Rethinking teaching and learning in higher education:

Reframing our research priorities

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Where am I coming from?
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SA higher education system

• Participation in HE: 18% of the youth cohort (African 14%, coloured 15%, Indian 46%, white 57%)

• Graduation in regulation time:
  3 year degrees: 29% (37% attrition)
  4 year degrees: 36% (39% attrition)

Research perspectives in HE

• Approaches to learning  
  Marton & Saljo 1976,

• Constructive alignment  
  Biggs 1999

• Approaches to teaching  
  ↔ Approaches to learning  
  Prosser, Ramsden & Trigwell 2003

“The aim of teaching is simple: it is to make student learning possible”.  
(Ramsden 1992:5)
A critical realist reconceptualisation

• What are the real entities we are talking about? And how do they relate?
  – This is the only reason we need theory in social science! To know what we are talking about.
  – Beware of ‘chaotic conceptions’
  – And note that a correlation is not an explanation

• Teaching and Learning as distinct activities
A stratified ontology
Margaret Archer’s morphogenetic theory

- Structural and cultural conditioning
- Social and socio-cultural interaction
- Elaboration or reproduction of structure, culture, agency
Illustrative analysis

- Third year chemical engineering students
- Focus on 10/35 students who entered through extended programme
- Semi-structured interviews on experience of learning
The Prof explained so much that I tend to visualize and it really helps because I can see what he’s talking about... (Mpho)

He explains everything like in detail, compared to Prof XX [who] is more vague you know ... (Sipho)

Any question you ask him, he will answer it so I think that’s very good because some of the lecturers they don’t answer questions ... (Nkosi)
The Prof himself he gets us involved in class. ... I mean I could always study myself, but his methods of teaching, he doesn’t just take everything from the textbook. You need to be involved in the class, you need to concentrate more I mean. If you come to class and don’t concentrate it’s like sort of not coming to class at all. So I try to come to class each time and try to, you know, concentrate. He asks questions, [he says] “Solve this” and then he goes around. This is the type of thing I come to class for. (Tshepo)
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• How can we capture the teaching-learning interaction?
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