

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

This is the fifth 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 **Rhoda Malgas, of the Department of Conservation Ecology and Entomology,** is interviewed by Dr Catherine Kell, a researcher commissioned by the CTL.



"The way I see it, there are different currents, working in different directions. The community interaction cannot happen without the teaching and research, because it can't be sustainable without baseline data. Maybe you could do community interaction and research together without the teaching, but I find teaching so helpful in that it cements my thinking and it challenges me to think differently."

Rhoda Malgas is a lecturer in the Department of Conservation Ecology and Entomology. She joined Stellenbosch University in 2009, after working for several years in a non-governmental organization called Indigo Development and Change. She has Masters' degrees in Botany and majored in Archaeology, and Environmental and Geographical Science in her undergraduate studies. The starting point for the discussion was how academics see the relation between the roles they can play in teaching, research and community engagement. Rhoda explained how she came to work as an academic at Stellenbosch University:

RM: Before I came to the university I worked for five years with an NGO that does support work with small-scale farmers in a remote, dry, rural landscape just across the border from the Western Cape. My role was to offer research support to farmers, flowing directly out from my Masters Degree in Botany. Then someone from Stellenbosch University approached me during a conference of the Arid Zone Ecology Forum(AZF) and the Fynbos Forum. I was serving on the committee of AZF at that time, but my contract with the NGO was coming to an end. This person grabbed me in the corridor and said: "I've just heard you talk. Have you got a minute?" I said "I really only have one minute because I'm on my way to the next meeting". So he said "There might be a position at Stellenbosch. Tell me what you do." I said "OK – small scale farmers; natural resource management – these are my passions – these are my interests – I really have to run now!" So I ran.

I applied for the lectureship and got the job. The areas where teaching was needed were the ones in which I had some academic training, but also the ones in which I had NGO experience. So a lot of what I do is 'come at' the work from my NGO experience and then embed it academically. I think it's often done the other way around where it's academics first and then you have to learn some kind of social responsibility on the side. I've been thinking "Maybe that's the difference – to come at it from experience and then apply your mind rather than the other way round."

CK: ... and deepen your knowledge rather than having to then simplify your knowledge in a sense.

RM: Exactly! So some of my teaching is very closely linked to my Masters research which was 'Sustainable harvesting of wild rooibos in the Northern Cape'. I therefore teach a module on sustainable harvesting of terrestrial species which covers the population dynamics of plants and animals. I focus on the concept of sustainability and how that differs from maximum yield with respect to economic, social and political implications. I also teach on Climate Change Adaptation, and on Conservation Management. I have a 3rd year class which covers the history and philosophy of conservation describing how *homo sapiens* engage with their environment, how our values are shaped by the environment and vice versa, and community and government influences on conservation. It becomes more applied when we talk about hydrology, fire and ecotourism. I guess I deal with all the soft issues in the department that stand between environmental and ecological and social systems and how those systems meet each other. My department is in the Agrisciences Faculty which is an important nexus for conservation, agriculture and landscapes.

CK: Sometimes when you come in with an activist background it's harder to view yourself as an academic.

RM: Yes, I don't easily. I'm respected in my department because I bring something that no one else can bring. And sometimes I say I'm an academic, but then I feel it's a bit like saying you are a mother when you are only pregnant – it's not untrue but it's not the complete truth. It's in my consciousness and I think like an academic. Perhaps I would prefer to say first, that I am a writer, and second that I am a musician! I'm also a mother now. For me, academic-ness has to do with how I think. But then you do have to publish and you have to publish in good journals and you have to be strategic.

CK: Can you tell me then about the kind of work you've been doing in terms of community interaction?

RM: Well, I got thrown straight into teaching and in most of the classes there were only white students, 100% white. It's not that I minded that - I'd been at UCT for all of my degrees and I was used to being the only one or being one of a few. But I realized that the Stellenbosch students couldn't relate to the kinds of things I was talking about in class. At first I was upset, but then I thought: "Who are you to be self-righteous? These people haven't had the kinds of exposure that you've had. They have had other experiences." So I saw how a lack of diversity is really a disadvantage to these 'white' kids and I asked myself "How do we diversify the class?" My answer was if the students aren't embedded in the civil society they are learning about, I could bring the civil society to them. It would have to be a diverse group of people that reflect the social makeup of the country and the regions where they are likely to work.

I also decided to get students to draw on examples from their upbringing so I could learn about their backgrounds. Instead of just making it about fynbos and what I know about, I would have an assignment and ask "Is sustainable development possible in the dorp where you come from ". I started seeing the geography in the class and I realized maybe there is more diversity here than I had thought. There isn't racial diversity or ethnic diversity but there's geographic diversity.

CK: What about linguistic diversity?

RM: It's limited, but at least we have 40/50 or 50/50 English Afrikaans. There are some foreign students in the class, as well, so I'd ask the foreign students to cite examples from their countries.

My first year teaching was very difficult. I got bad reports and that was really devastating! Fortunately, in the NGO we did a lot of critical thinking around organizational development so I knew how to receive it and think about it proactively. I distilled the things that were helpful in the feedback and realised I needed to get to know people better. I decided I also didn't want to immerse myself in their culture because I didn't want to be a white student in Stellenbosch. So my answer was to engage them about their personhood. So I'd sit next to them in the Kombi when we went off somewhere to a field trip and ask them something like "I've heard this new word on the campus. What does 'zef' mean exactly? Is it even a word?" So I got to hear that it's from Die Antwoord (a music group). I also tried to watch some Afrikaans TV bits and pieces.

I grew up with Radio Springbok and Radio Suid-Afrika with commentators in Afrikaans. My father is from Mosselbay so he always spoke very good Afrikaans. I was living in Clanwilliam so my Afrikaans was “opgeskerp”. So I felt maybe I’ve got something in my own treasure store that I can scratch out and use here. They also listen to KFM and BoyZone and I thought that was a little closer. So pop culture really helped a lot. One student was a rock player in a band so I was able to talk to him because I’m a musician myself. So we could talk about riffs and chords and how this sounds and that kind of thing.

So with that class I got one step closer to their realities. But then I thought “Ok – so those are their realities. I understand now that they are privileged kids”. But then there are other kinds of trouble. You know a person can get cross with the privilege! I have to walk because I can’t fix my car while their parents buy 4x4s for them. When I was their age I had to walk to varsity and those kinds of things. I’m not going to say it’s ok because it isn’t! I do appreciate my students and I made a decision not to hold it against them that they are privileged and their realities are different. So then I asked myself “isn’t it now my responsibility to introduce them to an alternative that is mine to give?” I put it in a way that is loving and useful and kind and respectful of their position in life. You’ve got to model that for them. And then I thought “How do I get them to think in other people’s shoes if they don’t know the other people?”

CK: So how did you engage this idea in your actual teaching practice?



RM: In my first year teaching I gave them a task of interviewing someone who made use of natural resources from the wild. But their essays were really problematic. Their writing made me feel: “these kids are so non-sensitised!” One girl used words that would not have been very politically correct and I told her so. Then she said “Look, I wrote it like that because that’s what my Grandfather said”. Maybe it was “kaffir” or “hotnot” or something like that. I wrote a little note on the side to say “When you are writing academically it is useful to consider the political context and one needs to be sensitive in South Africa about these realities”. I got an email back days later – no salutation – there was just a “middle” and it was explosive! “How dare you say stuff like this and I

wasn’t being racist ... “ and so on and so forth. I remember exactly when I opened that email I was sitting at our kitchen table in Crawford and I just sat quietly for a while.

Then I said to myself: “Ok, again, let’s see where she is coming from. What is this about? She’s taken offence. Why? Did you say something offensive? I don’t think so! So where’s this coming from?” I tried to unearth it a little bit like that. In that moment I remember thinking “There are two ways to teach my students. There’s what I can say (in the way I responded to the essay, for instance), there’s what you say and comment on, and then there’s what you do.” And I thought: “I need to learn something from this experience. I need her firstly to learn that you do not write an email like this and secondly I need to address the issue itself.” So I wrote back to her asking her to be professional in such communications, and I didn’t press the issue any further.

That was an important lesson for me to know that there are two ways to teach my students – by what I do and what I expose them to and by what I say. Now whatever ‘klappe’ come, that’s how I deal with them, and the same with the compliments. This approach guided my thinking. I decided from then on to be up front with issues of race in the class. I realised that maybe for many of them I’m the first ‘coloured’ person they have an interaction with, in a power relation that is not ‘lower’. That was a big one for me. It saddened me on the one hand but I thought: “that’s a very powerful position to be in, I must make sure to use it to the advantage of the sector so when they see the next ‘coloured’ person it’s not just a poor unemployed individual stealing the fynbos from a landowner”. I even told my parents: “Maybe, for them the only ‘coloured’ and ‘black’ people they know are the ones who work on the farm or in the garden.”

CK: How did the interview task go?

RM: Well, I’d really imagined that they knew how to do that kind of thing. I realized that they didn’t know how to ask questions and that it wasn’t fair to them to expect them to be able to. I changed all of that and with the funding I got from CPR to implement change in the course, I

developed a few objectives. First, to diversify the class by importing diversity, and secondly, to not just import but also to export knowledge. By this, I mean having ‘knowledge exchange’ rather than ‘learning’ - not just learning from the outside or you teaching to the outside – knowledge exchange; the valuation of different kinds of knowledge - for the goal of conservation.

CK: Did you start to think about such ideas in your NGO or did you just develop them once you started teaching?

RM: I first thought of them as a child. My first learning experience about plants was with an uncle of mine who explained to me, while hiking up the mountains in the Overberg, what the different plants were and what they were used for. I knew as a child when a doctor wasn’t available or was too expensive that this is what one would use. I never forgot those lessons in the veld - I always valued them.

CK: I’m thinking about this idea of ‘exporting’ and ‘importing’ knowledge?

RM: Oh, that was from the NGO. We had done what they called C2C (community to community) exchange visits which were funded by the World Bank. I think I took it on so well because it confirmed this valuation of different kinds of knowledge that I had already experienced before. Now there was a name for it and a plan.

CK: But it can be quite difficult bringing that into a university because you’re having to legitimate an existing body of work here that you have to disseminate or pass on to other people?

RM: And you have to straightjacket it so that it’s academic. Fortunately in that course there are lots of case studies. Students go out on field visits. So I asked myself how can we reciprocate? “Let’s bring that same harvester back to come and talk to them in the class and so make it iterative.” That was also something I learned in the NGO context – it was about knowledge exchange. You really remember a person because he becomes a knowledge partner. And that is one of the mission statements of the university – “being a knowledge partner”. So I use that concept to my advantage because the words were there, the thinking was there...

CK: You can use university discourse to legitimate what you are doing?

RM: Precisely! I knew what I wanted to do and there was some money to do it, thanks to the FINLO fund. I always made the importance of legitimizing it explicit to the class. So when they are working in that kind of context in future, for instance, when doing a community based natural resource management project they should consider peoples’ time and transport. I also always give feedback both ways - to say what the students thought of the visit back to the people; and what the people thought of the students back to the students. I then became, I suppose, the intermediary between the two – I had to bring them together.

CK: A sort of mediator?

RM: I also made a point of sensitising the students before they met a land user and sensitizing the land user in the opposite direction (because we have huge power relations here). I made the students think “What does it mean when you arrive in a white bakkie 4x4 hectic Mazda, sunglasses, blond, white, blue-eyed. What are people thinking about you?” You see a poor black harvester in the field “What are you thinking about them?” I told them “These are things that we don’t teach in the university and it’s not in the textbook, but think about your reality. How do you see other people? How does that then translate into a project that you conceptualise with WWF funding and how do you deliver on that project? Then do you see how these values inform how we work?” Maybe making such points takes five or so minutes in a lecture but those are the kinds of things I couldn’t teach my students otherwise. The process is as important as the objective – otherwise how was I going to get them to think like someone else? To get them to step outside of themselves and question their own thinking?

But I still had difficulties. One day a coloured person was telling them about uses of the plants when a group of students were disruptive. I reprimanded them but they carried on. I then found that they may have plagiarised some work. I told them I would have to take appropriate action if they had plagiarized and then denied it. Then they were completely against me – especially these

two students – hot under the collar, hectic, they were like tinder waiting to be ignited. One said: “First of all you are not my mother and second of all you are just defending your people. That’s what you are doing.” Again I had to take a moment and think about what he was saying. I thought: “OK, think about that. Think about how they might be thinking this. You’re just bringing more of your own people in here. Is that what you are doing?”

So I decided to create a blog space for them and made use of another very useful NGO tool - the learning cycle. So now at the end of every week I evaluate what I have done instead of getting a negative report at the end and then sitting with my hands in my hair not sure what happened. So I created the blog and with every field trip I took photos and posted them immediately and invited them to do the same. So it was almost like Facebook but it’s a kind of intermediary platform between a website and facebook.

CK: And more interactive?

RM: They really liked that. If we had a class or practical they’d send me a photo. The next morning I’d put it up in class because we have internet access in our lecture theater. I thought: “This is the other nice thing about being in a well resourced university. You can do stuff!” I would put it up there and comment that this is what happened yesterday then ask: “So how did you think about it?”

Then I decided that I needed to deepen their critical thinking skills. A lot of the students when they start off are so missionistic. They’re going to save the world or they’re going to teach the farmers or they’re going to rescue the harvesters - they are the saviours! A lot of us come with that ethic into the development sector or the NGO sector. But it’s not a helpful way to go about things because it becomes patriarchal and perpetuates certain mores. So I asked myself: “Now how do I get them to think critically about it?” In the end I decided to post four to seven critical and reflective questions every week. This was for me to see where they were at – to locate them in the landscape and then navigate them.

It wasn’t built into the assessment strategy at first. I posted the questions and said if you don’t answer them you lose out. But it didn’t work well. So later I acknowledged that marks are the currency in which they operate. I worked out that they could answer the questions every week and get 2% for whatever they wrote. They could write one-sentence answers but they must answer them all or forfeit the 2%. I also put a time limit on it. I said: “So you can write a long essay or you can write whatever. No punctuation. No grammar. No spelling. I just want to see where you are at.” They really appreciated it. I got badly written things with SMS language but at least I knew where they were at.

There came a point where they would miss the cutoff date because they had gone to the farm and there was no internet access or they had gone somewhere else. They would still send it the Monday and comment “Even if I don’t get the 2% I just want to say this about it.”

CK: That was a big change!

RM: Such a big change! This year we went to Robben Island with the same group of people. I got some emails back to say “We know you didn’t ask for it and we know there’s no 2% for this but we just want to give our feedback about the Robben Island trip. I thought “Wow! They’re engaging in a kind of learning that I really wasn’t out to teach them but they’ve learnt anyway.” That’s powerful!

Their contribution needed to be valued and it was so important to respect what they were saying. One issue came up about religion and I had to handle it very carefully. It came from one coloured student in the class. Obviously, everyone could see what he’d said and I thought “You know people throw a fireball into the sky and then everybody watches to see what’s going to happen.” I needed to respond quickly but in a way that offered leadership. I heard many angry kids before. But the way you respond to anger is very important. It ended up being really helpful.

CK: So do you think the transformation happened through this blog and the constant interaction and evaluation?

RM: I don't know if it was just that. I think it was an approach. I always say to my students before field trips "n Boer sal jou uit 'n bos uit bekyk voor hy met jou werk." But the students are exactly the same! They are scoping you out all the time - just as we're checking them out, they're also checking us out and drawing conclusions. But now I'm mentoring a lot of students, especially coloured and black ones who come to me for help.

I have to now manage my time between the teaching and informal mentoring. I've also been asked to head up a very big project in our faculty which requires leadership - it's a development of the Masters Degree on sustainable agriculture, funded by a European funder. I've never been in that kind of leadership position before so I'm going to have to think very creatively.

At the same time I'm also very aware that I've only published two papers and a book chapter in the last two years. I need to step that up. I need to build my research portfolio but I know this other stuff better and I can call on the other things that are outside my academic life - music and writing; the artistic side of my life. But I do need to embrace this larger research portfolio.

CK: I'd like to go back to the people that you brought into the classroom. Can you give me an example of this?

RM: First, we had a group of harvesters from the Flower Valley Conservation Trust. It's an NGO, situated on the Agulhas Plain that specialises in support to harvesters and land users around sustainable wild harvesting of Fynbos species. I wanted the students to see how people harvest to get the concept behind sustainable harvesting, not only from an ecological point of view but also the social and marketing points of view. So I asked them to please visit us at the university. I knew the manager and he brought four harvesters, two women and two men.

I invited them for lunch first. For all of them it was their first time on a campus. They almost fell on their backs when they learned they were all white students. I told them "Look - the students are younger than you and you know more than they do about this particular thing. You've been doing this for many years. Talk to them about what you know - 'uit die hart uit'."

I had a group of 46 students. I had each of the visitors sit with a group of about 12 students. I had already told the students they have to develop questions to interview these people they were meeting. They said "We don't know them." I said "Yes - that's exactly how it is in the field, is it not? You don't know the people that you meet. You might have one or two conversations with them before but that's it." Afterwards we did a detailed debriefing session with both groups and at then distilled the lessons learnt. I then asked for feedback on the blog.

CK: What was the response like?

RM: First, for the harvesters this was their first time addressing a white audience. They don't feel so knowledgeable but here they could actually say something that somebody else could learn about - that was quite amazing. It was also their first time on a campus - they really want to come back and maybe have their kids on campus one day. I called those pretty successful because this wasn't a development undertaking. I was just trying to do something in a respectful way!

Two weeks later we took the students to Flower Valley. The harvesters had given the students the name of a species they work with, that they would like to know more about or to see visualised in a certain way, or perhaps a species they have heard about but didn't know much about. The students then had to make a poster on it. This involved researching the particular species, the ecology of it, coming up with a sustainable harvesting schedule, gathering literature by doing a literature review and then demonstrating that knowledge in a poster. We set up the flipchart with the posters in a field where people were busy harvesting. The presentations were in Afrikaans and the harvesters could invite people from their families or other harvesters to join us. The students had to give back the information in a way that the harvester could understand and the harvester had to check whether indeed the students had done it like that. We checked on other small things: grammar and spelling. The harvesters had a rubric to judge things like visual presentation; does it make sense; can you learn something from it and so on. We also judged on some other criteria and then the assessments were done.

CK: Do you think the posters did make sense and let the harvesters learn something new?

RM: I certainly think they did and not only that. At the end we had a workshop with all the people we had invited throughout all the modules. Small-scale farmers meeting harvesters and commercial managers meeting conservation people – lots of cross pollination in that regard. One of the groups – the harvester group – had now decided to commercialise one of the species that one of the posters was about, because although they had known of the species before, they hadn't thought it was so valuable. Now having had the information at hand they were able to make it a marketable species within their suite of species that they already had. So the impact was far beyond what we had anticipated or planned.

CK: What was the students' feedback on the whole exercise?

RM: They said things like:

“I didn't think the harvester would be able to explain so much.”

“I didn't expect him to speak so knowledgeably about it. I didn't realise he knew as much as he did”.

“Now today we've got to deal with real people. It's not just some abstract group somewhere in some place. These are real people with real problems and we were part of some real solution”

So there was lots of positive feedback.

CK: You managed to fund all of this from the FINLO grant?

RM: And we still had funds left. It was a very cheap exercise because we were not asking consultants to do this. It was not costing R15 thousand per day. It was costing R80 per day per person because that's the minimum wage these people are generally earning and we also pay for the mileage. The benefits far outweighed the small costs and also went beyond what we had planned for.

CK: So from all this experience what sort of advice would you give to other lecturers based on what you have done and what you have learned?

RM: I don't know if I would give any. Really it's a way of being in the world. It's not a doing because the doing comes after the being.

CK: Becoming an academic and being an academic is a process. In terms of becoming an academic what would you advocate?

RM: I think it's been useful for me to think back to how I've been doing it and then seeing what works – kind of like natural selection – what's going to be the strongest. And always being aware of your purpose I suppose.

It's useful for me to talk to other lecturers, for instance, sharing what worked or didn't work. There's the freshness of the younger colleagues, where we think similarly along some lines, but I really value the wisdom of my older colleagues. I'm always questioning: “Did I do it the best way possible? Did it work in that context?” Always keeping it dynamic. You can't just apply what you do with one class to the next class. It's dynamic because it's always different. I try to live an aware life you know. I was also thinking I should be careful to not be euphemistic because I'm not on a mission here. In an academic context one has to stay an academic.

CK: Exactly! This must a big shift, from a more activist role to an academic role. Can you talk about that a little bit, in relation to your roles in teaching, research and community interaction?

RM: I'm still questioning myself a lot: “You say that but why do you say it?” It's really helpful that I teach at the same time because I don't think I would have liked to be somebody coming from just one of the three spheres (research, teaching or community interaction). The teaching one really helps me to inform the research and the community interaction.

In fact, the way that I see it is that there are different currents, working in different directions. The community interaction cannot happen without the teaching and research, because it can't be sustainable without baseline data. Maybe you could do community interaction and research together without the teaching, but I find teaching so helpful in that it cements my thinking and it challenges me to think differently. "How are they seeing it? What am I teaching them? What is going to be useful to know and to think about in the next ten years when the outcomes of sustainability are crucial?" So I appreciate that there are all these three things together. I feel strongly that the university should incentivise this. At the moment it incentivises research and teaching separately. It sometimes even incentivises community interaction. But I say there are some of us who are working right here in the interaction amongst them.

CK : So it's about not seeing them as so distinct? It's about viewing them all together.

RM: That's right. The reason I argue this is because I see the potential for dysfunction in my students' future practice. This comes from a lack of thinking like a citizen. They're thinking in what they are trained in, in conservation ecology, so they don't consider themselves as a member of their community. I think that's a failing in our discipline as well as a South African issue. This needs to be an integral part of their learning and of our teaching because they are community members – they are citizens. To my mind it's not separate.

So in my future work I would like to concentrate on something that has to do with sustainable harvesting amongst marginal land users. Often when we do research it's on the landowners, but in fact when you've got a population of plants in front of you and you decide to harvest this one, that one, and not that one or this one, then the decision making lies with the marginal guys. The harvester might only get R60 for his labour for the day but he is actually the one deciding how the population is being managed. The farmer has a different decision to make – it's more abstract. So those things get me thinking. I like the philosophy behind it.

But it goes further. I've been thinking about Kader Asmal's revolution in the water sector – about making privately owned water public water. I thought "But that's only one natural resource. Imagine if our fynbos was South African? Imagine if every South African was responsible for all the fynbos in South Africa? That would revolutionise our thinking. What if all our natural assets were all our natural assets?" Elinor Ostrom argues that there are many examples in the world where the commons are very successfully managed. So I ask what if we changed our thinking around what the commons are? I can't tell you how that excites me!

I hope I've shown that for me, any work that I ever do will always involve an interaction between research, community involvement and teaching.

CK: Rhoda, thank you very much! You have certainly provided a very full and rich example of how these areas have come together in your work at Stellenbosch, while also drawing on the background you have of working in communities.