Contexts for teaching and the exercise of agency in early career academics: perspectives from realist social theory

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Abstract

Early career academics face a significant challenge when taking up a post as a lecturer, with significantly increased scope for agency in relation to teaching. In this exploratory study, we investigate the interplay between context and agency for three early career academics as they seek to develop their teaching, focusing in particular on development carried out alongside a specific programme of initial professional development. Our analysis is conducted in light of Margaret Archer’s realist social theory, framed as this is by the theoretical paradigm of critical realism. We argue that it is possible to see ways in which Archer’s account of the interplay between structure and agency is evident in the practice of these academics, with the influence of contextual factors mediated by their concerns and reflexive deliberations. We thus open up a range of questions for further research and points of departure for the development of practice.

Introduction

An important transition occurs when early career academics take up a post as a lecturer or established member of the faculty. This typically represents their first opportunity to exercise significant agency in relation to teaching. Prior to such a post, early career academics (if indeed they have taught before at all) engage in teaching on a relatively limited basis as a graduate teaching assistant (Goodlad, 1997) or post-doctoral researcher (Åkerlind, 2005), with the framework for teaching usually established by others. Someone taking on a lecturing role is, however, both expected to employ a wide set of teaching practices as a tutor and to take on significant responsibility for the selection of those practices. Indeed we can expect that the agency of early career academics will play a significant role in the development of their practice given increased autonomy.

Such agency is affected by social and cultural factors. At the same time as taking on greater responsibility, such academics may move to a new institution, often teaching for the first time in the given country or cultural setting (Musselin, 2004). Or the academic may embark upon a programme of initial professional development. In an increasing number of countries, indeed, newly appointed lecturers are required to undertake a programme of initial professional development. Trowler and Cooper (2002) and Fanghanel (2004) furthermore highlight characteristic differences between the teaching environment on such programmes and that present in departments. They identify differences in the teaching practices, the discourses employed and so on. Trowler and Cooper further conclude that such programmes may embody an entire regime for teaching and learning that is incompatible with the regime experienced by participants in their own departmental settings. This may make it
more difficult for participants subsequently to exercise agency in relation to their teaching, as carried out in light of such programmes.

The ways in which early career academics exercise agency has, however, received little attention. And this is despite the growing literature that Archer (2008) identifies on the characteristics of academic roles, work and identities. Becher and Trowler (2001), for instance, addresses the relevance of culture in academic work, Knight (2002) identifies the department as the primary locus for the development of teaching, and Read, Archer and Leathwood (2003) considers the role of power relations. Focusing on teaching, Fanghanel (2007) identifies a range of social and cultural constraints on agency, but without exploring more directly ways in which such agency is actually exercised. Archer (2008) itself focuses on ways in which the professional identity of younger academics is shaped by neoliberalism, albeit acknowledging some scope for resistance. It is clear, however, that such studies reflect a dominant socio-cultural approach in this area of research, with individual agency effectively determined by structural influences. Indeed, there is a similar tendency within social theorising at large to explain human action exclusively in terms of social structure, as with Bourdieu (1998) or Foucault (1970). By contrast, studies in this area rarely consider interplay between personal powers exercised by individuals, and structural and cultural factors; although Clegg offers a notable exception. Her study (2005), for instance, addresses personal development planning and practice predicated on notions of ‘learning outcomes’ offers addresses ways in which the agency of specific actors mediates the impact of structural factors. In this she draws on the realist social theory of Margaret Archer (2000, 2003, 2007) to consider interplay between structure and agency. But scope remains for a wider application of this approach in relation to understanding academic practice, as with its development for early career academics.

In this exploratory study we consider ways in which early career academics on a specific programme of initial professional development for teaching in higher education chose to adapt their teaching in light of practices promoted on the programme, seeking to identify factors that help to account for their choices. The programme in question is the Certificate in Professional Studies in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (CPS) at the University of Liverpool, a research-intensive university in the North of England. The programme involves 600 notional hours of learning at honours level, primarily involving attendance at workshops and completing assessment tasks. The university encourages newly-appointed staff with greater experience of teaching to take a masters-level certificate. The intake for CPS is thus weighted towards those with relatively limited experience of teaching. We now introduce salient elements from Archer’s realist social theory, before looking to explore how early career academics on this programme sought to exercise agency in relation to the development of their teaching.

The basis for the study

Archer’s work is situated within the broader paradigm of critical realism, a paradigm which is increasingly being seen as an alternative to both postmodernism and positivism. Collier (1994) describes how critical realism posits both the existence of social realities (ontological realism) and the provisionality of our knowledge about those social realities (epistemological relativism). Scope for criticality in relation to our conceptions of social structures is thus always present, and it is this notion of criticality, rather than one focused on issues of politics or pre-suppositions (as with Brookfield, 1995), that is employed within the field. A status of reality, meanwhile, is accorded to the social structures that underlie appearances, structures which exist whether or not they are conceptualised. Such an approach, it is argued (Collier, 1994), provides a genuine basis for emancipation.

More specifically, Archer argues that social theory typically downplays how agents use their own personal powers to conceive and pursue courses of action within social and cultural contexts. Such personal powers would include, for instance, intentionality, the capacity to engage in deliberation,
command of a language and so on. She argues that a realist approach to social theory ‘begins by presenting an account of this sense of self, which is prior to, and primitive to, our sociality’ (2000, p7). It is the pursuit of specific projects, driven by concerns held by the individual, that ensure he or she engages with the constraints and enablements deriving from the social and cultural context. These concerns pertain to self worth within the social and cultural context, but also to both physical well-being and performative achievement in the exercise of skilled expertise. Projects may then lead to the establishment of successful practices by the agent. In this way Archer posits a progressive specification of concrete courses of action, as concerns lead to projects and thus practices. This trajectory is driven though inner conversation or reflexive deliberation on oneself and one’s concerns in relation to society (Archer, 2007, p. 3), helping to explain why individuals acts so rather than otherwise within a given context. She thus argues (2003, p135) that the effects of structural and cultural factors are mediated to the agency of individual by a process that entails three main stages:

(i) Structural and cultural properties objectively shape the situations in which agents confront involuntarily, and possess generative powers of constraint and enablement in relation to
(ii) Agents’ own configuration of concerns, as subjectively defined in relation to the three orders of natural reality – nature, practice and society.
(iii) Courses of action are produced through the reflexive deliberations of agents who subjectively determine their practical projects in relation to their objective circumstances.

Archer (2007) further demonstrates the role of contextual continuity or discontinuity in triggering distinctive patterns of reflexive deliberation. She identifies four characteristic modes of reflexivity. Communicative reflexives share their deliberations with others before deciding on a course of action. This mode is seen to be dependent on the presence of stable relationships, and thus on continuity of social context. Autonomous reflexives engage in action primarily on the basis of solitary internal conversations, prioritizing performativity in relation to their practice. Archer identifies ways in which autonomous reflexivity develops as an individual prioritises employment-related concerns in the face of contextual discontinuity; an individual may leave behind familiar relationships on moving locations, and thus become increasingly reliant on solitary deliberation. Meta-reflexives constitute a grouping of individuals whose reflexive deliberations characteristically pay critical attention to social ideals; prioritising such concerns in the face of contextual discontinuity. Finally, fractured reflexives engage in deliberation that intensifies personal distress rather than resulting in purposeful courses of action. Archer regards practice as pivotal in this, with her three stage model offering us a hypothesis broadly to account for courses of action decided upon by early career academics, through which they establish a modus vivendi in relation to their practice.

Archer’s social theory provided the theoretical frame for our data collection. Semi-structured (transcribed) interviews were carried out with three participants on CPS. Table 1 offers baseline characteristics of the interviewees, each of whom had recently undertaken a range of teaching duties. The contrasting disciplines potentially allow us to illustrate different contexts and concerns, rather offering a basis for generalisation. While one of the participants had yet to fully complete the programme, she had still encountered a wide range of new practices within the programme. Our intention, after all, is not to assess the impact of the programme, but rather to explore the agency of these academics in relation to the programme. After initial questions on the overall context for teaching in their department and their experience of the programme, each 40-minute interview focused on practices that had been promoted within the course, with requests for examples that had been adopted or not adopted: ‘Can you give an example of a practice promoted on CPS that you adopted/you did not adopt/you adopted only after adaptation. In each case the reasons for adopting a course of action were also explored.
A thematic analysis involving cross-case comparison was then conducted on the resulting data in light of the Archer’s model, with the categories and associated concepts primarily derived from Archer’s model itself; although it must be noted that, even allowing for this, scope remains for interpretation particularly in relation to the identification of structural and cultural factors. Although here existing literature, as with Fanghanel (2007), has already identified the principal factors involved. The analysis was subsequently cross checked by the interviewees, in order to help ensure that interpretations involved did not contradict their own perspectives. But rather than offer descriptive statistics that detail the frequency with which particular categories were mentioned, we highlight connections between statements made within the interviews and aspects of this model. At this stage our primary analytic frame is to demonstrate the possibility of a connection between interview data and Archer’s model, rather than to rule out alternative ways in which a connection might be made. It is important to be clear about the limitations of this study, which is exploratory in nature. Scope for any wider application of the ideas developed here depends primarily on the theory developed by Archer; and indeed one of the main purposes of this paper is to introduce this theory to readers. We seek to demonstrate that this theory is relevant to understanding the agency of early career academics, offering points of departure for more developed studies.

### Cultural and structural factors shaping the context for the development of teaching

The interviews highlighted a range of social and cultural factors affecting whether the practice of the interviewees. Indeed, we can regard the programme itself as one such structural factor, offering cultural resources that may subsequently be drawn on by the participant to shape their practice. We see this, for instance, with participant AH, who made use of ideas in relation to giving a lecture that had been promoted on the programme: ‘But the most useful thing, actually, was at the beginning in terms of planning lectures, thinking about what you are trying to do in a lecture; and that seemed to me to work across the board.’ As well as providing an introduction to specific teaching practices, two of the participants also mentioned how theoretical understanding developed on the programme shaped their emerging practice (as the literature on conceptions of teaching also demonstrates, as with Kember, 1997), as with participant AH, again, who came to understand the relevance of focusing on student learning:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category of discipline</th>
<th>Participant AH</th>
<th>Participant P</th>
<th>Participant SE</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arts and Humanities</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>3 years as a postgraduate teaching assistant</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Science and Engineering</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of prior teaching experience</th>
<th>None</th>
<th>3 years as a postgraduate teaching assistant</th>
<th>None</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nationality</td>
<td>UK national</td>
<td>Overseas</td>
<td>Overseas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Status on the programme</td>
<td>Recently finished</td>
<td>About to complete</td>
<td>Recently finished</td>
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Table 1: Characteristics of the three early career academics constituting the sample.
And another thing that really stuck, that I thought was great, was the idea that this isn’t about you and what you know; it’s about the student experience, and it’s about what they learn rather than what you teach, kind of, and I thought that was good.

But the programme itself was clearly only one factor amongst many in shaping the way that the interviewees developed their practice.

The interviewees saw their responsibilities as set within a given departmental context. Fanghanel (2007) specifically identifies the department as a crucial filter on the formation of teaching practices, offering scope as it does for a range of collaborations and conflicts that affect the agency of academics. Thus interviewees AH and SE respectively claimed the following:

They sent me someone else’s (module descriptor); and it said that she taught one-hour of lectures and one-hour of tutorials for contact time. So I just followed that in terms of contact hours and things. So I just followed that pattern.

We do lectures where we describe a new theory, we explain new things. We have tutorials, where we have problems, and I do more practical presentations things. We also have labs – labs can be computer based or electronic based.

The participants thus indicated ways in which their practice was shaped by existing approaches in operation within their department, as Knight and Trowler (2001) have also previously seen.

And alongside this, we see the role of the discipline as a further element in shaping practice. In our case, perceptions of disciplinary relevance ruled out certain practices, as in each of the three entries in Table 2. We see here that certain forms of assessment were linked in the mind of participant SE with other subjects, and that professional relevance provides a driver for assessment practice.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant AH</th>
<th>Participant P</th>
<th>Participant SE</th>
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<tr>
<td>We’d looked at all kinds of assessment. It’s not just multiple choice or computer kind of questions and stuff that you would do in science where you would need to know particular facts. That kind of thing wasn’t relevant, had no relevance, for what we do here at all.</td>
<td>Yes, trying to adapt assignments. For instance, I try to set a specific assignment that has the most interesting, the most popular, areas of (…). What are those features of (…) they need to learn for the future? I’m trying to make it relevant and professional.</td>
<td>Objective assessment is not something that applies to (…) at all, because it’s something that is very good for subjects such as scientific subjects or History; where you have notional things. You can ask for notional answers, rather than answers based on reasoning.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Selected interview data relating to the role of disciplinary considerations in shaping practice.

Finally, each interviewee mentioned workload as an influence on their capacity to adopt practices promoted on CPS; with the demands of research an element in this. Participant SE observed: ‘It is from the point of the lecturer quite demanding. You have to keep up to date with the marking.’ And, more directly, participant AH indicated:

And in terms of what they say in the book this is a very good thing to do, because they are all engaging and they all get on board, but this was an extra lot of work for me in the end because I collect them in and summarise the information and send it to the students giving the presentation, and it ended up being a lot of extra work so in that sense although they were very supportive in CPS about this being a great idea and peer evaluation being very important and “These are various websites that you can look at”; it just ended up being too much work for me.
Workload constitutes a particular constraint on the exercise of agency in relation to adopting practices promoted on the programme, with Fanghanel (2007) similarly noting that this factor severely restricts the scope for agency. But at the same time there are ways also ways in which a demanding workload might encourage a participant to adopt practices promoted on the programme, as with participant AH:

I think the reality is now it may be if I had 8 students in a seminar group, I wouldn’t need to do all this stuff; but I had 15 or 16, so I was forced.

We see that practices adopted by the participants are constrained or enabled by a range of factors from the social and cultural context. Educational practice is evidently highly context-specific, taking us beyond considerations stemming from the nature of a discipline and including many of the factors identified by Fanghanel (2007), even from this limited set of interviews. But Archer argues that while such structural factors do objectively shape the situations faced by individuals, agency still needs to be exercised within this situation; and that this does not occur through some invisible process; but rather through the way in which such factors constrain or foster concerns.

Social and cultural factors influencing the concerns of early career academics

It is thus essential to consider ways in which these factors influenced the concerns of the interviewees. As we now argue, the underlying concerns particularly relate to the responsibilities held by these participants, and to their capacity to act as a professional. A similar point holds in relation to workload, with concern evident to perform well across the whole of their role.

The interviewees were each keen to stress the way in which their actual teaching responsibilities shaped their perceptions of the programme’s relevance. And indeed we can already see relevance to actual teaching responsibilities emerging above, in the use of theory to shape the way that they taught or in strategies to use while lecturing. Thus participant SE had embarked on the programme before taking up any teaching responsibilities:

I attended and at that time some of them seemed quite theoretical, but say when I was writing the assignment, ... when I went to change the assessment, then I had to go back to the notes, and I said, “Ah right, so this is what happened”. Again it is one of the problems with thinking “This is too theoretical. I’m not going to use it.” I thought the same. But some of the ways of assessing of coursework or trying to deliver lectures, I guess there were quite a few good methods to use, but when I attended - I hadn’t even started lecturing yet. Why am I going to use that?

The programme was evidently unable to convince this participant that specific teaching methods would be relevant to his practice, in the absence of a specific set of responsibilities that would allow him to actually implement the methods. Furthermore, some forms of practice that were promoted on CPS only became a matter for concern when taking on responsibilities in relation to curriculum design or more senior roles, which might involve helping to shape the practice of others. This was apparent for participant AH: ‘I’m going to be (…) next semester, which is good because you know that could mean opportunities to at least try and encourage a bit more focus on, for example, (…).’

We can also see implicit concerns underlying the readiness to fit into the standard expectations for teaching within the department, as with participant AH in following the usual departmental balance across lectures and tutorials or simply the recognition that this is how we do things in my department. Indeed the interviewees more explicitly indicated ways in which they introduced practices in relation to how both students and colleagues might react. Participant AH further claimed: ‘You can do what you like as long as nobody complains about it’, and interviewee SE was concerned to respond to student feedback:
Sometimes it’s best to call some people into your office and just talk to them and say, what do they think? You ask the best students, the worse students, and those somewhere in between; and I get feedback from them, and I always try to adapt.

The primary underlying concern here is to operate as a professional in relation to both peers and students. But such such concerns need further to be translated into action if the development of teaching is to result.

**Reflexive deliberation and the progressive specification of action**

Archer argues that it is through the progressive specification of action in social contexts that the agency of the individual emerges. It is through reflexive deliberation that the agent prioritises their concerns, and guides the conduct of specific projects. Our challenge now is to draw out ways in which the interviewees were able to deliberate on concerns and projects that relate to developments in their practice.

The reflexive deliberation undertaken by the interviewees was linked most directly to actual experiences of teaching – experiences that are of course closely related to one’s responsibilities. Indeed, the reports of reflexive deliberation provide within the interviews are most obviously characteristic of autonomous reflexives, given that the associated concerns are focused on performance in the practical order (see for instance Archer, 2007, p286). Further investigation would, though, clearly be required before one could categorise each of the interviewees as an autonomous reflexive. Participant P, for instance, identified how her reflexive deliberation was linked to practice:

Well if I see, for an example, unresponsive students, or if I see that I try to teaching something in a certain way and it doesn’t work and students come back and say “I didn’t really get that”. That is something that prompts me into seeing whether I can adopt an alternative strategy. Like you know setting a little work task or working in small groups, rather than working in an open tutorial or something of that sort. Then from there I try to see other strategies. What is there available? What are the alternative things that can be done? And then it’s very much a gut feeling that I feel really. I ask myself, “If I was a student would I be feeling comfortable in addressing this particular issue by following this particular model or using this particular method of learning”, and if the answer is ‘yes’, then I’m more inclined to use it. If in the first place I don’t feel comfortable with it then the chances that I will adopt it will be nil. If I don’t feel comfortable what are the chances for someone who hasn’t done the subject before or anything?

We see here the interviewee engaging in reflexive deliberation that involves imagining, re-living, planning, and deciding on practical action. Four of Archer’s ten forms of reflexive deliberation (2007, p73) are covered within this short quotation. Participant AH displayed a similar deliberation, with an additional role for mulling over:

It’s thinking about being in the situation next time. I don’t do this normally now, but at first I wrote a kind of reflection on what didn’t work in this and what did work, so that next time I could look at that again. So it’s doing it, I suppose, and it’s observing the engagement of the students. I’m thinking about whether this is penetrating. It’s also then about in the seminar what problems did they have in picking up on stuff that was discussed in the lecture.

Little, if any, evidence emerged in the interviews as to adopting practice on the basis of meta-critical perspectives. For the early career academics who were interviewed, it seemed primarily to be the case of dealing with a new set of professional responsibilities, with reflexive deliberation centred around immediate teaching responsibilities.

Deliberation particularly focuses here on new aspects of practice, as one might expect. Archer argues that contextual discontinuity plays an early role in shaping the characteristic mode of reflexive
deliberation adopted by the individual. But here one would expect entry into a new context to heighten the need to engage in reflexive deliberation, because of the importance of establishing a new modus vivendi. We see, for instance, that participant P was more inclined to extend her reflexive deliberations through comparisons between the current context for teaching and earlier contexts:

You see, because I did my Masters degree in (…), and then I did my PhD here, but as an undergraduate I did a degree in (…), where we got oral testing and oral assessment, which you don’t have hear at all, and you’ve got a damn sight more exams. So it’s all different. … So I try not to translate my experience as a postgrad. So I tried to remember what worked for me in that particular framework without getting it too much in the way because it was a postgraduate course, not an undergrad degree course.

Cranton and Carusetta (2002) also note the relevance of changes in context to promoting reflection on practice, although this was perhaps surprisingly not seen as a significant issue more widely in a recent review of associated literature (see Kahn et al, 2008).

While we are unable to trace ways in which different modes of reflexive deliberation result in variation in the exercise of agency, given the limited scope of our study, we have been able to expose how the effects of structure are mediated to the agency of these three early career academics. Indeed, we see that entering a new context directly gives rise to concerns related to their teaching, concerns that were then addressed through reflexive deliberation. Such a focus on reflexive deliberation allows for the place of human subjectivity in shaping agency, as Archer stresses (2007, p. 6). Agency is exercised over time and through experience.

Conclusions

We argue that it is possible to see ways in which Archer’s three stage model of the mediation of structure to agency helps to account for the practice of three early career academics. The objective situation in which these academics found themselves constrains and enables the development of practice, as the literature generally recognises. But their agency is not seen simply to be influenced by social and cultural structures in this way; the concerns that they hold also give shape to their agency, as do the reflexive deliberations in which they engage. Agency unfolds in real time, rather than through some static or detached perspective that avoids recourse to human subjectivity.

It would be of interest further to study the variation that Archer’s model suggests is present when early career academics exercise agency for the development of their teaching, attending to different modes of reflexive deliberation. One could similarly trace more directly how adaptations to practice become progressively concrete. We suggest that such a more comprehensive understanding of the interplay between agency and structure would offer a substantive basis for academic developers to assist early career academics to find a suitable modus vivendi for their academic practice, as they seek to navigate their way through a range of enablements and constraints. Indeed, such understanding may also assist academic developers to carry out their role in supporting institutional change (Gosling, 2001); and potentially also foster emancipation. Indeed the extent to which academic developers might or might not assist academics in developing or enhancing practice, rather than simply impose their own views on others, remains a perennial concern as a recent issue of this journal makes clear (Holmes and Grant, 2007).

It will be valuable also to carry out research on how the context for teaching and the exercise of agency may differ between departmental settings and a programme of professional development for early career academics. There may be different patterns of reflexive deliberation in operation for early career academics and for those running such a programme, with one focused more on performativity in relation to teaching responsibilities and the other taking in critical perspectives on wider issues characteristic of meta-reflexives. A further study into this issue would fill out the fundamental insight
from Fanghanel (2004) that reflection provides a major source of dissonance on programmes of initial professional development for early career academics. The concerns of those responsible for programmes of initial professional development for early career academics and the concerns of the participants on these programmes are unlikely to align of their own accord.

This paper points towards a necessary revindication of the human powers that early career academic exercise in relation to the development of their teaching, offering hope for enthralment in academic life. To construct agency solely in terms of room for manoeuvre against socio-cultural factors represents a reductive approach academic practice. We suggest, rather, that Archer’s approach (as she similarly concludes in 2000, p315) offers a promising way forward to reconcile agency and structure, and subjectivity and objectivity; ensuring that academics are not evaculated of all their personal powers.

References


