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Turning adversity into opportunity: A black woman's journey into academia

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Abstract

This article is a contribution to the stories of black women educators working at schools and higher education institutions (HEIs) in South Africa as they have responded to a variety of challenges in their journeys into academia. It is an auto-ethnographic account in which the author has borrowed concepts from sociology to help her analyse her experiences in two educational fields or contexts (ie, a high school and a university) which have contributed to the constitution of a habitus characterised by resilience[1] and assertiveness.[2] In this auto-ethnography the author focuses on the challenges she has faced; how her habitus has informed the choices she has made in response to these challenges; and how, as she has tried to work out what actions to take, she has been able to survive in the sometimes trying circumstances presented by the fields. Her story is in three parts: (i) her experiences as a Zulu First Additional Language (FAL) teacher in a previously white suburban high school at which there were no materials available for teaching Zulu at this level; (ii) her largely positive experiences as a student in the Bachelor of Education (BEd) Honours degree programme which enabled her to respond to some of the challenges of the high school teaching context; and (iii) her experiences as a lecturer at the Wits School of Education (WSoE) with responsibility for teaching (successively) Zulu FAL and Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in Education courses, while also undertaking research in the latter area – experiences in which the support of a mentor played a key role. The author concludes by making explicit the impact of the interactions between her habitus and her experiences in the two fields as she has made choices that have contributed to her on-going development as an academic.

Keywords: habitus, field, options, resilience, assertiveness

INTRODUCTION

> Which choices we choose to make, therefore, depend on the range of options available at that moment (thanks to our current context), the range of options visible to us, and on our disposition (habitus), the embodied experiences of our journey. Our choices will in turn shape our future possibilities, for any choice involves forgoing alternatives and sets us on a particular path that further shapes our understanding of ourselves and of the world (Maton in Grenfell 2008, 52–53).

This quotation comes from a chapter on habitus authored by Maton (in Grenfell 2008). I begin the article with a brief explanation of Bourdieu's (1994) concept of habitus. This is followed by an auto-ethnographic account of the options that became available to me as I faced challenges and made choices in my academic journey as a high school teacher, a postgraduate student and a university lecturer. Auto-ethnography has been defined by Maréchal (2010, 43) as 'a form or method of research that involves self-observation and reflexive investigation in the context of ethnographic field work and writing'. The life story provides the context from which the researcher conducts a study to understand or make meaning of his or her experiences. In their explanation of auto-ethnography, Bochner and Ellis (2006, 111) suggest that it 'depicts people struggling to overcome adversity' while they try to 'figure out what to do, how to live, and the meaning of their struggles'. As they track these events and choices, they are able to make sense of how and what has shaped their existence. The reflections on my academic journey that are the focus of the article are informed by the conceptualisation of habitus on the part Bourdieu and others.

THE CONCEPT OF HABITUS

Bourdieu (1994, 12) defines habitus as a 'set of dispositions which incline agents to act and react in certain ways'. For Maton (in Grenfell 2008, 52), habitus describes 'our ways of acting, feeling, thinking and being'. Our habitus 'orients our ways of constructing objects of study, highlighting issues of significance and providing a means of thinking relationally about those issues' (2008, 50). A key relationship is between what Bourdieu describes as the field (the context) and habitus (the dispositions). In simple terms, the relationship is between the individual and the context in which he or she finds himself or herself. Bourdieu (1994, 14) emphasises that particular practices or perceptions should be seen not as the product of the habitus as such, but as the product of the relation between the habitus, on the one hand, and the specific social contexts or 'fields' within which individuals act, on the other. Hardy (in Grenfell 2008, 131) emphasises this point by saying that 'habitus and field have change as a necessary consequence of their condition – a change in one necessitates a change in the other'. In fact, as the field changes, habitus is modified based on the options available and as that modification happens, the individual is shaped in a particular manner that either promotes development or is destructive to self.

In the auto-ethnographic account that follows, I narrate a number of changes in the fields in which I have worked and studied over time; the options available to me with regard to each change; and my responses to them. I use this account to argue that the experiences I have had in the two fields have contributed to the modifications to my habitus that have, for the most part, been fruitful for my professional development.

FAILURE AS A TEACHER OF ZULU SECOND LANGUAGE IN A SUBURBAN BOYS' HIGH SCHOOL

I started teaching at an ex-model C school[3] during the time when the curriculum had been standardised for all schools. During the apartheid era, there were separate curricula for each language subject and huge discrepancies between the development of language curricula across English, Afrikaans and African languages. English and Afrikaans were given more attention than African languages, and much literature and learning material had been produced to assist in their teaching, particularly as second languages.[4] Elmore (in Weber 2006, 9) argues that 'structural changes to education systems are too often developed out of context and without an understanding of what is needed to start the process of change and to ensure that it succeeds'. In the case of the development of language curricula for South African schools, standardisation meant the translation of English learning outcomes and content for African languages without any consideration of how teachers were going to be prepared and particularly without consideration of the teaching and learning materials that would be required. This was not a well-considered move, as teachers of African languages were expected to teach learners a language that these young people did not speak in their homes, and to do so without learning materials. As a result teachers were forced to use first language materials which learners could only use in class as they needed an interpreter to read and understand them. This presented the African languages as very difficult to learn and for that reason few learners in ex-model C schools chose to study them. What made matters worse was the introduction of Outcomes Based Education (OBE) that advocated 'loose and flexible guidelines on outcomes and assessments' (Weber 2006, 52). Teaching Zulu as an additional language became the most challenging part of my teaching career. My previous experiences of teaching Zulu to learners who were already confident speakers of the language did not prepare me for this challenge. I did not know what strategies to use to teach a language to 'non-speakers' so that they would learn it well enough to be able to communicate as required by the curriculum.

The curriculum changes also meant that learners who would previously have taken Zulu as a Second Additional Language (SAL) (taught and written in English), at the school to which I was appointed, now had no choice but to study it at First Additional Language (FAL) level. I joined this school when the Further Education and Training (FET) Phase (grades 10–12) learners were learning Zulu as an FAL for the first time. This meant that learners were expected to learn Zulu through the medium of Zulu. The communicative approach was the option advocated in the curriculum documents and yet without materials, this was impracticable.

This language teaching situation threatened my credibility as subject departmental head for Zulu especially given the fact that I had no materials to use and offer to learners so they could extend their classroom experience with the new language. I had no guidance to give to my colleagues on how we were going to help close the gap between the prescribed learning outcomes and the level these learners were at. Expecting learners to remember all the translations and apply them was

really too much to ask. In the end both the teachers and the learners were frustrated. Rothery (1972, 63) asserts that 'frustration is a process that results in either success or failure'. He adds: 'It results when courses of action or aspirations are blocked.' My aspiration of helping learners of a new language (Zulu) was blocked for the abovementioned reasons. The learners' aspirations of understanding and passing the subject were also blocked. The consequence of the learners' frustration led to some, justifiably, dropping Zulu and moving to Afrikaans as the teaching there was 'better', catering for their needs as learners of a new language. I had the choice of either allowing the language to slowly die or looking for alternatives that would shape the future of the subject at the school. I believe the passion I had for my language and the responsibility that came with being the subject head of Zulu contributed to the assertive stance I took and the resilience I displayed in the decision I made. I did not give up.

My first attempt to respond to the learners' needs was to write materials to help bridge the gap between the curriculum expectations and their level of understanding. This move initially looked promising since one of the frustrations our department had was lack of suitable FAL materials. When the use of these new materials did not have the expected results, I consulted the Afrikaans FAL teachers at the school for ideas, but mine was a different problem from theirs. The Afrikaans subject head had developed learning materials for grades 8 to 12 and these were effective in supplementing the lessons, as they were carefully sequenced in terms of level of difficulty. In my case, there were no suitable texts in Zulu except the materials that had been prepared for mother-tongue speakers and mine that were of limited value to learners because I was uncertain of what principles to apply when designing learning materials for beginners in a new language. When I went to district meetings of Zulu FAL teachers, they all complained of the same challenge – the struggle to teach 'non-speakers' and the absence of materials to assist in teaching the language. The materials that some teachers presented were either from FAL or SAL, mostly written by white authors whose mother tongue was not Zulu. If ever I tried to use the latter materials, I realised I still had a gap to close – between that low level and the First Additional Language level where learners were expected to speak the language and write essays in it. It was evident, as my fellow teachers admitted, that the challenge was beyond their capability as they had no capacity to address it as practitioners. For that reason, I failed to get help from what was meant to be my community of practice. We were all (including subject advisers) novices in FAL teaching, with no tools and no expert to guide and lead the way. Lave (in Resnick et al 1991) highlights the importance of having an expert or master and the availability of or access to resources in a community of practice as key elements in such a community. Neither of these was evident in my situation.

Back in the classroom, teaching Zulu FAL continued to be a challenge and poor results in Zulu compared to Afrikaans positioned me as a black woman who was failing to adjust to the 'white' school's learning culture (as some learners and white

parents indicated). I was determined to prove them wrong by doing all I could to improve the learners' Zulu marks.

CHOOSING TO ADDRESS THIS FAILURE

I registered for a Bachelor of Education (BEd) Honours degree with the School of Education at the University of the Witwatersrand (WSoE). The Theory of Education courses offered in this programme confirmed my observation that the challenges I was facing were bigger than the subject I was teaching. The education system, and societal, historical and cultural issues beyond my control, contributed to what was happening in my classes in terms of the behaviour of learners inside and outside the classroom. Much as that was helpful in understanding that both the language curriculum and perceptions learners and parents had of me as a black woman were influenced by the country's history, the primary problem still had to be addressed.

Positive outcomes

The following year at WSoE I was pleased to take a course that addressed teaching and learning of a second language and as a bonus for me, the development of teaching materials. I was the only black South African woman in the class and although that was intimidating for me where participation was concerned, I was determined to continue with it as the course could help me improve my teaching of a second language. In the community and home in which I was brought up, women only spoke when invited to do so' especially at formal gatherings. Much as the course presenters encouraged me to talk, my silence was not strange behaviour for me. I am pleased though that they did not let me enjoy the comfort of silence as I was able to learn more through asking whenever I needed clarity or more information related to my teaching challenge. The lectures were in English and for English teachers, which meant that I needed to always relate the content to my subject. The course coordinator, who was one of the presenters, had a huge impact on my survival in a course I had been warned by black students studying other courses in the BEd Honours programme would be very difficult for me, but in which I was determined to succeed. When I was uncomfortable with making contributions, she and the rest of the course presenters often came up with strategies encouraging me to talk by relating and giving examples in my subject. This made me feel at home. Often I would forget I was a black woman and would just get carried away in the flow of the class's conversation. Each class was such an eye-opener for me that I would immediately and enthusiastically attempt to implement the new knowledge and skills in my lessons at school.

These classes had a huge impact on my life as a second language teacher and as a student studying through a second language. In fact they later contributed to my survival as a student at this institution of higher learning. There seemed to be an assumption that when a student is accepted for a postgraduate degree, he/she

has the ability to cope with the readings, to make sense of the knowledge and to respond to assignments, all of which were done individually. Black students have an additional problem of carrying out all these activities in a language that is not their mother tongue, a language that they may be uncomfortable with and a language that may be a barrier to expressing themselves to their satisfaction. For that reason, their performance is at times adversely affected, making them feel inferior to English mother-tongue speakers. Initially, this was my experience. Much as speaking was a challenge, writing was a greater one as I struggled to express myself in reflections on the lectures. I just did my best. Surprisingly, my lecturers seemed to overlook my grammatical errors and concentrated on the meaning of what I wrote. That was very encouraging for me, not because I was happy with the oversight, but because my lecturers were more interested in what I had to say and less in how correctly I was saying it.

The third challenge was reading literature with understanding. I was given the challenge of reading an ethnographic study of a community's literacy practices and reviewing it as one of the major assignments. This was my first experience of this genre and I struggled to understand the gist of the writing so that reviewing it was a nightmare for me. I eventually did it and with my lecturer's mercy, I was able to pass the assignment the second time. This experience prepared me for writing literature reviews and whenever I have written them since then, I have received positive feedback. Lastly, I benefited from what I learned about reading, and teaching reading to second language learners. The emphasis was on how learners could make sense of a language they did not know well and could come to comprehend and use what they know and understand from a passage or text. I soon realised the importance of adjusting the language of learning in the classroom and gradually increasing its complexity as understandings improved and of supporting the lessons with carefully designed learning materials. This experience contributed to an 'empowered *habitus'* as my ability to be a competent teacher and subject head was enhanced.

I also found my BEd Honours research project very fulfilling because through it I was able to investigate the reasons why other experienced language teachers and I were struggling to teach at second language level. My supervisor played a significant role in helping me engage in critical analysis as I worked on reviewing literature and examining data in ways that developed my capacity to identify key problems and critically deduce possible solutions. The results were beneficial for me and for the learners. There was evidence that my resilience in a challenging learning environment (the BEd Honours courses) had positive outcomes as I could now design effective learning materials, resulting in the improvement of Zulu marks in the school, even at matriculation level. As their marks improved, more learners opted to study Zulu, even those from classes with gifted learners. They knew they could now add to the number of distinctions on their matriculation certificate as it had become feasible to learn the language. I was able to identify weaknesses in the materials I had started developing and now that I was becoming more confident, I was

able to start designing useful materials for grades 8 to 12. Masten (2001, 227) argues: 'Resilience appears to be a common phenomenon that results in most cases from the operation of basic human adaptational systems. If those systems are protected and in good working order, development is robust even in the face of severe adversity...'

Although my choice to remain at the school and to advance my studies (BEd Honours) resulted in some trying experiences for me, there were dividends for my habitus in terms of resilience and assertiveness.

RESPONDING TO NEW OPTIONS

Surviving and eventually thriving with the support of a university mentor

As a high school teacher of Zulu, the choices I made set me on a path of exploring ways of overcoming the challenges I encountered. When I moved to a university post, overcoming the new challenges that I faced would not have been possible without the on-going support of a mentor. This senior white male academic was the lead researcher for a Pan-African ICT in Education project which I was appointed to work on, while also teaching Zulu to student teachers for whom it was a new language.

Choosing to take on new challenges

The first set of challenges related to differences in approach between myself and my colleagues in regard to teaching Zulu as an additional language were: 1.) I wished to use Zulu, not English, to teach the new language; 2.) The student teachers in the Zulu additional language class (all of whom, at that time, were black) were concerned that they would fail the course if it were not taught in English; 3.) I was now faced with the problem of applying the knowledge and skills I had acquired in my studies and teaching experience. However, with the knowledge and experience I had accumulated, I was able to prepare materials in simple Zulu that they could understand and respond to. Giggens (in Blommaert 2005, 10) suggests that actors in subordinate positions 'are often very adept at converting whatever resources they possess into some degree of control over the conditions of reproduction in the system'. With the support of my mentor, and with the capital accumulated from my BEd Honours studies and my experience of teaching Zulu additional language to high school students, I had the courage to contest the established practice. At the end of the year, all the students passed with about a third of the class achieving a mark of over 70 per cent. Although they could not yet speak the new language fluently, they had achieved some level of communicative competence. When I taught this course for a second time, I had the confidence to order two novels prescribed for Grade 8 Zulu home language classes; to use these in conjunction with my own materials; and to include numerous formative assessment tasks in order to guide the student teachers in their developing knowledge of a new language. By the end of the year,

they could speak Zulu fluently enough to engage in a simple conversation and to read independently. Being assertive was rewarding again in this context where a new teaching approach to teaching second language was introduced.

At the end of my third year at the university, I was invited to work full time in the Educational Technology division of the WSoE. I accepted because I hoped that this move would enable me to pursue my interest in researching and acquiring skills in designing on-line materials for teaching Zulu. While this interest became one of the focus areas in my Master in Education (MEd) studies in the field of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in Education, I encountered an obstacle which proved insurmountable. I was discouraged from designing on-line materials in Zulu for the examination task in one of my courses because of the unavailability of a lecturer to support my work and of an appropriately qualified examiner. In my view, indigenous languages will continue to be marginalised at South African universities unless there is greater commitment to supporting teaching and research in these languages.

As an alternative to designing and using on-line materials for Zulu I was asked to participate in designing such materials for a new short course to be offered by the WSoE, namely, the Certificate in ICT in Education for Policy Implementers. This was one of my greatest challenges to date as I was being asked to work in an area in which I had limited knowledge and expertise. I confess that being a black woman, positioned as disadvantaged in terms of opportunities to develop expertise in ICTs, worked to my advantage at times as colleagues in my division, (and especially my mentor), were willing to assist whenever I requested help. After satisfying the examination requirements for the materials design course it was a relief to move on to a research project in which I investigated how teachers in advantaged and disadvantaged schools used ICTs for educational purposes. My main finding was that having a repertoire of pedagogies on which to draw is more important than sophisticated knowledge of technology when it comes to productive use of ICTs, and that became the impetus for my current PhD research.

In the course of my MEd studies I came to realise the potential of new technologies to increase efficiency in both my administrative and teaching roles. Initially, my teaching was in Zulu courses and I decided to offer part of my Zulu Additional Language literature section on Blackboard, the Learning Management System (LMS) used by the university at that time, so that I could give my students an experience of blended learning. My aim was to use the discussion forum to extend their learning experience by giving them an opportunity to respond to questions and to discuss the literature books they were reading. Lave and Wenger (1991) stress the importance of exposing the learner (in this case, myself) to activities or commitments that provide the appropriate contexts that will develop the cognitive processes and conceptual structures required in the learning experience. It was therefore important for me as a prospective teacher trainer and researcher in ICT pedagogical integration to interact, model and participate in a learning environment that I was going to teach about. Lave and Wenger (1991) advise people who are apprentices or new in a field to

gradually connect with communities of knowledge and practice. With the continued guidance of my mentor I was able to attend conferences and later present papers in the field of ICT in education (though these still need to be prepared for publication). I also attended honours lectures in my early years in the field while completing my MEd courses and from these experiences my understanding of ICTs in education was enhanced. The papers we wrote and presented at these courses particularly prepared me for understanding and developing arguments for effective ICT pedagogical integration. Facilitating the online course exposed me to the area of ICT in education policies and their implementation. After all this experience and exposure, I am now able to supervise honours and master's students' research projects in this field. My PhD is in the field of ICT in education where I have started analysing data and I am finding the experience enriching as it is deepening my understandings. I have also taught a BEd Honours course on online teaching and learning and am currently teaching one on developing materials online.

Lave and Wenger (1991, 29) encourage the 'whole' person participating in the field as the 'person's intentions to learn are engaged and the meaning of learning is configured through the process of becoming a full participant in a socio cultural practice'. This last new challenge has been a particularly difficult one as I have become aware that some colleagues have reservations about my ability to teach a new course on my own. It is hard not to see these reservations as at least partly racist and probably sexist, particularly when some white colleagues express doubt that I can teach a new course and yet they take opportunities to teach new courses on their own. However, to return to a statement made at the beginning of this section, my mentor is a white male who has generously played the role described by Kram (1985, 319–320), though Kram is writing about a corporate environment:

> we should not lose sight of the fact that mentoring provides other important needs for the protégé besides helping him / her to climb the corporate ladder. Indeed, elsewhere it has been shown to enhance an individual's sense of well-being in the organization, provide a source of friendship, develop the protégé's sense of competence and professional identity as well as help the individual to mature personally.

I would like to give credit to my mentor's insightfulness whenever I have been presented with a challenge and have needed his advice. His attitude of trusting me with challenging roles at this institution has afforded me opportunities that I believe are responsible for my development of knowledge and skills that are critical for operating in this environment. Like my BEd Honours lecturers, he has unreservedly accommodated my distinct dispositions (as having nothing to do with my colour or gender) and has helped me to move forward in my career as a fledgling academic.

CONCLUSION

I conclude by reflecting on the impact of the interactions between my habitus and the experiences I have had in two fields (school and university) for my on-going

development as an academic. It is evident from the above account that resilience and assertiveness, as 'aspects' of my habitus have played a considerable role in enabling me to become 'active within a wide variety of theatres of social action' (Bourdieu 1993, 87). The choices that people make seem to form a pattern, over time, that is consistent with a particular habitus. In my case, by being assertive rather than accepting or compliant as I have advanced towards full participation in the new field of ICT in education, I have found ways of addressing a range of pedagogic and other challenges. My resilience of spirit, together with the support of some of the lecturers I encountered in my post-graduate studies and of my mentor, have kept me going even in fields in which, as a novice, I have felt challenged. Maton (in Grenfell 2008, 51) argues that the habitus 'does not act alone' but acts in an 'unconscious relationship' (Bourdieu 1993, 76) 'between a habitus and a field'. It is this unconsciousness that I have attempted to examine in this auto-ethnography and as I have done so, what has emerged is that choice making and its consequences are likely to benefit from the presence of a mentor or mentors. In my case mentors contributed significantly by helping me to look beyond being a 'black woman' – facing challenging circumstances due to my colour and gender – to being a person with the potential to function effectively in the situations I find myself in and to become what I wish to become through responding professionally to challenges.

NOTES

1. Resilience – 'a class of phenomena characterized by good outcomes in spite of serious threats to adaptation or development' (Masten 2001, 228).
2. Assertiveness – 'behaviour which enables a person to act in his own best interests, or stand up for himself without undue anxiety, to express his rights without denying the rights of others' (Alberti and Emmons 1974, 165).
3. Model C schools for white learners only until late in the apartheid era when they were 'opened' to learners of all racial categories.
4. Second language – in the South African curriculum a second language learnt in the classroom is referred to as the First Additional Language and the two terms are used interchangeably in the article.

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