

## 'Making a Life': Academics and their Roles in Teaching, Researching and Community Involvement

This is the fourth brief in the Centre for Teaching and Learning or CTL's 'Making a life' series, where we explore the experiences and attitudes of academics at SU, with regard to their roles in teaching, research and what is generally called 'community involvement'. The series was approached as a set of interviews with individual academics which took the form of reflective conversations between a CTL researcher and the individual academic. Academics approached for the interviews were not sampled, but drawn from different departments and different disciplines, and tended to be those who had had some involvement with CTL. At times we have incorporated other texts into the brief, to enrich the sense of the activities academics engage in, in 'making a life'.

In this brief, **Professor Leslie Swartz of the Department of Psychology** is interviewed by Dr Catherine Kell, a researcher commissioned by the CTL.



*"...it's a huge privilege [working as an academic], I feel so lucky and people who work at institutions like ours are lucky, lucky. Yes, I complain but I don't like it when I hear people moaning and complaining and feeling hard done by. I want to say 'Then go and find another job. Where basically you can do what you love to do; come and go just as you please; be exposed to young people all the time; have technology just provided for you! Find another job like that!'"*

*~ photograph courtesy of Christine Fourie ~*

Leslie Swartz is Professor in the Department of Psychology and a clinical psychologist. While teaching, researching and writing across a range of areas in psychology, his special passion is Disability Studies and he is viewed as one of South Africa's foremost scholars in this area. In 2003 he was awarded a B rating by the National Research Foundation. Leslie enjoys teaching at all levels; during 2011 he had 14 doctoral students on the go, taught Masters level modules as well as undergraduate and honours teaching. But at the same time he is deeply involved in the training of disability activists from all over Southern Africa, some of whom have only reached Grade 10 at school. He sees himself as an 'activist' in the area of Disability Studies, is involved in numerous disability initiatives within SA, regionally and internationally, and is constantly contributing to commentary, debate and policy work around disability issues in South Africa. At the same time he is passionate about what it means to establish Disability Studies as a field at university.

The starting point for the discussion was how academics see the relation between the roles they can play in teaching, research and community engagement. As a way into this Leslie explained how he came into his role as an academic:

LS: I got into university work in 1986 when I got my first permanent job as an academic in the Department of Psychology at the University of Cape Town. At that time, in 1986 or so, 'politics' were just so big in South Africa! I was part of the academic mobilization against apartheid, and was involved with alternative mental health organisations, like OASSSA (Organisation for Alternative Social Services in South Africa), which were very prominent. I'd come from a research unit in a psychiatry department, where I'd been fairly unhappy with the research and I had already started writing and publishing, which was quite unusual in those days. Contrary to what's expected now, very few academics in the Psychology Department were publishing. So I was writing about mental health and apartheid. So it was that sort of history, as it was to many of us at that time. I was doing mostly activist writing, thought pieces, opinion pieces, before I started

publishing academic articles. So right from the beginning, writing for a wider public audience (rather than the specialist audience for journal articles) was already very much part of my identity as an academic.

But as much as writing and research have been and continue to be my passion, I have also always loved teaching and I believe that you can't be a good teacher if you are not doing research. I feel this very strongly, unlike some academics who focus almost exclusively on their research or exclusively on teaching. So I see them as quite intertwined, as very, very integrated, and I've always used my own research in my teaching. In fact, I always drag everything I am doing into my teaching. When I first started teaching at Stellenbosch and using my research as part of my teaching, I got feedback that the students were actually intimidated that I was using my own published research as part of my teaching! So I really enjoy doing all of these things - but managing a life is another thing!

CK: Well, we will talk about that, as these interviews are all about teasing out how people manage and what tensions this focus on the three roles can give rise to. So carry on...

LS: At the same time I am also very involved with the Disability Movement generally. This is very, very time-consuming work politically. There are many meetings and it involves a lot of traveling across Southern Africa. At the moment it involves training representatives of Disabled People's Organisations across ten countries in Southern Africa in research skills. This is now registered as a short course at Stellenbosch and our first set of students are just going through! I am also involved in running a series of public debates on disability and citizenship and am often involved in writing pieces for the media, for example, on World Disability Day. A lot of this is hidden work, it takes up lots of time, and it doesn't fit neatly into the three categories of teaching, research and community engagement.

CK: You received a B rating as a researcher in 2003. This means formal recognition for your research publications. Has this made a difference in terms of balancing tensions around the three areas of work?

LS: I suppose the B rating has given me some laurels I can rest on. But a lot of what I do is a range of types of writing. For example, I have just written an op-ed piece for World Disability Day, to try to get something into the media. And I'm now venturing into different kinds of writing, which I'm struggling with, but loving. In 2010 I wrote a memoir, partly about me and my family so it's very personal, but it's also a piece about activism and disability. That is so out of the ball-park in terms of how research is seen. I think it is seen as part of my output; if I were in English studies it would be seen as an output, but now I'm not sure.



- photograph courtesy of Christine Fourie -

The same applied to the book of photography on disability that I did in 2006. We worked with the mother of a disabled child and we wrote the text. I'm very proud of this. We sent it to the University Research Committee and they said 'no, this is a work of art so it must go to the art works committee'. So it's the same thing with my memoir. It's been very important and very destabilizing, in a good way. I spoke about it at the Franschoek festival and someone said afterwards 'where is the novel?' So I don't know quite who I am any more.

CK: So this has given rise to questions about what kind of writing you want to do and therefore about your identity?

LS: I am very interested in writing as an activity and I'm very interested in different forms of dissemination, and this means different forms of writing. The academy has to be engaged. And I think there is a lot of space for alternative forms of disseminating at Stellenbosch, whereas I think it's closed down in a lot of other places, closed down for thinking about different ways of problematising and questioning.

CTL has also had a tremendous impact in the academy, so the whole idea of the scholarship of teaching and learning has been raised. This is so important especially at Stellenbosch which is an immensely complex teaching environment. I've had to learn about this [the scholarship of teaching and learning] and I've had to learn to take it seriously. Working around this and around issues to do with writing is hugely valid, particularly in South Africa and at the institutions which are supposedly research-driven, where students have very diverse language backgrounds.

One of the other issues about teaching here, and this is particular to psychology, is the issue of – 'is it a canon of facts or is it way of looking at things'? We're in a very big transition in the discipline. It's been very much canon-based but the centre of gravity in our department has changed completely. And another major issue affecting one's teaching, at Stellenbosch but also more widely, is the expectation from students that they are going to get a job. Particularly, psychology raises the promise to them of a professional training. Most of them don't get into the professional training. In the old days the Department was very focused on this, you know Verwoerd came from this department. It was all about upliftment of a certain segment of the population, but it obviously can't be that at all anymore. So it's all changing.

CK: Can you talk about what characterizes a good teacher in this context, and what that means for your own teaching practice:

LS: I think I teach by trying to destabilize safely. I show them the curve about the relationship between anxiety and performance, which shows that if you are too comfortable you don't learn, but that if you are too uncomfortable you also don't learn. I do believe in that zone of optimal anxiety. This fits in well with what CTL is doing in raising the idea of the 'Pedagogy of discomfort'.

But often with my teaching what happens is that students find it much too unstructured; they don't know what the curriculum is, and what is expected of them. So every now and then I have a very difficult experience, and then I agonise over it.

But I'm also very enthusiastic, and I just find everything interesting. So I try to make the anxiety safe. I use a lot of humour, I don't like making it sound like a technique, but I just do. I think that at Stellenbosch, and particularly with graduate students, it's very important that students learn to be more playful about ideas. It's very scary for them. SU has been a very authoritarian environment, and the students often come from authoritarian homes.

CK: Can you tell me about any particular curriculum innovations, or approaches and techniques that you use?

LS: Well, psychology students always want to be taken on a tour of the lunatic asylum! They have that idea about mental illness. So I'm trying to challenge that. For example, one of my students had a severe mental disorder. She was extremely bright and she was very respected by the students who didn't know about the disorder. So I surprised them by telling them that I was bringing in someone with a serious disorder who would talk to them about it. And it was this student who they really look up to, together with her psychiatrist. They were so shocked; it just shattered their prejudices! I also bring people and families with serious mental disorders to come to a day-long workshop and I find people who are quite happy to talk about these things. It's not really an innovation but it's trying to get students to think about how they've been socialized.

I use artwork and poetry in my teaching a lot. When I did some teaching on language and mental health care, I used the work of a wonderful, young poet from the Cape Flats called Ronel Kamfer, who uses a lot of code switching, so I've used that to lead into all sorts of language issues to do with mental health, with metaphors and disability.



– photograph courtesy of Melanie Basson –

Then I've also been doing work with Brenda Leibowitz on interdisciplinarity. It's all part of a cross-university course (UWC, SU and UCT) for higher educators on identity and diversity. It's involved some powerful learning for people. When I ask my students at Stellenbosch how many have been to the Waterfront and how many have been to UWC, they've all been to the Waterfront and none to UWC, so, simply there's the very visceral experience for these students of going into classrooms at UWC. And that's all about breaking down stereotypes. Some resist it and find it very hard; but most enjoy it. A recent publication related to this project was called "Apartheid was your past not mine" and it was about the difficulties of 'are we foisting all this stuff on apartheid down their throats'; about the problems of students not wanting to hear. That's been really interesting.

Another area of innovation has been in relation to actual writing skills. Honours students can't actually write! I was encountering these difficulties in my teaching last year, so I got a grant from CTL and we ran a writing skills course for the Honours students on how to put articles together. I can already see the difference it makes, things they don't know about writing. We are still evaluating that and writing it up. The idea for next year is that before they start with their modules they have a week where they focus on actual writing, even technical things, like punctuation and journal format. Our students have been taught that they can only use the passive voice, the third person. I mean this went out of the American Psychological Association in the 1980s, but here it's continued to be unscientific if they don't. Most of my students are not English speaking but they want to write in English so it makes it harder.

CK: So psychology is at the intersection of those tensions? It must be about finding their own voice, which can be very difficult for students who have come from fairly authoritarian backgrounds.

LS: Yes, and where we have so many undergraduates that have learnt by rote. But it's a great adventure and I find most students step up to it. It worries me though that I struggle to give the kind of structure that students want. But then part of me argues that it's wrong to give it anyway. So part of my struggle with teaching some of the coursework is that I don't really think you should be teaching it unless you are a practitioner. To teach practices to people who are not practising is problematic. So then I teach them the sociology of psychotherapy and of psychopathology, but many of them then say 'well, when are we going to learn how to...?' They're wanting simple skills and they're not going to learn 'how to'! So it's difficult. But I do really enjoy the sense of students allowing themselves to feel uncomfortable, the fun and the irreverence.

I recently had to give a talk about different forms of skepticism, and I've become very interested in that now. At university it's so important that you learn to be skeptical about ideas about data and so forth. But in the activist world you are skeptical about people. So I worry that my students in the disability courses, now that they know me and they like me, I can say anything and they'll agree with me.

CK: So how does the skepticism thing get played out then, the need to learn to be skeptical about ideas and about data?

LS: Well, interestingly enough, and this also feeds my teaching, the thing about them is that disabled people do not struggle with thinking that the world is strange like my privileged students do. They've grown up feeling tremendously excluded themselves. So it's completely natural to have to think 'why are things like this, why is the world like this'? Whereas many of the students I teach have not had to do that fundamental questioning and so it feels dangerous to them rather than fun. It's really interesting. One of the star people in the disability training has a Std 8 and he understands research issues better than many of my Honours students.

To make the investment for students, not in how much knowledge they have accumulated, but in the process of discovery what I'll often do with them is show them things that I wrote twenty



years ago. Then I ask them: 'how could I have said that? I don't agree with that anymore!' So then I explain how I did believe that then and I have to say I can look back and say that isn't it wonderful that I can do that it was the best at the time but now I have changed my mind. That's very strange for them to get used to. But it's about playing with ideas and perspectives and change. Now we live in an age when it's OK to do this.

CK: Can you talk about the importance of this quality of skepticism in relation to the university particularly, and in relation to traditions of activism?

LS: I think activism fails when it's taken uncritically into the university. But I also think there's a misunderstanding of what solidarity means. From within these projects from the University it means mealy-mouthing, where everyone has to agree. I think it has to be critical. When it's said that the heart of the university is hope, I really believe that the heart of the university is doubt! So I worry about the potential anti-intellectualism of the hope project. I mean everything I do fits like butter into the Pedagogy of Hope, I am totally involved with disabled people; I'm working on language access to mental health care; I work around interpreting and translating, I'm doing everything they want! But I feel insulted by it intellectually and I worry about it academically because it's only one voice and it's the voice about uplifting whatever. This [single-voicedness] is particularly the case with disability studies. There are very few academics involved with disability studies. And academic studies in the disability area mimics disability studies in general. So it's all about being activist in general, about sort of transplanting the loyalty associated with a certain type of activism into the university. But actually that's not very academic – the academic world is about questioning everyone's ideas, including one's own and those of one's friends.

The development of a social model of disability (which depends on solidarity) has at times helped academics to avoid looking critically and empirically at things. So disability studies can encourage a kind of intellectual narrowness, a very narrow understanding of activism as speaking angrily with one voice. I always say they [people with disabilities] can be angry all on their own, but our job as academics is somewhat different. So the way that students engage with it initially, either they get very excited about the idea of 'working together with' a broader civil society or they are very antagonistic and defensive. What I try and inculcate in them is the sense that we have something particular to offer that may not always be welcome and it isn't always welcome. I disagree with my colleagues in disability studies who believe that we should not be critical of what happens in disability politics – it worries me because it then fits in with quite a shallow project of hope but then you lose what academics are there for.

And in the disability movement at the moment there are certain truisms or orthodoxies that have to be followed. I try to challenge those and get people to question them. But in South Africa, everyone's identities are very fragile at the moment, and people are protecting their own sense of privilege. A lot of students feel besieged and frightened. So the challenge is how do you acknowledge the fear and not be just disparaging of students who are often quite privileged, relative to other people they have very little to be afraid of. You have to respect that and create a space where they can think about themselves in a different way, where they don't feel they are losing themselves. So the issue of identity is huge in South Africa at the moment.

CK: So I suppose it has a lot to do with language in terms of rigidity in writing as well. This must then relate to the question of how you hold that space open in your own writing.

LS: Yes, and then there is also the politics of language in SU as well. Sometimes it can be heart-breaking. For example, very few post-graduate students will write in Afrikaans. They write in English because they want to be part of the international, publishing culture and you can see them struggling and I am saying to them please write in Afrikaans, write in Afrikaans! There's a certain irony to it, but it's hard, it's sore.

CK: But I imagine it could then provide quite an interesting lens for such students on disadvantage/exclusion?

LS: Yes, because I'm interested in language in health services and interpreting I can use these direct experiences of the politics of language in this university to get them to reflect on the politics of language more widely. And my Afrikaans-speaking students can seriously engage with and get much more involved in a genuine way, about what it must be like for Xhosa-speaking patients in

psychiatric care in the Western Cape. When they think about what it must be like for Xhosa-speaking patients my Stellenbosch students just understand that in a way that students at UCT don't understand as easily, where English is just naturalized.

So that makes it quite fascinating here. All the problems around the politics of language at Stellenbosch, which drive me nuts, are counter-balanced by for me by the fact that I love being in a multilingual environment. It's just lovely; it creates spaces for thinking about broader things in South Africa. And I try as hard as I can, when I can to work in Afrikaans.

CK: What would prompt you to improve your teaching? How do incentives work?

LS: Well, in addressing this one has to talk about the ways the university is structured in such a way that you won't privilege teaching. For example, the cycle to get new courses on the books is unbelievably slow and bureaucratic. We wanted to introduce a new curriculum many years ago and by the time we could implement it we can't remember why we wanted to do it! You develop ways to get more clever; you write your course outlines ambiguously. But really it's absolutely fascinating, as this bureaucracy is just part of how conservative institutions maintain themselves in spite of innovation. It's like 'Oh we'd love you to do it but the committee only meets in four years' time.... Yes, you can do whatever you like but ...' So the administration is incredibly inflexible. We really need more flexibility. At UCT if you had an idea for changing the curriculum, you could implement it the next year.

I think things are changing but especially in our faculty which has been dominated by a particular approach to texts, very 'puntjie, puntjie, puntjie' as one of my Afrikaans students described it, very focused on the letter of things. There are people who do exegesis here, people who have made their career by considering just a few lines of text. That's completely acceptable academically but it's not how my world works. Things get sent back, for example, I had a doctoral proposal sent back because the student had put the title in title case instead of upper case and it had to go back to a meeting that would only take place in three months. We're working on it. But that's the negative side, a very powerful administration. And I have been told that people say about me, 'hey, ons het dit nog altyd so gedoen, nou kom hy weer'.

That being said, the fact is that there are incentives for teaching and learning from CTL. There's been a prominence given to it and it's really having effects. When I started working with CTL, people in my department used to say 'no, we don't want to do anything with them', but that's really changed. It's partly the training they do is so good, especially the induction course they do for new academics – I wish I'd had the chance to do that. So there's lots of encouragement. And even in the research area there are now earmarked research funds to encourage cross-disciplinary and cross-institutional projects. I mean I've never had a project that is not cross-disciplinary or cross-institutional, none of my research projects have been pure psychology. But it's great to see that people are also publishing in this field of teaching and learning now, even in the disciplinary areas.

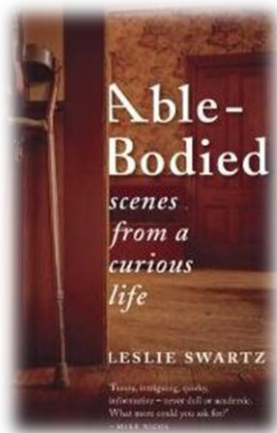
CK: I suppose psychology does lend itself to this - as you say, it is moving from the canon towards ways of seeing.

LS: Yes, one of my colleagues is working with a physicist at UCT on a project to do with teaching students to think scientifically and they are getting papers into really good psychology journals. This is partly because there's encouragement for it. But ultimately what determines whether you become a professor or not is your publications.

CK: Has this loosened up at all for you? Would young academics be able to do what you have been able to do?

LS: Well, you do simply have to publish in good journals, and you do have to churn them out. My rating in publications in good journals is higher than most and that's what has saved me. So a lot is tolerated if you do that.

CK: Is that because you've simply worked so hard or because you've been really clever about it?



LS: I think I've been very lucky. I love writing and it's not hard for me and in fact I don't even get enough opportunities. I absolutely love it and most academics don't. I don't know what I think until I write, so I have to do it. But yes, I do work an insane amount; it is incredibly hard work. And I think it's very hard for young academics. All I can say to them is to allow space for thinking aloud about all of the things you are doing the rest of the time. In terms of mainstream psychology I don't know if I would have got a professorship now. There are people especially in the US who would laugh at the work I do now and say this is not psychology! But I think there is still some space in this country to do interesting stuff.

At the moment I am trying to get a Chair in Disability Studies established so that's part of trying to get the discipline established here in South Africa. And we are making progress on it. Overseas it's a very strong discipline, much closer to cultural studies and almost literary, as well as in a sort of activist tradition. Here it is such an important area but the discipline is so weak. So if I can get a decent, proper, serious academic here at Stellenbosch, I will feel I have done something really worthwhile.

It worries me when people are not aware of the incredible privileges working here. There are things I have to do but I spend a lot of time doing what I like, sure, it happens to be in line with what the university wants, but I'm able to do exactly what I like.

CK: But you have also been clever to make it that way, you've worked very hard to craft that space for yourself?

LS: Yes, sure I pay my dues, I'm raising a lot of money, big research grants, I do all those things but it's a huge privilege, I feel so lucky and people who work at institutions like ours are lucky, lucky. Yes, I complain but I don't like it when I hear people moaning and complaining and feeling hard done by. Then go and find another job. Where basically you can do what you love to do; come and go just as you please; be exposed to young people all the time; have technology just provided for you! Find another job like that!

CK: Thanks Leslie, for a wonderful discussion!