

CHAPTER 7

MY LIVING THEORY OF MY ACADEMIC PRACTICE

By taking action to change conditions, one is personally changed in the process.
(Karl Marx cited in Susman & Evered, 1978, p.595)

My living theory (Whitehead, 1989; 2008a) is about my personal transformation in the context of transformations in our collective understanding, knowledge, and heightened awareness of resources available to us, as well as in the context of higher education transformation in South Africa. As I explain in chapter three, I use the word *resource* in this thesis to indicate a potential asset, and the word *asset* to indicate a resource that has been used to the benefit of someone. Arguably the greatest resource available to the R@I workgroup was our regular and reliable availability to each other as both a supportive and a critical audience. As a group, this potential resource existed in the relationships between us, which were available to be transformed into an asset for a particular purpose. The formation and nurturing of a regular, supportive and critical audience in the form of the R@I meetings represented a transformation of our potential availability to each other as a resource into a valuable asset. My thesis is an account of my own learning in the form of my description of how, through my facilitation of a collaborative action research project, I contributed to the transformation of resources into assets when we worked towards improving the service delivery and local relevance of a university psychology clinic.

My living contradiction revisited

In this study I conceptualised improving my academic practice as resolving my experience of my academic self as a living contradiction. As explained in chapter three, this contradiction existed in holding certain personal values (creating locally relevant knowledge, working in synergy with my colleagues, and self-determination) and seeing very little of these values expressed in my academic practice prior to the year 2004. In

this thesis, I use these values to explain the decision I took to initiate and nurture the R@I project.

My living contradiction resolved as a result of my facilitation of and participation in the R@I project. My experience of myself as a participant in this project was one of working in synergy with my colleagues to create locally relevant knowledge. My experience of myself as the project facilitator further allowed me to live my value of self-determination, not just in seeing the project unfold, but also in creating opportunities for others to co-determine conversational spaces for discovery, experimentation and learning. In this sense then, the R@I project evolved into more than the resolution of my living contradiction. It acted as an important catalyst for the R@I project, and provided me with an opportunity to live in the direction of my values (McNiff et al., 2003).

Towards my living theory - what I have learned and gained from the R@I project

My living theory of how I improved my academic practice includes my explanation of my living contradiction as well as descriptions of the actions I took with my team members to respond to this contradiction. My living theory also includes descriptions from my team members of the educational influence the R@I project held for each of them. In constructing my living theory of how I improved my academic practice, I answered the same questions that I posed to my team members on the value of the R@I project as a framework for my reflection on my own learning. I then summarised the results of my learning in the form of *tenets* of my living theory.

What have I gained from participating in the R@I initiative as a team member?

Overall, I have shared in the overt outcomes of the R@I initiative in terms of the improved functioning of the Itsoseng clinic, the development of an individuated research identity and an increased ability to define community in the practice of community engagement. I have also shared in the protective aspects afforded by belonging to a cohesive group (the R@I team) during the process of our institutional incorporation and associated stresses. Apart from sharing in these collective gains, I also made some personal and idiosyncratic gains which are expounded in the answers to the remaining questions below.

What increased awareness and/or shifts (or not) did I notice in terms of my values (what is important about research for me)?

Reflecting on my facilitation of the R@I project involved responding to the critical questions of my promoters (Dr. Gerhard Viljoen and Prof. Terri Bakker). During this process I became aware of a previously unacknowledged personal value: the co-creation of nurturing and creative conversational spaces. I believe that this value had a significant impact on the educational influence of the R@I initiative. This was perhaps the biggest discovery for me in terms of my values. Prior to the R@I initiative, I had very little awareness of how important it is for me to be a part of such contexts and to what lengths I would go to co-create them.

Like Gerhard, I experienced an increased awareness that I value locally relevant research conducted *with* community members, especially in the context of the high level of social need in many South African communities. In this respect, the Educare programme evaluation research project that Gerhard and I conducted was an opportunity to live this value. In this project we evaluated the feasibility of the continuation of a local daycare programme by integrating information from policy documents, assessing funding implications and incorporating focus group information. This was a research project conducted in partnership with an NGO and its direct stakeholders (the daycare mothers) located in the community surrounding the Mamelodi campus.

The R@I initiative also increased my awareness of the relationships between universities and surrounding communities; and made me question whether we do enough in South Africa to promote and encourage research that is useful and liberating to marginalised and disenfranchised people. Like Linda, I became more aware of how much I value community-in-research and working in a cohesive team.

What increased awareness and/or shifts (or not) did I notice in terms of my way of working (how I approached research projects)?

The biggest shift occurred in my thinking about the preparation of a journal article for publication. Prior to my participation in the R@I initiative, I assumed that a researcher

completes a research project, proceeds to write an article and then send it to a random journal hoping that it will be accepted. The idea that there is a process in which one evaluates which journals to approach had never crossed my mind. During the period of the R@I initiative, Gerhard attended a workshop that aimed to prepare postdoctoral academics for the professoriate. During a R@I meeting, Gerhard shared with us that the presenter of this workshop asked each academic to name their field of speciality within their discipline, as well as the ten leading journals in the world that publish articles on cutting edge research in these fields. The idea that particular journals focus on publishing articles related to particular fields of knowledge seems obvious to me now, but it was definitely a new idea for me at the time.

Related to this idea, was Linda and Terri's disclosure of the experience of having submitted articles only to have them rejected by journal reviewers who provided contradictory and confusing feedback. This prompted me to consider that I should not only inquire into which journals publish research similar to mine, but also that I should pay attention to the style and format of the articles in each journal. In short, my awareness of the role of the journal editor and peer review panel as a first audience grew immeasurably. As a result, my way of working in preparing a manuscript for publication shifted.

What increased awareness and/or shifts (or not) did I notice in terms of my identity (how I think about myself as a researcher)?

Being a member of a group of researchers was instrumental in helping me to see myself as a researcher. The R@I team was formed by six lecturers around a common purpose – research. Our purpose defined us as a group of lecturers doing research. Our name reflected this purpose: *Research@Itsoseng*. Our actions in the direction of this purpose also redefined us in these terms. From there it was a smaller and more manageable step to see myself as a researcher by virtue of my membership of this group. Therefore a shift and definite gain in this regard was the development of a researcher identity in a social formation (the R@I team) that nurtured and encouraged this identity.

What increased awareness and/or shifts (or not) did I notice in terms of my unique abilities and preferences?

My unique abilities as a facilitator of a creative and nurturing conversational space were highlighted to me. I also learned that I am able to participate and facilitate at the same time and that I am able to tolerate the messiness and unpredictability of an emergent research process. In terms of my preferences, like Linda, I have learned the value of regular, focussed collegial contact and dialogue with each other and with the context in which I work; and that I prefer to live and work in the context of my research. I also learnt that I was able to create opportunities for collegial contact that was not confined to my five colleagues, but also to a larger and more diverse group of like-minded (or perhaps like-valued) colleagues. In this respect I organised a meeting to discuss indigenous psychology that was held on the Mamelodi campus on 3 June 2005. I invited colleagues from the psychology departments of the Universities of Pretoria and South Africa (Unisa) who were interested in the concept and practice of indigenous psychology. The meeting was defined by the context: we sat and talked in a circle outside under a large acacia tree – a fitting setting for our musings on indigenous psychology in a South African context.



Figure 13 Creating an opportunity for discussing indigenous psychology in an indigenous context. Mamelodi campus, 03-06-2005. (Eventually we adapted to the context and moved into the shade of the tree.) Photographed by the author.

What increased awareness and/or shifts (or not) did I notice in terms of the resources available to me as researcher?

As an R@I member I experienced an increased awareness of how we can become valuable resources to each other and to ourselves in circumstances that allow for this to happen. I was often amazed by the generosity, richness and complexity of the contributions that we made to each other. In talking about how to improve the functioning of the clinic in a regular, sustained and structured way over several months (May to November 2004), we became more aware of “our own abilities and resources” (Bhana, 2004, p.235). I posit that we transformed these resources into assets, using the R@I meetings as forum. From our attempts to improve the functioning of Itsoseng Clinic, I learnt that the development of relationships and the capacity of people to address issues is a more valuable use of time than merely resolving the concerns. I was also at times surprised by the contributions I made during some of the R@I meetings, which showed to me a level of understanding about a topic under discussion that I had no previous awareness that I possessed. My experiences of the R@I meetings as a conversational space in which my colleagues and I were transformed from potential resources into assets to each other not only increased my awareness of this potential, but also alerted me to the value in creating and participating in such conversational spaces.

What did I do that made the R@I project valuable to me as a team member?

In facilitating the R@I project, I not only attempted to create a space in which my colleagues could flourish, but one in which I could do so too. When I entertain friends at my home, I play my role as host with diligence and attentiveness to their needs, and when my guests appear at ease and well cared for, it transforms my house into a welcoming space for myself also. The R@I meetings were no different in this respect. Not only did I schedule the meetings, prepare the recording equipment and take the minutes, I also played the role of host to my conversational guests. By so doing, I transformed our common meeting room into a welcoming space for myself and others. I did this through attending to small details such as baking fresh muffins, ensuring that we had plenty of good coffee and tea, laying the table in a way that defined the space differently, and by being attentive to my team members’ (guests’) emotional and practical

needs. In this way I created the most ideal way for myself to be in conversation with my colleagues about the things that mattered most to us in our day-to-day working lives.

My living theory of my developing academic practice

My membership and facilitation of the R@I initiative has helped me to form my living theory (Whitehead, 2008b) of my developing academic practice and what it means to me to be an academic. In this section I provide my living theory in the form of basic tenets derived from what I have learnt in the R@I project.

- (1) My living theory is informed by my understanding of the three tasks of universities (Brulin, 2001), namely, teaching, research, and community engagement. I extended this conceptualisation to a consideration of the three core tasks of my academic practice. My original understanding of these three tasks was that they co-existed as separate activities. This view was transformed as a result of my involvement in the R@I project, and I now regard these tasks as interrelated and often co-occurring in various combinations and to various degrees. This is particularly the case if I regard teaching as not merely delivering a lecture, but as the facilitation of opportunities for others and my own learning in the presence of others. My academic practice is therefore at heart a practice of learning with others, in the company of others.
- (2) By creating a research forum, I was able to make use of the creative potential and passionate commitment present in my work colleagues as social formation (Whitehead, 2008b) at my place of work. I facilitated the creation of R@I as a temporary community (another social formation) around two common aims. In striving together with my colleagues towards these aims, I claim that I have improved my academic practice on three systemic levels: a personal level; the level of immediate community (my five colleagues); and the level of local community (the people living in the university's immediate surrounds).
- (3) On the personal level (first person action research, see Chandler & Torbert, 2003) my individuated research identity developed out of a group research identity, and I regard the group research identity to be a valuable precursor in my eventual

individuation as a researcher. I furthermore shared in the knowledge we created in the group pertaining to the definition of community in the context of community engagement and the resolution of key aspects of the clinic's functioning. This contributed to my academic practice in that I am more able to create and engage with communities of inquiry.

- (4) The second systemic level relates to improvements in my academic practice of facilitating transformational opportunities for myself and others in a communal conversational space (first and second person action research). On this level my academic practice as a facilitator improved due to the reciprocal influence we as team members had on each other; and how the group process shaped me in turn as I responded to this process. In this way I acquired embodied knowledge of educational influence as a reciprocal process, in that we mutually influenced each other. As a result, and as I inquired into my academic practice in order to create my own living theory, I developed a concept of personal agency within the context of reciprocal influence.
- (5) The third systemic level of improvement in my academic practice pertains to my increased awareness of the relationship between my academic practice and the local communities surrounding the university (second and third person action research). In this respect I claim an improvement in my academic practice in that I developed my ability to create inquiring communities within an ethic of care and respect, together with people from organisations in the local community surrounding the university where I worked.
- (6) My academic practice also improved in terms of my understanding of the unique potential of a university psychology clinic as an interface and integrating agent between the three tasks of universities and the three systemic levels described above. A psychology clinic provides opportunities for research, teaching and community engagement both as separate tasks and also for bringing these tasks together in an integrated whole. It further provides an opportunity for engaging with self and other, with existing or created communities of inquiry, as well as for thinking

about larger societal issues such as indigenous psychology and locally relevant psychology.

- (7) Lastly, my academic practice improved as a result of my becoming aware of valuable resources within myself and others, as well as because of an increased awareness of the processes by which I could turn these resources into assets. In addition, I realised the value of choreographing creative and nurturing conversational spaces. My co-creation of such conversational spaces is as much for my own benefit as it is for that of my conversational partners, and aims to contribute to the flourishing of thought and relationship.

The development of my living theory of my academic practice represents an important contribution of this study as well as an important influence on my own professional life. In the following section I provide my thoughts on the wider contribution of this study to action researchers, academics, people involved in university psychology clinics as well as psychologists interested in the emancipatory and transformative potential of action research.

Contributions of this study

The R@I project provided a means to multiple ends – some anticipated and hoped for, and others unexpected. We aimed to improve the functioning of Itsoseng Psychology Clinic and started with a list of concerns that we hoped to address. In the process of addressing these concerns, we discovered that the solution lay in clarifying the roles and responsibilities of the people involved, as well as establishing processes for dealing with daily and ongoing concerns. We also became aware of the impact of the quality of the relationships between the role players in the clinic on our ability to deal with issues germane to clinic operations. These two discoveries were unexpected. We furthermore aimed to increase our output of locally relevant research and discovered the value of establishing a researcher identity from which to act with creativity and confidence. The formation of a researcher identity happened in stages, from first belonging to a research initiative, to collectively contributing and co-creating that initiative, to developing individuated researcher identities that were able to respond in a supportive, creative and

also critical manner toward each other. The importance of individuated research identities was another unexpected discovery. In striving towards both our aims we experienced transformations in our understanding of our challenges, in our awareness of external and internal resources available to us, and in our identities as psychology academics in South Africa.

The contribution of this study therefore extends beyond solving my living contradiction and improving my own academic practice. The R@I project developed as a collaborative action research project in the interfaces between academic-and-university and university-and-surrounding-community during a period of transformation in South African higher education. I discuss in the following section the contributions this study makes to the relevant academic fields.

The relevance of the study to community engagement as an academic task

A first contribution this study makes is to the debate on the social responsibility of universities to their local communities, which I discussed in chapter three. In this study I demonstrated how we acknowledged our responsibility to the local community surrounding the Mamelodi campus and created opportunities for local knowledge production. This study confirms that academic staff members in psychology departments are well placed to engage with communities surrounding the university as one of their academic tasks (Brulin, 2001; Greenwood & Levin, 2000). University psychology clinics are ideal sites for community engagement initiatives as they form a readymade interface between the university and its surrounding community. The types of services that university psychology clinics offer (e.g., individual psychotherapy, family therapy, relationship counselling, psychometric assessments, etc.) are likely determined by the assessment and treatment skills that psychology departments want their postgraduate psychology students to develop. If the university psychology clinic is seen as an interface between the university and community rather than as a service only, more aspects of psychology (e.g. community psychology, research psychology, etc.) could be utilised in a collaborative way that could benefit people in the surrounding community and other community stakeholders. In the R@I project we approached the running of a psychology clinic as a task that was not only oriented towards training students and providing a

service to individuals or groups, but also as a *responsibility* of the university towards the local community. This represents a particular focus in attitude or vision, and as such incorporates an additional element to the tasks of teaching or service delivery that are usually referred to in the literature (see for instance, Brulin, 2001; Greenwood & Levin, 2000) and in research in fields concerned with the relationship between universities and communities (such as community psychology).

The community engagement focus is different from contemporary research into university psychology clinics (see for instance Babbage, 2008; Borkovec, 2004; Gonsalvez, Hyde, Lancaster & Barrington, 2008) in which the researchers focus on the operation of the clinic itself rather than the relationship between the university and the surrounding community, with the clinic as an interface between the two. In the context of community psychology, Oosthuizen (2006) defines community as “the evolution of relationships” (p.283), a conceptualisation of community engagement that resonates with our approach. Oosthuizen (2006, p.283) further states that “community psychology is no more a case of ‘visiting communities’ but one of ‘co-creating communities’”. This belief echoes our approach to creating temporary and fluid communities of enquiry around a common purpose, and recalls also Anderson and Goolishian’s (1988) notion of problem-determined systems (see chapter five).

The relevance of the study to psychology

Dick (2004) laments that psychology has largely ignored action research. Some authors (Boyd & Bright, 2007; Brydon-Miller, 1997; Tolman & Brydon-Miller, 1997) have argued that action research is ideally suited for research in psychology. This study makes a contribution to the field of psychology in that it demonstrates the possibility of combining a self-study project with a collaborative action research project. There are clear examples of this combination in the academic fields of education (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006) and nursing (Burgess, 2006).

This study involved an inquiry into my practice as an academic in psychology (my living theory) as well as the improvement of the functioning of a psychology clinic and enhancing the local relevance of our psychology research as a group of psychologists

employed by the University of Pretoria (the collaborative action research project). As such, there were several outcomes at various stages of this study. This study contributed to our sense of belonging during the incorporation of our campus. This sense of belonging not only contributed to our flourishing (Reason & Torbert, 2001) as academics in psychology, but also likely increased our confidence as the R@I group to sell our vision for Itsoseng Clinic and the Mamelodi campus to the senior management of the University of Pretoria, which in turn may have contributed to the continued existence of the clinic on the campus into and likely beyond 2011. Another outcome was the resolution of our concerns regarding the functioning of the clinic. In this way, this study has directly contributed to the practice of psychology and service delivery at Itsoseng Clinic. Babbage (2008) conducted a survey among directors of clinical psychology training and psychology clinic directors in Australia and New Zealand. This author found that the greatest dissatisfaction was expressed in research productivity, and that “a more even balance between clinical service, training and research is desired” (Babbage, 2008, p.257). This study may be of particular relevance to university psychology clinics that are managed by academic staff members who are committed to addressing issues of pressing concern, and who use the psychology clinic as a research site. I envision a further application of this study to directors of psychology programmes who wish to encourage greater community engagement in a way that integrates this function with research and teaching activities.

This study furthermore informs our ability to live our values of social justice as psychologists by mixing our politics and psychology. This is advocated by Brydon-Miller (1997), who states that participatory action research:

demands greater involvement and commitment on our parts to our own communities and to addressing issues of social justice around the world. At the same time, it will allow us to place our skills and training as psychologists in the service of our personal and political values, giving our work new energy and meaning. For those of us with a commitment to addressing social issues in an open and democratic fashion, it will provide a way to integrate our politics and our psychology-to the benefit of both. (p.664)

The R@I project contributed in this respect by allowing us to use our commitment, creativity and psychological skill in service of our values of social justice and social responsibility.

The implications of the study to the concept of transformation

Reason and Torbert (2001) argue that

a transformational science needs to integrate first-, second- and third-person voices 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.” (p.1)

In addition, Tolman and Brydon-Miller (1997, p.598) point out that “transformation is always in some way personal, political, and psychological”. In relation to collaborative action research projects, Bhana (2004) states that “the ultimate goal of a collaborative relationship between researchers and participants is **structured transformation**, and the improvement over a broad front of the lives of those involved” (p.235).

In essence, this study is about transformation: my personal transformation as an academic-psychologist; our collective transformation as members of the R@I project; and the transformation of resources into energising assets. In discussing the relevance of this study to the concept of transformation, I share what I have learnt in my facilitation of the R@I project regarding transformational processes. When personal and collective learning is directed by an open question in the form of “how can I...?” or “how can we...?” (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006), the ground is prepared for a transformational process in which resources related to one’s purpose can be pursued to be discovered or identified; and actions can be taken to utilise these resources as assets in order to answer the stated questions. The question prepares the ground, but in itself is not sufficient. I argue that it is necessary to co-create a particular conversational space which nurtures creativity, experimentation, critical self-reflection and respect for each other’s views and contributions. I believe this conversational space cannot be provided; it can only be co-created by whoever is involved. This co-creation process might not occur by itself and may require a facilitator. Therefore a third element completes the picture, namely, a guardian (research facilitator) who keeps the question a living one, allowing it to evolve

while facilitating the co-creation of a particular conversational space. If the facilitator remains aware and respectfully attends to the collaborators' contributions, this may contribute to the development of a conversational space that allows for transformation to occur. In much the same way that happiness cannot be pursued and only opportunities for joy created, so transformation cannot be assured, although opportunities for transformation can be created and nurtured. Arranging a comfortable, safe space, providing refreshments, and overseeing administrative tasks such as record keeping, scheduling, reminders, and encouraging emails, may help remove barriers to engagement and transformation and communicates the esteem in which you hold your team members. I further argue that opportunities for transformation cannot be instituted by management structures, but only created on the micro level by people committed to transformation. Wood, Morar and Mostert (2007, p.68) contend that "sustainable transformation can only take place at the micro level". I argue that this study contributed directly to the micro level transformation of academic practice in the psychology department on the Mamelodi campus of the University of Pretoria.

The implications of the study for action research methodology

This study conforms to the characteristics of action research as defined by Reason and Bradbury (2001, p.1):

Action research is a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowledge in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes. It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities.

Using this definition, the R@I project involved a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowledge in the pursuit of improving Itsoseng Clinic and our research output (worthwhile to us). In the R@I project we sought to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with each other, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to us, in pursuit of the flourishing of each of us both individually and collectively, and in pursuit of the flourishing of the communities in which we were embedded. This study contributes to the field of

action research by demonstrating within a South African context the practice of action research in psychology and higher education.

With regards to living theory methodology, I experienced significant difficulty in identifying and isolating my educational influence in my own learning and the learning of others in the context of a collaborator team of professional peers. This was further complicated by the co-existence and intertwining of essentially two parallel research projects – a collaborative action research project and a living theory (self-study) project. Linked to this dilemma was my personal value of self-determination and the expression of this value in my experience of *agency*. I furthermore declared a social constructionist ontology. Personal *agency* and *my educational influence* represented concepts that did not fit well with a social constructionist ontology but are very much part of the living theory vernacular (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006; Whitehead & McNiff, 2006). Consequently, in chapter six I introduced the term *reciprocal educational influence* to highlight the reciprocal nature of educational influence in collaborative learning groups, especially ones that are made up of professional peers. In this way this study contributes to the development of the concept of practitioner-researcher’s “educational influence in their own learning, in the learning of others and in the learning of the social formation in which they live and work” (Whitehead, 2008, p.104).

Action researchers often have an emancipatory aim in that one of the purposes of the research is “the flourishing of people, their communities and the larger ecology” (Bradbury-Huang, 2010, p.99). This study further contributes to the body of action research studies with a strong emancipatory aim, in which we as the R@I team strove to flourish in the contexts of higher education transformation in South Africa where we were vulnerable to an incorporating institution that questioned our value. I have learnt that a collaborative action research project (such as the R@I initiative) holds within it the potential not only to transform but also to preserve, guard and further develop that which members collectively value. I envision the value of this aspect of action research in contexts of transition or rejuvenation of existing business or other groupings of people. Our emancipation resided in our ability to collectively resist the invitation or injunction to cease our existence as “Mamelodi campus academics”. Belonging to the R@I group

helped us preserve our identity as academics committed to teaching, research and community engagement with the students and people of Mamelodi. In this way we were temporarily emancipated from the pressure we experienced to lose or denounce our valued unique identity.

Limitations of this research

The first limitation of this research refers to the dual relationships of both my promoters (Gerhard and Terri), who were also R@I team members. This likely had an influence on their supervision and direction in the writing of this manuscript. I experienced both Gerhard and Terri as very mindful that their R@I membership might make them less critical than someone who was not part of the R@I initiative. However, their immersion in the R@I project afforded them an advantage in that they were more able to question my assertions of influence, being participants and co-influencers of the process.

Nevertheless, I consider the relative absence of additional “critical colleagues” (McNiff, Lomax & Whitehead, 2003, p.38) as a limitation. I state this as a *relative* rather than an absolute absence, as some attempts were made to seek feedback. The R@I group presented our vision and values to several critical audiences including University of Pretoria management, Hatfield campus psychology colleagues, UNISA colleagues and at an international conference. In addition, even though it was intertwined with the R@I project, the living theory aspect of this thesis was also separate enough that I believe it allowed my promoters a critical perspective on it.

The second limitation of this research pertains to the length of time it took to complete the several layers of reflections on the content and process of the R@I project and my living theory project. Life did not stand still and I experienced several major life events during the writing of this manuscript (notably, emigrating to New Zealand and two new career directions) as well as the deteriorating health and deeply mourned death of Gerhard, my dear friend, colleague and promoter, over the period 2010 to 2011. As a consequence of the time it took, I developed a living theory of my academic practice after I had already left the typical academic setting of the university to take up employment first as a forensic psychologist (September 2008) and most recently (March 2011) as a clinical psychologist in a community mental health clinic. I therefore had

limited opportunity to apply the fruits of my labour in a purely academic setting following the establishment of my living theory. I acknowledge, however, that my living theory is not necessarily limited to my academic practice and is applicable to my general practice as psychologist, especially in a community mental health setting. As such, at the time of writing, I am facilitating a workgroup at my place of work that shares some characteristics of the R@I project. I work at a community mental health clinic that provides specialist mental health services exclusively to adult Maori people. Most of the staff at this clinic identify themselves as Maori and there is a particular emphasis on providing a mental health service from a Maori worldview and adhering to certain core values that are considered typical of traditional Maori communities. It is probably not coincidental that I find myself working once again with marginalised, disadvantaged people, and in a setting that acknowledges and values indigenous perspectives on psychology. The overarching aim of the workgroup I am facilitating is the alignment of our clinical practice with the core values that distinguish our mental health clinic from other mainstream mental health clinics in South Auckland, New Zealand. In essence we want to improve the functioning and service delivery of this clinic – and so it begins; or rather, so it continues. Even though the context is different in many ways, the process remains the same, being one of establishing a group with committed people, willing to explore and learn as we tackle issues of pressing concern.

Lastly, by virtue of the research design (collaborative action research and living theory action research), this study is limited in the readymade generalisability of the results and will require of practitioners and readers to “extract what is relevant and transferable to their own settings” (Lothian, 2010, p.68). In order to assist with this process, I have taken care to provide detailed and rich descriptions of my practice in the company of others as well as of the unique contexts and social relationships that contributed to the reciprocal influences on our learning. I have also presented my views on the contributions this study makes to the operation of university psychology clinics by academic staff and to action research within the field of psychology.

Considerations for future research

Research initiatives by academic psychologists that explore creative and novel uses of their university psychology clinic could further develop the idea of the clinic as an interface for creative community engagement rather than as a training and service delivery point only. One such initiative that has operated for more than twenty years is the *Agape Healing Community* (Lifschitz & Oosthuizen, 2001; Buchanan, 2008). This project is a joint initiative between the psychology departments of the University of South Africa and the University of Johannesburg that not only offers training opportunities for students, but embraces the principles of community engagement and ownership. However, despite its novel and relevant approach, too few such ventures are reported in the South African literature.

The gap between a newly appointed academic staff member and a publishing academic in a psychology department in South Africa is likely a formidable one for many new recruits. The establishment of peer support research groups that include experienced staff and involve collaborative projects may be beneficial in reducing this gap, as belonging or membership to such a group may facilitate the adoption of a research identity. In this study I regarded the formation of a research identity as a crucial step in improving our individual and collective research output.

Conclusion

Seventeen years into South Africa's democracy the higher education landscape has changed. Historically white universities and historically black universities have merged and technikons have been reinvented as universities of technology. In 2011, South Africa boasts 11 universities, six comprehensive universities and six universities of technology (Council of Higher Education [CHE], retrieved August 13, 2011, from <http://www.che.ac.za/heinsa/overview/>). Seven years after the inception of the R@I project, the Mamelodi campus of the University of Pretoria has also changed. It has not closed down, although the chickens are gone, and so are many of the students. Those who do attend are all enrolled for special programmes and represent many races. Itsoseng Psychology Clinic has not only survived; it has grown and provides work and training for Clinical and Counselling Master's students, five interns, trainee occupational

therapists and student and community volunteers. Art and music therapy classes run every week, and collaborative relationships exist with special education departments, NGOs, research organisations and youth programmes. Three of the original six staff members continue to work there, and although the conflict with the main campus has largely abated, they still identify themselves as 'other': "The Mamelodi Three" (personal communication, L. Blokland, August 13, 2011). One of the younger and previously unpublished R@I researchers (Ilse) has also gone on to publish articles as a single author, which, significantly, relate to the functioning of psychology in an indigenous setting (see Ruane, 2006; 2008).

This study traced the inception and evolution of the R@I project, a collaborative action research project that attempted to improve our practice of generating locally relevant research in a university psychology clinic. In so doing, it impacted not only on the lives of the participants, but allowed us to start to enact the three tasks of universities and so influence the lives of the student and residential communities to whom we had a responsibility. This thesis provides an exploration of the two research questions that formed the first part of the study, namely, "how can we improve the functioning of Itsoseng Psychology Clinic?" and "how can we increase our research output?"

The second part of the study was a self-study AR project which examined my attempts to improve my academic practice by inquiring into my practice of facilitating the collaborative action research project. This thesis explored my answers to the questions: "how can I facilitate a peer support research initiative?", and "how can I improve my academic practice through facilitating such an initiative?" in the form of my living theory.

My living theory is my evidence that I have gained living and embodied knowledge of how I have improved my academic practice. I presented in this thesis my story of how I understand that this new knowledge has come into being, the nature and content of this knowledge and why this knowledge is valuable to me. The essence of this study remains for me one of transformation. So how did I improve my academic practice? In short, I did this by creating a space for the transformation of resources in myself and others into assets.

EPILOGUE

On the 13th of August 2011, I wrote an email to Linda, Terri and Ilse asking them about the state of the Mamelodi campus and Itsoseng Clinic in 2011. I was hoping that they could provide me with an insider perspective, as I had not been on the Mamelodi Campus since 2008 and was wondering what happened to the students, the clinic, the trees, grass and the chickens. They each responded generously in their emails and gave permission for me to include their responses verbatim.

Emails received from Linda

13 August 2011

Dear Willem

Seven years have passed since you wrote the introduction I read at the beginning of your writing process for this document. I sometimes reflect on the changes and more recently the nature of the event-shape in time-space has been on my mind. Yesterday Rosemare called me to tell me that Kyknet wants to do a programme on the clinic with Kyknet's focus on Afrikaners who are engaging in ground-breaking work. As you can imagine this sent me into a spin of questions around how we got to this perspective of the work done at the clinic. I recalled how we found ourselves back in 2004 as a fringe community seen as radical activists whose opinions held threat to established institutions holding power and authority over the education system at least at tertiary level. Now we are sought out by church groups and vroue federasies (women's leagues) and other mainstream groups who extol our virtues as do-gooders. At least this was my initial cynical feeling. I have since given it more reflection and describe some of these thoughts below.

Since 2004, the radical movement was adequately quelled. We persevered, despaired, resigned, and announced we would close shop and move on - conform. At that stage, clients were barely trickling in. We had no Master's students to provide a service. Support from the University was invisible and un-felt and there was nothing on the horizon. In response to our announcement to close shop was a resolution from the senior executive of the University that they would support us and we should continue. The support which followed came in

the form of students returning to the clinic and some small amount of seed funding provided.

Today we have 14 clinical Master's students and a few counselling Master's students working in the clinic, about five interns of psychometry and trauma counselling, as well as about five volunteers full time and also a squad of Psyche students (student association) highly active in the clinic every day of the week. We see about 90+ sessions a month and we have a waiting list of clients. Art therapy classes run twice a week and music therapy classes run once a week for mostly children who have been traumatised. Volunteers run the art therapy classes while the University's Music Department run the music classes. Occupational Therapy students from the University see our children on the campus. We also refer children to the special education students. We have a volunteer on a fellowship coming from the US to work next year and we have a PhD student from the Netherlands coming in September to run an art therapy research project. We collaborate with Lifeline who has offices in our clinic; the Vaalwater project based in the Waterberg; and the Centre for Creative Leadership for whom we are trying to find funding in order to run a 'leadership without boundaries' programme for youth in Mamelodi. Itsoseng donors have sponsored a trip to Israel for Rosemare to attend a creative arts therapy workshop/conference held at Haifa University.

We are very active. We are well known. We battle for funding. We no longer challenge policies in that we seem to have exited from the political arena. We are looking more alternative in a mainstream kind of way. What remains the same is that the support from the University was confined to the initial seed funding, and a continued tolerance of our activities. The original staff members of the clinic are still the only staff involved. A gift has been Rosemare who is a fiery fighting spirited person carrying passion we once knew. We are going for funding independence by forming an NPO which will remain under the University system.

The trees are tall, the grass lush and green. There is little dust and the chickens were gone when I last looked. The students of the campus are of mixed racial grouping and none are in mainstream programmes - they are all enrolled for special programmes. Programmes we had designed have long since disappeared and I think none of us have any trace of them on our PCs. There is a dusty box somewhere in a storeroom with some left over hard copies. The bitterest battle at present is the fight to get a ramp for our one disabled student so she can get herself out of the parking lot.

Linda

14 August 2011

Hi Willem

Just some clarification and responses to your mail.

The University does not much refer to the clinic. Guests are only told of the clinic or brought to the clinic if one of the 'Mamelodi three' get to get the message in. Then the visit will be an after-thought and no-one else among the staff will accompany the guest. We are hosting a dinner event later this month to raise awareness and celebrate some successes with our donors. Yes, private funding is the only way to go with independent status as far as funding is concerned. We are planning a post graduate creative arts therapy diploma for qualified psychologists and other professionals. This will be in conjunction with Israel University - Haifa.

We still select 7 students at Master's level each year but we now have a two year programme. There are great advantages to this for all and not least for the clinics. It provides us with continuity from year to year as far staff in the clinic is concerned. We also always have a squad of experienced counsellors as well as a new batch of trainees who eagerly lap up what mentorship they can get from the seniors. It gives the seniors status and a sense of progress.

Linda

Email received from Terri

15 August 2011

Hi Willem (and Linda)

Maybe the do-gooder image is inevitable in terms of the position of the campus within The University - a distant colonial outpost.

To illustrate: A public relations officer has recently been appointed to the campus. After my initial (admittedly naive) excitement at the prospect of some assistance with networking in the community, I discovered that her job description entailed using the campus to distribute glossy pamphlets of the main campus activities of the university in the surrounding area, as well as policing the campus for potential deviations from The Corporate Image! I was given a lecture

about The Excellence of the University and given a stack of pamphlets of cultural activities on the main campus (not sure what I was supposed to do with them, invite the clients to buy tickets to the symphony concerts?).

The campus is extremely tidy. It has happened that I have arrived there to find only the clinic staff and an army of cleaners and gardeners on the campus, but the dust and the boom boxes and the voices of the township are still blown in through the concrete fence poles...

Terri

Email received from Ilse

15 August 2011

Dear Willem

I read thru Linda and Terri's email and can't help feeling saddened and on the other hand grateful that the clinic endured.

2011 has brought with it the realisation that to continue is indeed to adapt and change and the clinic's survival has been no different. So yes we are still housed in the same building, on the same campus and staffed (in terms of psych staff) by the same people. BUT the larger landscape has changed, environmentally as well as discursively.

The open veld, a short walk between the campus' official grounds and the community, has given way to large concrete fencing that separates the clinic, and campus, from the community it serves. Manicured gardens, although beautiful, now seem to stand between me and the real-life of the people of Mamelodi because I can enter and leave without ever really leaving an impression. The distance between us and them has again been restored. Then again what more did I expect from a HWU. Perhaps I expected more of myself as I have allowed these perceptual divides to become 'real'. I miss the singing, the vibrance and I miss the chickens!

We work differently than before and I feel our role of activists has given way to strategists of survival and masters of adaptation. As a therapist I know this has been necessary for the clinic and our survival. On another level for me this sadly means we have needed to forsake (or perhaps set aside) the very essence of why we choose to work in Mamelodi in the first place. We are pioneering spirits at heart and we thrive and are energized on the uncertainty and unfamiliarity of the

context and are thrilled that we may, in collaboration with the community, choose how we interact and what we may do in/for the community.

Contrary to the cynics view, we strive forward and I, naively, wait for the day when the powers that be decide to allow a truly African community based and resourced campus, where fences figuratively and literally are broken down. Ahhh sigh!... Perhaps the dominant discourses haven't broken me yet.

In writing this I realise it may read as a step back or that I have not developed to the point where perhaps Linda and Terri are. Not ascribing a judgment for or against this position but possibly my naiveté and idealism that longs for a South Africa that is all I dream it can be. But I digress.

To end, because I could rattle on: I truly believe the power of education lies in respecting the pupil and thus constantly look to my students to see the change they enact while in training and I excitedly imagine the roles they are going to play as psychologists in South Africa. It is both humbling and an honour to be part of that. The landscape of Itsoseng is constantly evolving and we along with it.

Perhaps one day the chickens will return.

Ilse