2. Making sense of experiences and observations

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Doing research on teaching and learning

In recent years there has been a huge surge of interest in researching teaching and learning in higher education. Journals specialising in this area, such as *Studies in Higher Education* and *Teaching in Higher Education*, have increased the number of issues they produce each year given the number of submissions they receive, and numerous conferences now have the same focus.

Much of the interest in researching teaching and learning has come from disciplinary experts; people teaching in a wide range of subject areas in the universities. As we will discuss in more detail in Chapter Three, academics across the world are under increasing pressure to perform in all areas of academic work. It is no longer sufficient to simply be a good researcher. In the performance management and promotion systems of many contemporary universities, academics need to demonstrate that they are also good teachers and that they can contribute to community engagement, to the administration of workplaces and to the disciplinary communities to which they belong. The need to demonstrate competence in both research and teaching has led many to try to combine these two areas by researching their own practice as teachers.

This book is underpinned by research we have conducted over the last 25 years. As we indicate in Chapter One, one of the biggest pieces of research we have done was commissioned by the South African Council on Higher Education (CHE) and involved an analysis of the impact of the first cycle of quality assurance audits on the universities. In order to do this study, we used a framework developed from philosopher Roy Bhaskar’s (1998, 2000, 2002, 2016) ‘Critical Realism’ and sociologist Margaret Archer’s (1995, 1996, 1998, 2000, 2002) ‘Social Realism’.

The work of Bhaskar and Archer was useful to us for a number of reasons which we will explain below. In this chapter we describe the elements of their work that we drew upon to develop the framework and the way we used it in the research commissioned by the CHE. We do this not only to allow our readers to judge the rigour of the work...
underpinning some of the claims we make, but also to demonstrate to others, who may be accomplished researchers in their own fields but new to research on teaching and learning, how we used the framework itself.

We begin by discussing some of the dilemmas which confront all researchers who seek to explore social life and involve human beings in their research studies.

**The nature of reality**

Many people embarking on a piece of research, particularly those without a background in the social sciences, focus on the distinction made between quantitative and qualitative approaches. As we aim to show, however, in many respects the quantitative/qualitative distinction is not very useful. What we really need to consider as we plan a piece of research is the nature of ‘truth’ or ‘reality’ itself.

The approach to scientific research that has dominated the Western world since the middle of the 18th century is known as ‘empiricism’. Empiricism assumes that the absolute reality or truth of what is being researched exists independently of human thought and existence. The role of researchers is to ‘discover’ or ‘uncover’ this truth or reality and, in order to do this, they need to adopt an objective stance to ensure that they do not ‘contaminate’ or affect what it is they are trying to see and, thus, know. There is no difference between knowledge and reality in this approach. If you have the correct knowledge of a phenomenon, then you have accessed the reality.

Knowing, in empiricism, results from observation and experimentation. A scientist observes and measures very carefully in order to be able to describe. Alternatively, she might design an experiment that tests a hypothesis to find out if it is true or untrue. Research design often involves using statistics – either descriptive statistics that allow us to ‘see’ our data in a different way or inferential statistics which allow us to make generalisations or even predictions beyond the data sample we have analysed. As a result, empiricism research focuses heavily on quantitative approaches.

The alternative to quantitative approaches is often seen to be ‘qualitative research’. Qualitative research often seeks to garner people’s opinions or beliefs in relation to a phenomenon, using questionnaires or interviews, although it can also involve observation in the form of close description. But once the data has been collected, the question ‘What does all this mean?’ arises, as it indeed must do in any piece of research. This is because the data itself simply represents respondents’ perspectives on or experiences of a particular issue or phenomenon. While perspectives, opinions or beliefs represent a certain kind of ‘truth’ at an individual level, problems emerge when attempts are made to extrapolate beyond the personal. As a result, we can end up with a piece of work that represents ‘multiple truths’ or ‘multiple realities’. A researcher then has to work with the multiplicity of observations and reports of experience to arrive at a more overall position to report on.

This process of working with other people’s observations and reports of experience involves the researcher interpreting what has been said or written. Given that what participants say in response to questions posed by the researcher are already the
participants’ own interpretations of a particular phenomenon or situation, the researcher’s claims are then the researcher’s interpretations of the participants’ interpretations – involving what research handbooks call the ‘double hermeneutic’.

When this sort of research is conducted, researchers are often careful to note their own positions and, thus, the potential for their own bias or fallibility as they engage in the ‘double hermeneutic’. In essence, what they are offering is one view of the world, the situation or phenomenon, which could be challenged by other views. Their particular view is offered up to others with an account of the researcher’s own position as a basis for interrogation or challenge. Such research is therefore grounded on the idea that realities are constructed, or brought into being, by individuals. Constructed accounts can acknowledge the influence of society. That is, they acknowledge that we are conditioned to see or experience in certain ways because of the environments in which we have grown up and live. This involves an acceptance of multiple views of reality in a position known as relativism.

Qualitative research does not preclude the use of numerical data. Typically, numbers are used in qualitative research to *describe* a situation rather than to *prove* the case. Numbers often involve the use of descriptive statistics which allow us to ‘see’ the data in new ways. These add depth to the analysis or interpretation by attempting to give an indication of how many people or how many situations it could apply to. Qualitative research conducted in this tradition tends not to be predictive – it describes and analyses what happens in one situation at one time from the researcher’s perspective. Although causes and effects might be identified, the link between cause and effect is not generalised to other situations or other phenomena. The research is offered up to others to judge how it could pertain to the situations and phenomena with which they are working.

As we have indicated, this sort of research, rooted in relativist views of reality, is often contrasted with quantitative research, which typically is based on very different assumptions about reality and how we can come to know it. As we have noted, much quantitative research is conducted within the ‘positivist’ tradition that assumes an external reality independent of human action based on identifiable cause-and-effect laws. In contrast, much qualitative research is conducted from a relativist position that assumes that reality is constructed by individuals. But in many respects, the quantitative/qualitative distinction cited in research handbooks is misleading since the real question that needs to be answered by researchers relates not to the nature of the data or data collection but rather to the view of reality underpinning both the research design and the kinds of claims being made.

The notion of an absolute reality independent of human thought and action is particularly attractive because, as Carspecken (1996) points out, the concept of multiple realities, and particularly the idea of multiple shifting realities espoused by postmodernists, can become ‘ludic’ or ‘playful’. Ultimately it can lead to the question ‘What’s the point of doing research?’ If all researchers do is present one view of the world, which is but one view among many on a reality that is ever-shifting and ephemeral, why bother to do research at all? Obviously, this is an extreme position and, as we have pointed out, researchers often offer up their understandings to others to see if they resonate or ring true in other contexts. Nonetheless, this sort of critique is still interesting and can perplex researchers.
Bhaskar’s Critical Realism allows us to see beyond the limitations of both empiricism, with its assumptions that knowledge and reality can be conflated, and relativism, with its concept of constantly changing, multiple realities. It does this by positing a ‘layered’ or ‘stratified’ reality.

The first layer of this reality is called the Empirical (Bhaskar 2002). The Empirical is the layer of experiences and observations made, as its name suggests, via the senses. Experiences and observations are acknowledged to be multiple – to be made on the basis of our past histories – and, therefore, to be relative. We might all experience a single event in multiple ways. As Elder-Vass (2013) explains, experiences are social products because our experiences are not simply a set of cognitive sense-data; our experiences result from our interpretation of that sense-data through our own socially influenced conceptual framework.

The second layer, the Actual, includes the first layer of the Empirical and also includes events that occur in the world, some of which we may be aware of in the Empirical layer and some of which may go unnoticed. Our experiences and observations of the Empirical layer emerge from the Actual. The layers of the Empirical and the Actual are thus the world we know – the world we experience on a daily basis. Acknowledging the existence of the layers of the Empirical and the Actual allows us to account for the multiplicity of human experience and a world of knowing that is relative – that is, it may be different for different people at different times. However, Bhaskar goes beyond this in his identification of a final layer of reality, termed the Real, which includes all the events of the Actual layer and the experiences of the Empirical layer but also includes mechanisms from which the layers of the Actual and Empirical emerge. These mechanisms are intransitive and relatively unchanging. They are intransitive in that they exist and have power whether we are aware of them or not. Every event at the level of the Actual, and every experience at the level of the Empirical, emerges from an infinitely complex interplay of these mechanisms at the level of the Real.
Amongst other things, the term ‘mechanisms’ can be used to refer to physical phenomena such as a virus or a fungal spore. It can also be used to refer to social structures, such as gender, education, and so on, that regulate access to material resources. The existence of education, for example, is a social structure that can enable or constrain access to material goods in the world.

By using the idea of a virus being a mechanism we can see how the different levels of reality work. A virus may enter a person’s body. The virus is real; it exists whether we know about it or not. The virus has the power to cause certain symptoms. Some viruses have the power to cause coughs and runny noses, for example. The fact that a certain virus has entered a person’s body does not mean that the person will automatically develop symptoms associated with it, however. One person’s immune system (another set of mechanisms) may work to contain the virus, with the result that that particular person experiences no change in her physical or mental sense of being. Another person’s immune system may not be able to contain the power of the virus, however, with the result that certain symptoms emerge. Her nose may begin to run and she may cough. The running nose and the cough can be understood as events which emerge from the interaction of the virus with other mechanisms in the human body. We can thus begin to see how the different layers of reality work.

From this particular example, which focuses on physical phenomena, we can also consider social phenomena. At the level of the Real we could begin to consider social structures like class, gender and race. Because of unjust societal structures, people’s class, gender or race may mean that they have not had access to the nutrition needed to ensure that their immune system functions well or they may be more likely to suffer particular comorbidities. The interaction between society’s construction of class, race and gender and access to nutrition and the development of the immune system and other medical conditions alongside exposure to the virus may well then lead to the emergence of certain events. A person’s nose may begin to run or she might cough. A person from a different social group may never have suffered deprivation with the result that their immune system is functioning well. When the virus enters the body, the immune system blocks it with the result that there is no emergence of symptoms. Another person with other diseases linked to social issues may also contract the virus. When this happens, these other diseases make the impact of the virus worse...
In this greatly simplified example, we have indicated only a few mechanisms at play at the level of the Real and events that emerge at the level of the Actual and have thus dealt with only two of Bhaskar’s layers of reality. We can now add the third layer, that of the Empirical. People experience physical symptoms like a cough or a runny nose in different ways. One person might say ‘Oh, it’s only a cold’, blow their nose and continue working as usual. Another might declare ‘I’m so ill’ and take to her bed, even though the symptoms are the same or very similar. When we try to account for these different experiences of symptoms such as a runny nose or cough, again we might bring the social into play. If a person has been raised in a milieu where enormous attention was paid to physical symptoms and the idea of needing to take care of the body was privileged, then it is possible that the runny nose and cough could be experienced differently to another person who had an upbringing where ailments were shrugged off. We can thus add the additional layer to our representation of these layers of reality.

Key to Bhaskar’s thinking is the notion of emergence. The runny nose emerges (or may not emerge) as a result of the interaction of multiple mechanisms at the level of the Real. The experiences of individuals then emerge as a result of the symptoms in interplay with ideas about physical health, and so on.

Although mechanisms have causal powers, they are not strictly causal. As we have explained in the example above, the fact that the virus enters the body as a mechanism with the causal power to bring about ill-health does not mean that symptoms will always emerge. The emergence or non-emergence of symptoms is related to the interplay and interaction of the virus with multiple other mechanisms. In Critical Realist research, we are therefore looking at the tendency of a mechanism to make something emerge. We will return to this point later.

The interplay of mechanisms at the level of the Real generally cannot be accessed directly using the senses. A scientist might be able to isolate and view a virus using a microscope but the interplay of a person’s immune system or a person’s set of beliefs about bodily health could not be observed directly. The idea that the full spectrum of mechanisms at play at the level of the Real cannot be accessed directly is important in Critical Realist research. A researcher can only work with empirical data, data that can be accessed via the senses, and therefore only at the levels of the Empirical and the Actual. In order to dig down and begin to explore the level of the Real, she has to use a number of tools, most notably those of abduction and retroduction.

Abduction, or abductive reasoning, involves using theory to see empirical data in a different way. Critical Realist researchers Danermark et al. (2002: 96) explain this as involving:
a move from a conception of something to a different, possibly more developed or deeper conception of it. This happens through our placing and interpreting the original ideas about the phenomenon in the frame of a new set of ideas.

In order to abduct, we therefore need to draw on explanatory theory. In the example above, we could draw on social or economic theories to try to explain the effects of social injustices related to poverty on the emergence of symptoms associated with a virus.

Retroduction involves moving from empirical data, from, for example, a description of experiences provided by a student, to positing the conditions which could have led to their emergence. A researcher thus asks questions such as ‘What must the world be like for this to be possible?’ in the context of an understanding that a deeper level of reality, the Real, exists and that this layer of reality involves a constant interplay of mechanisms.

The use of the tools of abduction and retroduction thus involve action on the part of the researcher. Any researcher is, of course, fallible and thus any identification and explanation of the interplay of mechanisms is open to challenge. The design of a piece of research needs to account for this potential fallibility. What is important, however, is the philosophical assumption of the existence of an absolute reality and therefore the adoption of a realist, rather than a relativist, position. There is an expectation that ‘judgmental rationality’ will be used to decide which is the strongest possible account of the mechanisms at play in the emergence of events and experiences.

The identification of three layers of reality points to the dangers of conflating what can be known through the senses (i.e. the Empirical) with what is (the Real). This conflation is termed the ‘epistemic fallacy’ by Critical Realists. What we know and understand is not all that there is to know and understand. While the diagrams and examples we have provided assist in making sense of a layered reality, they are simplified heuristics. It would be a mistake to see all mechanisms at the level of the Real as being of one kind. Similarly, not all events at the level of the Actual or all experiences at the level of the Empirical are of one kind. As Elder-Vass (2013) explains, a higher-level event may emerge from the interplay of a number of smaller events, that in turn emerged from a range of mechanisms at the level of the Real.

The idea of a layered reality can be difficult to grasp and at this point another example drawn from the field of higher education may be useful. In many countries around the world, as we will explain in more detail later in this book, the establishment of national qualifications frameworks have gone hand-in-hand with the introduction of the learning outcome and ‘outcomes-based education/competency-based education’. In order to bring this into effect, a great deal of policy work had to be done. In South Africa, the Qualifications Act (Republic of South Africa (RSA) 1995) was passed and a set of regulations about what needed to be done to register qualifications on the National Qualifications Framework was developed. For the registration to be meaningful, the use of learning outcomes to describe learning in qualifications needed to be accompanied by the development of classroom practices focused on teachers supporting and guiding learners as they worked towards demonstrating outcomes.
A Critical Realist researcher interested in these new classroom practices would acknowledge the policy intended to lead to them. However, her assumption would not be that any changes she observed emerged from a simple cause–effect relationship as a result of the policy. By working with her data (she may, for example, have interviewed teachers or observed classes in a number of schools or universities), she would begin to identify other mechanisms which would interact with the policy levers and either promote or inhibit the emergence of new classroom practices. Structures such as gender, age, educational background, location and so on might come into play in enabling or constraining emergence. So too might the extent to which educators had been able to access workshops and other training events. The sets of ideas to which the educators subscribed would be likely to be a very significant mechanism. Some teachers, for example, might have held very firmly to beliefs about their role as ‘teacher’, which constrained them from adopting a new position as ‘facilitator’ of learning.

The schema above captures two levels of Bhaskar’s layers of reality: the Actual and the Real. We now need to include the third level of the Empirical. As the new changes were introduced, individuals experienced them in very different ways. Some were positive and excited about the possibility of change. Others were very negative. We can now begin to map this range of experiences and observations about the shift to outcomes-based education onto the framework. A Critical Realist framework simply allows us to understand reality in a stratified manner and to understand that what we experience in many different ways (and which is thus relative) emerges from a level of reality that we cannot access directly. This level of reality nonetheless consists of mechanisms that are ‘real’ in the sense that they exist regardless of whether or not we acknowledge them or even know about them.

In order to do research on the emergence (or non-emergence) of new classroom practices, a Critical Realist researcher would need other explanatory or ‘substantive’ theory which could help them make sense of the mass of data and begin to identify some of the causal mechanisms at play. One researcher might draw from the field of education, another researcher might draw on other kinds of social theory. In a study which explored the introduction of a new curriculum in Swaziland, Liphie Pereira (2012) drew extensively on theory developed in ‘New Literacy Studies’ to explain why the educators in her study did not do as the policymakers expected when a new mode of classroom practice was introduced.

As we have indicated in Chapter One, theory allows us to ‘see’ the world in different ways. As with a pair of glasses, the type of lens will affect what we can see. We have to choose theory that will allow us to see what we need to see in order to answer our research questions. A Critical Realist framework allows us to adopt a position on reality,
what we believe it is and how it can be known. We need other theory to work within this overall position.

The explanation of the Critical Realist philosophy in this chapter has stressed the idea of emergence. Events at the level of the Actual and experiences at the level of the Empirical both emerge from mechanisms at the level of the Real. Although it is possible to draw diagrams and figures such as those we have offered in the examples above, it is wrong to think of the layers as strictly separated and sequential. In practice, the strata co-exist, subsume each other and work together simultaneously. This means that a researcher uses data to explore the world we know through the senses and then moves to the world we cannot know directly, the level of the Real. To most intents and purposes, therefore, Critical Realist research draws on the same methods as other research. We can know the Empirical and Actual through our interaction with others (by, for example, conducting interviews or using surveys and questionnaires) or we can observe the world closely simply by watching and recording.

It is also possible to draw on innovative methods. Behari-Leak (2015, 2017), for example, used ‘photo-voice’ in a study that explored the ways new academics were enabled or constrained as they tried to use the new understandings they had developed in a formal course on teaching at a university. Participants used photographs to construct a narrative detailing their experiences. What is important is that the methods access or generate the data necessary to explore the levels of the Empirical and the Actual in a way that allows the researcher to answer the questions she has set for herself. The Critical Realist framework provides a position on reality which then guides the research and allows the researcher to know what she is dealing with as she engages with data and begins to make claims.

As its name suggests, Critical Realism is ‘critical’ in that it follows a long tradition in orientations to research most obviously linked to a group of philosophers known as the ‘Frankfurt School’, who were concerned with social justice. Critical research aims to produce knowledge which will further social justice. As Bhaskar notes, ‘the emancipatory potential of social science is contingent upon, and entirely an explanatory power’ (1979: 2). If we can begin to explain the interplay of mechanisms at the level of the Real, we can begin to work with them to produce change for the better.

In linking the production of knowledge to social justice, our choice of Critical Realism as an ‘underlabouring’ philosophy for a book which seeks to provide an account of teaching and learning over time allows us to begin to account for change – what has changed and what has not changed.

The choice of Critical Realism was significant for other reasons, however, as we hope the explanation of the philosophy above has started to illustrate. Above all, it allowed us to adopt a realist rather than a relativist position in relation to our research by letting
us explore the workings of phenomena that are real and relatively unchanging through the use of a theory that ‘neither elides the referent nor neglects the socially produced character of judgments about it’ (Bhaskar 2002: 203).

While Critical Realism has provided the ‘underlabourer’ by clearing the ground of deliberations around the nature of reality and its relationship to knowledge, it does not provide us with much by way of explanation as to the emergence of events and experiences in the social world, and for this we turned to Archer’s work.

**Archer’s Social Realism**

The value of Archer’s work is that it allows us to look more closely at how social events and experiences emerge from the interplay of mechanisms over time. It does this through an examination of the relationship between people and social structures, which Archer refers to as ‘the parts’. ‘The parts’ comprise structure and culture.

Structures distribute access to material goods. Education, for example, is widely understood as a social structure. It distributes access to material goods because success in education impacts on the sort of work an individual is likely to be able to secure and, thus, the amount of money she is able to earn in a lifetime. Gender is also a social structure, in that society uses it to allot roles to people and it can impact on the kind of work that is available. Structures not only distribute access to material goods; they also organise relationships in any society. Education, for example, shapes relationships between the ‘uneducated’ and the ‘educated’, even though this distinction is inherently invalid as the fact that a person has never been schooled formally does not mean they have not learned through the course of their lives. Gender, our other example, would work in a similar fashion in that it is used to organise relationships in society, many of which are oppressive unless challenged.

Alongside structure, ‘the parts’ also comprise ‘culture’, which is defined in numerous ways. In all of our research using a realist framework, we have defined culture using the concept of ‘discourse’. A discourse is a set of ideas, beliefs, values, concepts and theories that are loosely bound together. Discourses can be identified in sign systems. Language is one such sign system. By analysing which words are used and the way they are used, for example, we can identify discourses in a stretch of text. Another sign system could involve the arrangement of furniture in a classroom or lecture theatre. By looking at who sits where and how this allows them to interact with each other, for example, we can see all sorts of ideas and values about power. From a Critical Realist perspective, the concept of discourses exists as a mechanism at the level of the Real, with specific discourses emerging in particular forms in different places and times and then enabling and constraining the emergence of events and experiences.

While discourse exists as an intransitive and relatively unchanging mechanism, the particular discourses at play in any time and place emerge out of that particular context. For example, in many countries of the world, a discourse of ‘widening participation’ can be discerned. Amongst other things, this discourse argues that higher education should not only be for the elite and that universities must open their doors to students from
a range of socio-economic backgrounds. This discourse has emerged from changing social norms and values. The emergence of this discourse then enables the emergence of other events such as alternative admissions procedures. The emergence of the widening-participation discourse and of the alternative admissions procedures then enables a range of experiences and observations.

Some people decry the idea of widening participation, arguing that higher education is inherently only for a few with a particular intellectual ‘bent’. Others welcome the idea. Students who are admitted as a result of measures intended to widen participation (which can be conceptualised as events emerging as a result of the discourse) may also report a broad range of experiences, with some, for example, feeling alienated by the universities to which they have gained access. In Archer’s explanation of society as being the interplay between the people and the parts, all three ontological layers are always in conjunction: the Empirical, the Actual and the Real.

Over many decades sociologists have considered the relationship between ‘the parts’ and ‘the people’ in order to explore the extent to which people do indeed have the power to do what they want to do or whether they are constrained by the social and cultural conditions in which they live. Debates about the relationship between ‘the parts’ and ‘the people’, or structure and agency, have therefore focused on which has ascendancy over the other.

One view of the world, termed by Archer (2000) ‘Modernity’s man’, privileges human agency over structure and has its roots in the Enlightenment, a period which focused on the use of reason to better the human condition. This view of the world is of ‘man’ creating the social world and, thus, of both structure and culture as emerging from the exercise of human reason. Archer also terms this view ‘upwards conflation’.

The alternative perspective on social reality is termed ‘downwards conflation’. This view involves the idea that ‘man’ is created by society – we are not free to act as we want because of the strictures of social structures and cultures. This view sees all human action and thought as being shaped by society. The idea that ‘man’ is a product of society has a long tradition in sociological thought and can be discerned in the work of theorists as disparate as Levi-Strauss, Durkheim, Marx, Lacan, Foucault and Derrida.

A third alternative, ‘central conflation’, is also evident in the work of structuration theorists such as Giddens, who see the systemic and individual aspects of social life as inseparable. Archer is critical of central conflation on the grounds that the ‘parts’ (structure and culture) and the ‘people’ (agency) are ‘clamped together in a conceptual vice’ (Archer 1996: 87). This then means that it becomes impossible to identify when or how agents are able to act to bring about change.

Archer’s solution to her critiques of upwards, downwards and central conflation is an argument for ‘analytical dualism’, or the need for the theoretical separation of the ‘parts’ and the ‘people’ even though, in practice, they do not act independently. Archer goes on to argue that in order to understand the interplay between the ‘parts’ and the ‘people’ each has to be accorded distinct properties and powers operating at the level of the Real. This means that we can begin to speak about the properties of mechanisms in relation to the ‘parts’ – cultural emergent properties (CEPs) and structural emergent properties (SEPs), and also of agents’ own personal emergent properties (PEPs).
The acknowledgement that structure, culture and agency all possess properties and exercise power is critical to the concept of emergence, which we discussed in relation to Bhaskar’s work, since it is through the interplay of these properties and powers that events at the level of the Actual and experiences and observations at the level of the Empirical emerge.

Archer’s later work focuses on the role of agency in particular. She argues that agency is exercised by means of what she terms the ‘internal conversation’ or ‘reflexivity’ (Archer 2007: 7). In making this argument she calls for a distinction between humans and other elements of the natural world in that humans can design ‘projects’, defined as ‘any course of action intentionally engaged upon by a human being’ (Archer 2007: 7). According to Archer, projects ‘promote our concerns; we form “projects” to promote or protect what we care about most’ (Archer 2007: 7). This means that agents, human beings, are also accorded powers, which are exercised in pursuit of projects by means of the internal conversation. These powers are exercised in relation to the powers and properties of mechanisms in the domains of structure (SEPs) and culture (CEPs).

In this book, then, when we trace the emergence of events related to teaching and learning from the early 1990s to date, we are looking at the ways in which key agents were put in place to address concerns about, amongst other things, efficiency, and we are looking at the ways in which they drew on the available mechanisms to achieve their personal projects. We look at how particular structures and cultures emerged or how they proved resilient to change. As we have pointed out, Archer’s work forms part of a conversation with other sociologists regarding whether the ‘parts’ condition human action in such a way that the powers of the ‘people’ to create a world of their own making is curtailed, or whether the opposite is true, that the ‘people’ have power over the ‘parts’. Archer’s contribution to this debate is not only the concept of analytical dualism, that is the idea that structure, culture and agency can be analysed separately, but also the accordance of personal powers and properties to people (PEPs). Although people use these PEPs to pursue the concerns and projects they have identified for themselves, they are conditioned in the way and to the extent they use them by their previous experiences. For example, previous conditioning will impact on the extent to which an individual may exercise her PEPs by subscribing to a discourse, or not doing so. Some individuals, then, may be more disposed to taking up and engaging with some discourses because of previous experiences. Others will be more disposed to refuting the same discourses in order to protect their personal projects.

This brings us to the point that CEPs and SEPs are not activated autonomously. Rather, it is only through the exercise of agency, that is an individual exercising their own PEPs, that they are activated. Archer (2007) elaborates on this point by using the example of swimming. Following her thinking, water is accorded the power to make us float. That power, however, would never be exercised if we, as agents, did not enter the water, take our feet off the ground and allow ourselves to float. This particular power of water would remain dormant. It would still exist but would be dormant until we entered the water and tried to float. Agency is therefore necessary to activate the properties and powers inherent in the ‘parts’.
If we now move to higher education, we can use Archer’s thinking to see how agency works. We could, for example, conceptualise a student as having a concern about her position in society and her life chances and those of her family as a result of this position. Her personal project might then be to get a qualification in order to better this. In order to pursue this project, the student would need to draw on ‘the parts’, both social structures and the set of beliefs, values and so on that constitute the cultural system. The student would exercise her personal powers and properties in relation to the educational system to complete her schooling and, in relation to various other structures (including possibly alternative access procedures), to gain access to a university. She would draw on beliefs in the cultural system related to the value of getting a qualification and also on those related to what constitutes ‘good’ learning to succeed at school. These ideas about what is ‘good’ or ‘successful’ learning might serve her well in school but perhaps be of less use in university. Perhaps, at her school, there is an idea that learning is about memorising sets of irrefutable facts and seeing the text as sacrosanct and above critique. These ideas might have served her well in achieving the marks required for entry to university and thereby furthering her personal project. Once she gets to university, though, she may find that she has to draw on very different understandings of what constitutes ‘good’ learning if she is to succeed. She may find that the ideas and practices that she brought with her no longer serve her very well at all.

At a more micro level, the student might draw on the structure of technology in order to carry a cell phone and might then choose to use this in her learning. She might be exposed to a supportive WhatsApp group and a useful set of YouTube videos that gradually give her access to different ways of understanding what constitutes successful learning. The point of all this is that the student is consciously exercising her own personal powers as an individual to draw on structures and cultures to pursue her project of getting a qualification and bettering her chances in society.

We began our discussion of Archer’s work by noting her insistence on the ability to separate the ‘parts’ (structure and culture) and the ‘people’ for analytical purposes. Archer follows through with the premise that the interplay of agency with structure and agency with culture is ‘temporarily distinguishable’ (1996: 66). As a result, it is possible to determine what happens over time with regard to structure, culture and agency in order for events and experiences to emerge. Archer’s claim is therefore that we can examine the ‘historicity of emergence’. She then goes on to describe what she terms the ‘morphogenetic framework’ as a methodology that allows for an analysis of the interplay of structure and agency and culture and agency over time.

**Archer’s morphogenetic framework**

Archer’s morphogenetic framework not only allows us to analyse the interplay of structure, culture and agency over time; it also allows us to account for why the emergence of change, ‘morphogenesis’, happens or does not happen. A state of no change is termed ‘morphostasis’. According to Archer, morphogenesis/morphostasis occurs in endless cycles.
The first period of any cycle is termed $T_1$ or a particular point in time, and describes the conditioning structures and cultures that are in place at its beginning. As we noted in the preceding section of this chapter, individuals are understood to be shaped by cultural and structural conditions which may enable or constrain the way they act. For example, a student born into a home where both parents are medical doctors may well be conditioned to pursue a career in medicine for herself not only because of the ideas and beliefs she has been exposed to but because she has been introduced to the way the medical profession itself is structured. And it is not only individuals who are shaped and conditioned by the contexts that pre-exist them. The potential for change to occur in the social system or the cultural system is also conditioned by what happened in the past.

In this book, we are interested in the way teaching and learning in higher education has functioned over the last 20 years or so. As we explained in Chapter One, students’ experiences of higher education over this time have not all been positive. Using the morphogenetic framework therefore involves analysing the conditions in place as the period in which we are interested began.

As we indicated in Chapter One, we use South Africa as a ‘case’ which we present to our readers so that they can make judgements about whether or not our analysis applies to their own contexts. The South African case begins in 1990 as apartheid, the political system which had dominated the country since the middle of the century, came to an end. To use the morphogenetic framework, we need to consider the way apartheid and related ideologies such as colonialism shaped the cultural system in order to see how they enabled or constrained new ideas, beliefs or theories as they were introduced. In the same manner, we would also need to analyse the way the structures of apartheid or colonialism enabled or constrained change as efforts were made to reconfigure the systems. In South Africa under apartheid, the higher education system was structured along racial and linguistic lines. Geography also played a part as different kinds of institutions had been located deliberately in different parts of the country. As attempts were made to produce a new institutional landscape in South Africa in the early 2000s, through a series of mergers and incorporations, it is possible to see how the old apartheid structuring constrained the development of the ‘new’ universities. Social divisions along the lines of language and ethnicity in many other countries on the continent have similarly constrained post-colonial development in higher education.

Once an analysis of the structural and cultural conditions at $T_1$ has been completed, the next step in using the morphogenetic framework involves analysing the interaction that takes place in a given time period, termed $T_2$ to $T_3$. In this period, agents interact with structure and culture. The final phase in the morphogenetic cycle is termed $T_4$, and is the period at the end of any one cycle. This is the point at which it is possible to assess the extent to which morphogenesis has, or has not, emerged.

The diagram below illustrates a morphogenetic cycle. Archer indicates that the cycles function across different time periods. For example, changes in the domain of structure may occur more quickly than those in the domain of culture.
In this book, we attempt to look at how structures and cultures related to teaching and learning in higher education were conditioned at T₁, and how they have been elaborated or reproduced in the period since then.

Archer’s morphogenetic framework can also be applied to agency. In order to do this, some more exploration of the concept of agency using Archer’s ideas is needed. Archer identifies two groups of agents: primary agents and corporate agents. Primary agents are accorded very little power and influence by the social structures and cultures within which they find themselves. According to Archer, they are ‘collectivities sharing the same life chances’ (Archer 2000: 263). A group of working-class students may thus be primary agents in a particular university context where the structures and cultures constrain their social being. In pursuit of change, primary agents can transform themselves into corporate agents. They would do this by exercising their powers of reflexivity to pursue a shared project and by drawing on the cultural and structural domains. Archer (1995: 258) defines corporate agents as groups:

- who are aware of what they want, can articulate it to themselves and others, and have organized in order to get it, can engage in concerted action to re-shape or retain the structural or cultural feature in question.

In the history of South African education as well as in the histories of other countries, there is no shortage of examples of groups of students transforming themselves into corporate agents. In South Africa, in 1976, schoolchildren in Soweto, a large township to the south of Johannesburg, came together to protest about the policy which required both English and Afrikaans to be used as languages of teaching and learning. This can be seen as an example of a group of primary agents transforming themselves into corporate agents as a result of their objections to a discriminatory policy. The protests in universities...
across the world in recent years can also be seen as an example of corporate agents working to effect change. For Archer, collective action is a property of agency, although the power to exercise this action is enabled or constrained by the cultural and structural systems in which agents are placed. Primary agents have a vested interest in developing the property of collective action to improve upon their life chances and also to allow them to participate in decision-making (Archer 1995).

Certain individuals can also be characterised as social actors. Social actors are defined as occupying roles which themselves have properties and powers. These powers are enacted by individuals, but they are not reducible to the characteristics of the individuals who occupy the roles. The role of vice-chancellor, for example, can be seen to have such properties and powers even though a vice-chancellorship could be exercised in many different ways depending on the individual occupying the position.

We have elaborated on Archer’s theory in some depth because, as we noted earlier, it allows us to explore the social world more thoroughly than would otherwise be possible. The rest of this book is structured in a way which allows us to demonstrate our framework in action.

In the next chapter, we focus on structural change in the case of South African higher education by exploring the way policies and other levers have been used to shape the system. As we have explained, however, Archer’s concept of analytical dualism is intended for purposes of analysis only. In reality, the ‘parts’ of structure and culture are in constant interplay. Structural change emerged as a result of the interplay between ideas and theories and the introduction of policies and funding formulas. We will nevertheless try to keep our analysis as clear as possible and will constantly refer back to the terms and ideas we have introduced in this chapter.