitherto been seen as a linear transfer of

scientific knowledge, while current practice is becoming more aware that research should be organised as joint knowledge formation processes.  As such, universities become partners in developmental processes and knowledge creation endeavours (Brulin, 2001). This is a process that is vastly different from the much-criticised "giving to the poor" heritage and hegemonic stance of tertiary institutions. In South Africa, "community service" had become synonymous with charity-like interactions in a rural or township setting between "advantaged" and "disadvantaged" people. In contrast, to become a collaborative research partner implies a relationship in which the contributions and benefits derived from the interactions are more or less equally distributed between the partners (university researcher and community member/co-researcher).  Such an endeavour seems both necessary and desirable, and exemplifies McNiff et al.'s (2003) observation that "life is a process of constant learning, being in touch with what might be possible and daring to find ways to do it" (p.41).

*Contributing to social and economic development*

The relationship between higher education institutions (HEIs) and their surrounding or local communities is by no means a simple one. Developing and maintaining a mutually beneficial relationship has not always been a key mission for HEIs (Brulin, 2001; Fallis, 2004; Greenwood & Levin, 2000; Humphreys & Conlon, 2003). What further complicates this relationship is that it is subject to transformations on the global economic market (Humphreys & Conlon, 2003).  High speed communication, rapid transportation and open global markets should in theory allow any company in any local community to source anything, from any place at any time (Porter, 1998). In practice, however, economic prosperity still seems to happen in what Porter (1998) calls clusters: "critical masses in one place of linked industries and institutions – from suppliers to universities to government agencies – that enjoy unusual competitive success in a particular field" (p.77).  In addition, worldwide economic decline in capitalist countries has given rise to local and regional development programmes thanks to a growing awareness that local municipalities can no longer depend solely on national growth to sustain themselves. Rather, the economic success of a nation now depends upon the aggregated successes of local development activity (Kanter, 1995). Success, it seems, depends on how well

institutions (like universities) can enter into mutually beneficial relationships with strategic partners in their locality:

> Geographic, cultural, and institutional proximity provides companies with special access, closer relationships, better information, powerful incentives, and other advantages that are difficult to tap from a distance. The more complex, knowledge-based, and dynamic the world economy becomes, the more this is true. Competitive advantage lies increasingly in local things - knowledge, relationships, and motivation - that distant rivals cannot replicate. (Porter, 1998, p.77)

The incentive for HEIs to positively influence the social and economic development within their local communities seems linked to benefits they will enjoy as a result of being part of this economic region or locality. In order to best achieve this, HEIs can play three key roles in the social and economic development within their local communities (Humphreys & Conlon, 2003): firstly, as a *stakeholder* in the local economy (employer, landowner, consumer, supplier); secondly, as a *strategic partner* in local economic development by contributing knowledge of local industry sectors and timely human resource development; and thirdly, as a *service provider*, building intellectual capital (skill development and new knowledge creation).

**Conclusion**

The R@I project and my living theory (self-study) project are intimately interwoven. I studied myself in my role as facilitator and at the same time participated as a team member in the project that I facilitated. The directions that the R@I project took were the result of a co-constructed and emergent process, rather than the result of my choreography of the project alone. My values of creating locally relevant knowledge, synergistic action and the expression of agency (self-determination), my beliefs, prior experience, and political commitments all influenced my facilitation of the R@I project and my learning about my academic practice as I set out to improve it.

In this chapter I provided a philosophical basis (ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions) for the collaborative action research design of the R@I

project and the living theory action research design for the self-study project. I also discussed the relationship between universities and surrounding communities as a framework for evaluating the potential wider significance of this research. In chapter four, I discuss the research method as it evolved throughout the duration of the R@I project and beyond.