'Making a life': Academics and their roles in teaching, research and community involvement

This is the first brief in the Centre for Teaching and Learning or CTL's 'Making a life' series, where we explore the attitudes and experiences of academics at Stellenbosch University, 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 Aslam Fataar, of the Department of Education Policy Studies**, is interviewed by Dr Catherine Kell, a researcher commissioned by the CTL.

"…[t]he classroom is not a container that can be closed off, and when you've done that, you've generated a frame for your research. …the classroom [can be seen] as an extension of social space and time, and that carries with it educational processes that have their origins in the larger world. So the big challenge is to bring that lens on board for teachers."

Aslam Fataar is currently Professor and Head of the Education Policy Studies Department. He works on the sociology of education, in particular, on policy reform and education in urban space and is an NRF B-rated scientist. The starting point for the discussion was his view on the relation between teaching, research and community involvement. Aslam explained how he became an academic and came to work at Stellenbosch University:

AF: I participated in youth activism in the 1980s and this fundamentally shaped me. I worked with youth organisations, religious organisations, teaching organisations, sports organisations, on the Cape Flats. I was also involved in student activism at UWC and I picked up a type of political literacy, which provided the intellectual context for my BA, and Higher Diploma in Education. I went into teaching and became a teacher with a deeply politicised agenda, but I realized that while you can always conflate politics with education, to be a good teacher, you had to keep a distinctive line between politics and how you ran your class. Being a good teacher was about pedagogy and learning, about getting kids into the curriculum, getting kids to critically engage with what they were doing.

I then did a History Honours Degree at UWC and began to engage with the history canon and how that unfolded vis-a-vis social history, people's history. I read deeply into thinkers and writers in South African history like Peter Delius, Colin Bundy, Martin Legassick, getting a rigorous theoretical grounding. I moved on to a Masters Degree in education and democracy, reading logical philosophy, analytical stuff, as well as writers like Edward Said, Charles Taylor, Amy Gutman and Martha Nussbaum. I was asked to pick up some teaching while I was still doing the Masters. So that opened up lecturing for me and then I got a job on the back of a good masters thesis, a background in radical politics and the ability to articulate these things probably more radically than theoretically!

When we were at UWC there were four or five intellectual traditions. There was the radical Freirean tradition with Shirley Walters, the action research school improvement tradition with Owen van den Bergh, the logical philosophy tradition with Wally Morrow, the political economy tradition with people like Peter Kallaway, and Saleem Badat, which I was into. We were exposed to all these traditions.

> CK: So to bring us this back to the issue of your teaching at SU, can you talk about how this background impacted on your approach?

AF: I knew a bit about the kind of students that education faculties attract. They come with uneven biographical, cognitive and intellectual personas - it's to do with what they are reading, where they were trained, the kinds of professional contexts they are coming from. So with this great conceptual unevenness, we decided that we were going to give these students a great conceptual richness. To do that, we had to get them to read, to recover the traditions we had all picked up along the way. At the Masters level, for example, we started this introductory and preparatory module and ran it through the holidays. We thought about it as giving students a conceptual platform to engage, to read, and then to write analytical summaries. At the risk of channeling them into a particular conceptual mindset, we gave them three or four texts to read because we thought that the texts would get them onto the same page, provide a kind of referential basis for the rest of the course.

So to backtrack to your question: At UWC we had engaged in these four or five traditions and they were contending traditions but they were all there. I was socialized into all of them, but not socialised dogmatically. This was very important because I was shedding the radical political economy tradition, relative to my own understanding as to where the explanatory basis of a sociology of education ought to be. That's a very important move in my own life. By then I had decided to take a more interpretive, subjectivist approach to my own work. I started to do more qualitative analysis and for my PhD I did a sort of detective story of the origins of the OBE curriculum.

But when I had done that, I had also written myself out of that reproductionist analytical stance, because by then I was starting to do more qualitative work, on private schooling, Muslim schools, studies on teachers, and then the big work for me was my work on township schools. I tried to understand the nature of schooling in the townships and my work started to become very, very post-colonial and post-structuralist. I started asking 'what is the nature of the lives people live in the township, in their homes, how do they pull it off, how do they construct it, how do all those processes swing and swirl around and how do they impact and influence schools?' So, when you take that perspective, the next question then is what do schools become in the midst of that social swirl? Instead of seeing policy as coming from outside, policy is emerging from within. I began to adopt a much more sophisticated theoretical lens, basically a social, spatial lens. What I'm trying to say is that now that I've made this shift into theory and theorizing, this shift also impacts on my understanding of how I teach, and how I engage with communities.

It also means that I'm a bit on the outside with all these concerns with school improvement and effectiveness, what is polemically referred to as the 'school fixit' agenda. I don't believe in those kinds of analytical framings. I want to say 'your understanding of school improvement is wrong, it's politically tangential', but I can't say that because that's where the normative debates are moving. I want to say you can't collapse a policy priority into an analytical priority. But I'm also saying you can't deny these levels of policy/practice, policy/analysis. I've developed a sort of a four layered understanding of how the world works in education: there's the normative, then there is the ideological level, then the policy imperative, I do believe in the imperative to reform schools for improved quality education, but there's also the analytical challenge as a fourth layer. How do you bring policy imperatives or normative commitments out analytically? So I'm pleasing no one but I have to be true to my own intellectual processing in order to establish and sustain my scholarly agenda.

CK: So can you talk about how you connect with the idea of community interaction then, given this theoretical shift you made?

AF: The kind of connections I make and the public intellectual role - well, I do it almost every week or once every two weeks. I just gave a keynote address to SADTU; I spoke at the launch of a library, I was instrumental in getting this set up for a school in my home township of Parkwood. Now I'm involved in getting the design drawn up for a ballet room in this school, which we'll be looking for money from sponsors for. I used to, when I was more normatively political, in other words when I wanted to change the world politically, I used to do a lot of workshopping at various WCED sites. But now because I've become more critically involved, I've moved into more of an individual approach, where someone will say come and speak to my integration management team about how to read literature to help us do our work and think about what we are doing. And I love that. So it's a more interpretive role, you have something to say but you insert it into a discourse that takes it on in a particular way, and you're none the wiser for how people take it on.

My best project at the moment in this sense is the establishment of a critical reading group in the South Peninsula. We've met thrice, and these educators have certain conceptual questions about their work. We decided to develop a reading programme around these questions. My theoretical point is that we are going to have to read ourselves out of this crisis. We have to read, to engender a different kind of debate. Currently, the mood among educators is a bit anti-reading and the discourse that has settled in the education environment is so school fix-it driven; so narrow; so technicist; so performative. The room to maneouvre is so narrow, that the conceptual imagination of educational practitioners is stunted. Now I'm speaking negatively but the social imaginary of our education workers is so extremely limited. And I think that what developing a readerly culture can do is to try to unlock that. So I don't promise to anyone that I have anything to say about how you can fix your problem, that's not the way we can read ourselves out of it.

CK: OK, I like your concept of a readerly culture. Let's come back and talk about what this means in your teaching.

AF: Since being at Stellenbosch, my mind is in a swirl. I am wondering if it helps rhetorically to label it, by considering the 'affective geography' of my teaching. Why? Because when I stand in front of my undergraduate classes [which can be up to 95% white students] the affective disconnect is so enormous that I begin to feel it on my skin for the first time in my life. It's not racism. But I feel the gap between what I am trying to do in my class and suddenly there is something here that I had thought was not so important. But I find I am almost led by my bodily… my bodily reactions and I have to take that seriously. So what do academics do when this happens to them? We go to the literature to help explaining this. There is something in what Raymond Williams calls "the structure of feeling", how the structure of feeling is part of the psychic make up, how this is constructed, how it shifts and turns. And this alerts me to the famous book about the bus in the United States, after desegregation. The Jim Crow system of segregation was now gone, so the context was completely changed. And suddenly the bus is desegregated! But the structure of feeling is now completely thrown out and confused, so that no one can speak. Because you are not used to it, no one can speak.

So I was completely thrown [by being in front of these classes]. How do I teach? How do I organise my courses? How do I engage with language issues? I can speak Afrikaans but some of my students told me I should perhaps not speak Afrikaans because of my inability to speak it properly! These are the kinds of things that students tell you.

CK: Do you mean they were telling you not to speak it because you were not speaking the standard?

AF: Yes, they were referring to standard Afrikaans, my use of anglicisations and so on! So what do you do? You have a responsibility to these kids. Many of them are Afrikaners, they are not the English urban/suburban types that my kids bring home from school; they come from a reference field that I have no idea about. So I keep thinking of my original Marxist orientation to teaching and learning, to teach the students the best social theory you can, the best on social equality, social justice and so on - if you want to be a good teacher give them an induction into the best possible theorisations of that.

CK: So how did this work out in the classroom?

AF: in my first year I floundered, I floundered. I tried to tell them this is how you understand the world, this is how theorists like Bourdieu and Bernstein theorise the kinds of things we are experiencing. Come the student evaluations – they are not crass - but students have a way of telling you "this made no sense". It was not that they don't want to hear what you are saying, it was more about "we've got other pre-occupations in life, what the hell are you doing teaching us these things? This means nothing to us; it's just too weird". It's not only about differently raced kids not being able to hear what one's trying to get across. They just said "you are talking about stuff that just doesn't touch sides with us". I got that feeling from reading the evaluations.

So you speak to people. They tell you that Stellenbosch has a deep institutional history that has to be accounted for when trying out pedagogical innovation. I came to understand that successful teaching at SU at present tends to be a rote type of teaching, when teachers give students a textbook and test the students on the textbook. Nothing is 'troubled', from the perspective of either the knowledge or having to understand that you have a different someone standing in front of you, a person who is differently classed, differently raced. We try to teach them these theories, but they're just not interested. So there's the basic dissonance - you feel it on your body for the first time in your life, the affective gap between oneself as lecturer with a particular pedagogical orientation on the one hand, and the students with their disaffections on the other.

The tradition of non-racialism during the struggle years made you think that racism is for other people and that "we are non-racial". Obviously, we know that's not entirely true, but what was happening in the class came out as a pedagogical problem. The problem is that actually my 'colour' matters! But I also didn't want to succumb to that, because then one would be guilty of a kind of self- essentialisation. But it seemed that that's where the experience drives you, i.e. to respond as productively as you could. So I thought to myself what do I have? I found that my recognized scholarly expertise doesn't mean anything because the woman with the textbook who teaches the same classes, providing pre-packed and 'closed' knowledge forms is regarded as a more effective teacher.

A key question is then, how do you curriculate? You have your research. But your research is different from your curriculating. It's related, but it's a distinct activity depending on one's pedagogical orientations and lecturing objectives. The challenge becomes one of recontextualising one's research into one's lecturing pedagogies. Many people don't do that. They just present the teaching straight from the research. Your research comes out of a particular universe within which you are constructed. It's important to almost bracket that, so that it can work in a classroom. Then you've got to do the teaching and learning. So the curricular moment is tied to the teaching moment, but it's a different moment. These are the three different recontextualising moments. The point about being an academic is that you have to do all three, but you have to get to understand the distinctiveness and relatedness of these three as you are going along.

CK: So you are grappling with deep questions about epistemology. I wonder how that takes shape at Stellenbosch?

AF: Well, I have to bring another point in now. Stellenbosch is somewhat of a performative university, or at least that's how I've been experiencing it. I found that it doesn't really require of you to grapple with these things. Perhaps that's the way I've been imagining things, not necessarily generalizable to anyone else. But, I found that it's outputs-driven and the outputs are subsidy outputs. What really matters is whether you actually produce - and that's articles - a quantity of articles, perhaps not unlike trends at universities worldwide. Whether you are doing scholarly production, the epistemologies you are working with in relation to research and teaching, the connections you are making with deeper issues – those don't really matter. I found that there is very little discussion about how bodies of scholarship are maintained and connected, how you can develop an argument over time. The dominant issue is how you can you top-slice your scholarship to get through the publishing cycle.

So I took that on. I showed that I could produce a quantity of articles and thereby establish my credibility. In order to be respected, you're a king or a queen if you can publish and the more you

publish the better. But it's abstracted from these epistemological issues. So the articulated and integrated, connected academic at SU is, according to my experience, a bit of misnomer, the discourse doesn't allow it. So if you are trying to do it, you take all kinds of strain and the biggest strain is the strain on your time.

But to come back to the teaching: let me take one example. I was teaching a 4th year PGCE course called 'Diversity and Inclusivity', one amongst five theory courses they do. I see these students twice a week. Once again the question is: who are the students? Where do they come from? Well, the answer is they come from all over the place. They land up in your class from accountancy, from maths, from sociology, from geography. And that is where the 'gatvol' factor comes in - they don't want to be there! So how do I deal with that? I need these kids to be there, but I'm teaching a course they don't really want to hear about. If less than 50% come to the class I need to find way to get them to be there, but these kids have always taken the gap. So the first thing I had to do, I felt, was to get them into class and I had to use all sorts of strategies, like getting them to sign registers, like checking if they are there at random, if they write tests, that being in class has an impact on the mark they get and so on. I had to engage with my technicist self and be like a police person.

Now once I have them, how do I hold them conceptually in terms of what I am teaching? It's on diversity and inclusivity but of the 200, only ten are non-white, one or two are black African, one or two Muslim, one or two gay, one or two from other countries. These groups are deeply disconnected from each other, so they would come in and they would sit quietly and wouldn't speak a single word.

I realized that the way through to them was to connect affectively, so in addition to English as my preferred medium of instruction, I spoke Afrikaans as well as I could, in the hope of connecting. The challenge was to speak and to develop linguistic flexibility that would cut through these divides. But then I felt I was alienating the black kids when I over-did the Afrikaans. This poor kid came to me and told me it wasn't working for him and he said "I don't expect this from you". Then I had to switch off from too much the Afrikaans again. One therefore gets sucked into this genuflecting, instead of genuinely inclusive pedagogising.

The one thing I thought they would have to get at 4th year level, is theory. I decided from the word go that they are going to read theory, that would allow me to develop a conceptual grammar about human diversity and inclusion. It's such a grammar that lasts, can be applied, built on, etc., not the stories. But the problem was that these students have never been exposed rigorously to theory, at least most of them haven't. So you have to think very carefully about how you engage. It involved lots of trauma and lots of engagement on the part of the students. Students initially hate all the theory. The challenge then is how to teach it convincingly, with experiential or horizontal exemplification, always concentrating on conceptual build-up, carefully, slowly, making sure that one's pedagogical scaffolding is supportive, illuminating and generative.. My coverage is conceptually engaging, although modest. I now have 90% attendance which must mean I've succeeded in providing an engaging and interactive learning platform in my lectures.

CK: Can you give me any examples of how you made this work?

AF: After the first quarter we have a student evaluation form. I said: "No, I don't want to know this at the end of the course, I want to know how we are going, so I can improve this going forward". The evaluations are all quantitative. I wanted more. So I paired up with people at the Teaching and Learning Centre. I told them: "listen you are processing these evaluations pedantically, routinely, handing lecturers reports and statistical profiles". I asked: "How can we deepen this story?" SOL was extremely forthcoming. Melanie Petersen from SOL and I devised a set of qualitative instruments. In both my Masters teaching and in my undergraduate courses they came in and did focus group interviews, along with the normal course evaluations. This was at the end of the first quarter for a full year course. The first questions were normal routine questions, but the big questions went around the students understanding of the conceptual content. How did they take to the teaching? I wanted them to tell me how the class worked with the pedagogies I was engaging with.

With regard to lecturing engagement, there are about 150 students in the lecture, so there's only so much 'dialogicality' that one can accomplish. But I was trying to rupture what is regarded as acceptable lecturing pedagogy, to get students to work in little groups and so on. I wanted to know how they experienced this. The qualitative dimension of the course evaluation, midstream, was very valuable, a very rigorous, critical process and I really learnt a lot from it.   It gave me insight into the students' social learning experiences in the lecture as well as their accessing the conceptual learnings, enabling me to adapt to allow for greater pedagogical responsiveness to their requirements in the areas of pacing, sequencing, exemplification, and more deliberate scaffolding.

CK: What kinds of things did you learn?

AF: I got a keen sense of how they access their learning. Some of the key issues were about linguistic awareness, the pace of the class, how at times the class broke down because we weren't able to take cognizance of where everyone was, how some of the readings weren't useful, who felt excluded from tangential debates that emerged from time to time. I even became aware how my humour (rugby jokes, for example) excluded woman students and the African males. In other words, I developed a keen sense of who they are and how they access learning, as well as how one can disrupt that but also build on it.

At SU, it is not easy to build up a relationship with students. At my previous place of employment, we got ten students when it came to teaching practice. So you go and observe them teaching and you've taught them. So this becomes a kind of dialogical space; they come back after the practice teaching, and you sort of debrief. You sit around and eat slap chips and drink coffee. And you establish a relationship with them. At SU you do teaching practice but you don't engage with the students. Everything is clinically organized. You have to observe them on the pracs, but you tear your hair out because you have no relationship with those students.

Now what I'm interested in is how these students are positioned by their backgrounds, their university experiences and so on, to become the teachers they become in schools. With students in my former context, the debriefing sessions with me once a week provided a very rich profile of their lives relative to the schools they are teaching in

CK: I see what you mean - the system, which arises out of the culture, can work to close down spaces for dialogicality?

AF: Yes, but I want to make a final point about diversity and inclusivity and the course I teach. I think the big mistake that is made at theoretical level in South Africa at the moment, is that there's a bifurcation between what can be called, using Bernsteinian terms, "knowledge discourses" or "knower discourses". You either do research on identity and knower discourses or you do research on knowledge and knowledge structures. And on the whole, it's also racialised - black people do the research on identity, the knower discourses; and whites do the research on knowledge, on curriculum. This is in part a useful analytical distinction but my scholarship is to work to try to work across it. Otherwise everything becomes so polarized and it feeds right into the broader polarization in South African society. The over-valorisation of identity can get you into a place that is a theoretical nowhere. And in this country, it just gets you into the populist space. So when I teach about diversity and inclusivity I try to avoid the work on "knower discourses", for its own sake. But you have to go through this journey theoretically to make sense of it and you have to do this with the students.

I have a link with a consortium of people internationally who do work on space. Their big argument is that the classroom is not a container that you can close off, and when you've done that, you've generated a frame for your research. They see the classroom as an extension of social space and time, and that carries with it educational processes that have their origins in the larger world. So the big challenge is to bring that lens on board for people studying to become teachers. It involves an anthropological approach, and it means asking how a diversity lens impacts on education? So I've accessed a body of work that understands how, at the micro-ethnographic level, these processes play themselves out. For example, when you've got a kid in your class what are the multiple identity contexts of these kids in relation to the learning processes? How do issues of inclusion and learning relative to social position play out? I try to get students to understand the

complex connections between social and learning identifications as they play out within specific socialities, understood within the spatialities of these processes. The aim is to generate pedagogical reflexivities that are alert to the diverse articulations of learning and pedagogy in particular sites on the one hand, and getting them as practicing teachers to take on appropriate pedagogical approaches that are responsive to these articulations.

I'm working with a very rich body of scholarship that talks about the complex ecologies of learning, and what are called kids' funds of knowledge, basically what that they bring from their backgrounds. These are kids who are engaging with multiple literacies and interacting with new technologies. So then the big point is that if you are going to be a teacher then you can begin to understand how to engage with a much more inclusive class. And that takes us back to the ontology, back to the politics. But you need the theoretical lens to get to that.

> CK: You spoke about how the outputs-driven paradigm constrains the development of a space where academics can work together at an epistemological level to explore the relation between research, 'curriculating' and teaching. What spaces or niches can enable you to work with this constraint?

AF: I think the department is the space of enablement. The structures of the university outside and upwards of the department are spaces that you have to negotiate. Foucault was amazing in his insight that you can't get outside of discourse, but discourse is also enabling. So you've got to insert yourself into those spaces. And what we're doing is we're talking ourselves into them and emblematically establishing ourselves in these negotiating spaces. The talking moments are moments where you've got to challenge them, and repeat yourselves over and over again. When the university says publish, publish, publish, we are saying what is the university as a community? With regard to research, the discourse is publish, publish, publish, but we are saying how do you develop a critical space, a critical community? This untrammeled discourse of outputs needs to be moderated by other discourses. So you just have to say it over and over again. It's a kind of radical pluralist approach, I believe, you're trying to pluralise the space, the discourses. And you open a space and then it closes. But I also know from my theory that the best way of moving discourses forward is to establish practices. So there are a couple of spaces I can mention where I think we are taking the establishment of practices forward.

> CK: Can you outline some of these?

AF: Well, the number one is that we've taken the teaching and learning assessment instrument and we've resolved that we've got to give this life, we've got to get a qualitative dimension to it. The moment people agree to this you have a qualitative conversation and you are able to ask the question: "what is teaching and learning?" It's hard because you say to yourself "the students are going to insult me!" But as thin-skinned as we are, we have to circulate insulting things. So you have to have the trust in the conversation, to bare yourself. And what you are doing is leveraging a conversation. So we've now settled on the fact that our students insult us! So that's off the table now, we're not worried about that any more. We have now constructed in my department, over the past 18 months, a hugely critical, engaging conversation about teaching and learning, lifting the lid a little on this opaque process. We're asking questions about discipline, about multi-disciplinarity, managing classes, conceptualisation in teaching, pedagogy and scaffolding, about assessment strategies.

Another example, more widely in the Faculty, involved developing a small group that broadly has the same conceptual inclinations, trying to leverage a conversation and a support network. We are hoping to expand this community, almost organically. But once again, this raises the question of how conversations of this nature work or potentially deflect us the outputs imperative

Another example of what we are doing is with a government-designed Advanced Certificate in Education on school leadership (principals, heads of departments and so on). We've been doing this for the last three or four years. But the course is deeply regulated by national government. So how do you find progressive agency in this? We feel that having to take it on in this way attacks our educational integrity. So we have engaged in a fundamental conversation about these texts that we are receiving from government, and we've established a platform running alongside our department for what we've called "courageous conversations". This is also about us hearing what

students want to say to us and we factor that in to what we are teaching. What we get is the enormous complexity of their worlds. It's highly unsatisfactory, we are dealing with huge numbers, mixed modes of delivery and so on, but we believe we are adding something to the intellectual weight of what we are doing.

> CK: I think what you've brought to this particular conversation is a focus on the epistemological issues around the relation between research and teaching and learning. At the same time you've surfaced fundamental questions about what a university is, as a community of scholars, in this time of what has been called 'audit cultures'. And you've pointed out a way forward in the pluralizing of discourses approach, and the establishment of new spaces for the nurturing of practices which challenge the dominant discourses. Thanks very much, Aslam.