Productive Disruption as a critical enabler for organisational change

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Abstract

Faced with challenges of being isolated through COVID-19, HELTASA leadership embarked on a process of productive disruption to restructure and reshape the organisation to be more agile and responsive. Embraced as a potential organisational catalyst for change, we used productive disruption as a catalyst for structural reorganisation and expansive capacity building; and methodological disruption through the unprecedented (un)conference experience that encouraged equitable and socially inclusive participation. We present a duo-ethnographic case study of productive disruption of organisational structure in a context of crisis. Data was generated through deliberations, reflections, provocations, and memory work by the leadership level. We reflect on and analyse the outcomes of the expansion and change to assess if HELTASA's shapeshifting could be contextually responsive, resilient, and relevant. We conclude that productive disruption is a necessary intervention when 'business as usual' no longer offers the stretch and growth needed for professional organisations to survive and be sustained.

Keywords: productive disruption, duo-ethnography, organisational change, (un)conference, agency

Introduction

As the Higher Education (HE) system reeled from different levels of potential destruction in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the Higher Education Learning and Teaching Association in Southern Africa (HELTASA) was faced with the possibility of organisational work grinding to a halt through the challenges of the pandemic. HELTASA is a professional development organisation concerned with staff, students, curriculum, and institutional development. In the context of the Covid-19 crisis, the challenges brought about by the pandemic stretched the organisation in ways that made change necessary for survival and for the sustainability of the organisation. To respond to the urgency, HELTASA leadership embarked on a process of productive disruption (PD), to restructure and reshape the organisation to be more agile and responsive to its members. This was a fearful time, as it was unclear whether the changes would enhance or diminish HELTASA's sustainability.

Background

HELTASA was established in 2004 and emerged from the Academic Development (AD) movement in South Africa in the early 1980s. This was in response to imminent political changes which saw relatively small groups of black students admitted to historically white, liberal universities (Boughey, 2010). Prior to this, the South African Association of Academic Development (SAAAD) was the professional organisation for AD and after its demise in 2002, an interim structure, South African Academic Development Association (SAADA) was established, which became HELTASA. Since 2004, HELTASA leaders have advocated for the organisation's role to be closely connected to student learning needs by providing a professional structure for academic developers to feel supported to carry out their roles. Great strides were made and much achieved in this regard by the brave and committed leaders who led the organisation through its various stages by upholding HELTASA's vision. As a non-profit organisation, HELTASA's mission and vision is to support learning and teaching scholarly practices in HE, strengthen collegial and professional relationships among members and key stakeholders, and to build an inclusive and diverse association that prioritises the upliftment of professional development and transformation of the sector.

As a professional network, HELTASA brings together academic developers and more recently, mainstream academics and professional staff to engage, discuss and debate HE related learning and teaching matters. This engagement is shaped by core values underpinning HELTASA's constitution namely collegiality, professionalism, quality, equity, excellence, development, creativity, criticality, and innovation. HELTASA plays a significant role contextually, conceptually, and methodologically in enabling epistemological access and student success. HELTASA has historically engaged with its membership through its main event, the annual conference, but also provides ongoing support for professionals working in the field of HE learning and teaching across the southern Africa region.

Context

Over the period of its existence, HELTASA has had to adapt to the challenges in the HE context. HELTASA has recognised, for example, the need for academic development to be contextualised and relevant in relation to the global South and for 'our' students. While this was precipitated by the 2015-2016 student protests which disrupted the South African (SA) Higher Education (HE) sector in unprecedented ways, it led to the need for more deliberate and considered professional development programmes for academics as scholarly teachers (Vorster & Quinn, 2017; Behari-Leak, 2017). This has been taken up by the organisation in its various projects and by universities who committed themselves to curriculum change after the protests. The disruption caused by the student protests also caused HELTASA to adjust its purview to be inclusive and cognisant of an expansive HE sector and membership, which did not strictly fit the description of South African or Southern African students or teachers.

In this paper, the authors, occupying the role of was the Chair and Deputy Chair of HELTASA at the time of disruption, reflect on the changes they instituted to take the organisation to a new level of innovation, participation, and productivity. Using PD as a conceptual frame, we bring into focus two key components that were disrupted namely: 1) the structural organisation of HELTASA; and 2) the annual academic conference. Through an unprecedented recruitment process to enable structure innovation and the use of (un)conferencing as a methodological approach to enable structural cohesion, we evaluate the effects of HELTASA's structural expansion "productive disruption" (PD) to see if structure and strategy were disrupted sufficiently and meaningfully to make HELTASA responsive and vital.

Using a duo-ethnographic approach, we present a critically reflective and retrospective case study of organisational change in the context of a national crisis. Data was generated through duo-ethnographic methods namely observations, reflections, dialogue, and provocations shared between researchers, in this case, two academic staff developers in the leadership level of HELTASA in 2021. We analyse our experiences and observations through our 'authentic ways of knowing through critical reflection and engagement' (Murphy, 2013: 69) to reveal insights and actions that emerged.

We also acknowledge the intersectional relationship between us developed over the years as academic staff developers, national project collaborators, research colleagues and in particular knowledge focus areas. It is with these higher education disciplinary, academic development field entanglements, together with our passions, interests, and projects as agents (Archer, 2000) that we embark on this paper as duo-ethnographers. Our discussion will assert that disruption can be extremely productive if conceptualised well and if conditions are created in advance for its positive affordances to be appreciated namely to create new ways of understanding structural entablements, governance, engagement, and scholarship.

Conceptual Framing: Productive Disruption

Disruption is a complex term, often conceived of in negative ways (Riddell, 2018). By its very nature, disruption induces fear and anxiety, which oftens makes it uncomfortable and undesirable (Buyserie, et al., 2021). At the structural level of HELTASA, fear and anxiety were rife as productivity was threatened due to the physical and social distancing the pandemic demanded as well as the difficulty in leading an organisation with reduced human capacity. In the context of the Covid-19 crisis, the "business-as-usual" mode was disrupted as the HE system reeled from different levels of potential destruction.

Disruption can also be perceived and experienced as destructive if the context for change is not ready (Kinchin, 2017). In other words, if the soil has not been sufficiently tilled. The student protests of 2015-16 was a severe disruption of the colonial reproduction of the curriculum, pedagogy and assessment which caused students to feel unheard, invisible, under-represented and alienated (Tabensky & Matthews, 2015). Many academics experienced this disruption negatively as they did not see it coming. What makes disruption "disruptive" is that very few people see it coming (Smith, 2020). Indeed, HELTASA did not see it coming. Academics'

conceptions about HE was disrupted to the extent that academics had to negotiate new understandings to alleviate 'pedagogic frailty' (Kinchin, 2017). Through the student protests, new ways of looking at teaching, learning, assessment, and curricula had emerged. The calls for the decolonisation of HE also challenged academic developers to re-think how they enabled epistemological access and which students were being excluded from such access. In addition, the question of whose epistemologies were foregrounded to the exclusion of indigenous knowledge, became central. The disruption meant that HELTASA and AD had to maintain a measure of epistemological openness to see alternatives and diverse ways of viewing our field and our practice (Behari-Leak, et al., 2018).

Disruption need not only be negative or fear-inducing. It can be fortuitous if embraced as a potential catalyst for reimagined potential (Leighton, 2022). Although the pandemic was the ultimate disrupter, it became a catalyst for different productive possibilities. It was productive in yielding new and different ways of knowing, doing, being and becoming in the online space. HELTASA leveraged this to create enabling conditions for the PD envisaged. While we accept that 'productive' and 'disruption' mean different things to different people, for most, productive has a positive connotation while disruption holds a negative one. In using the concept, productive disruption, we acknowledge the implicit contradiction or tension evoked.

Sometimes when people and practices are disrupted, inequities that were disguised and unquestioned are revealed and when these are revealed, it can make people feel uncomfortable (Buyserie, et al., 2021). The main reason is that people fear the unknown and are not sure how the disruption will negatively affect them. For fear of upsetting people and processes, resilience can remain firm and unchanged despite external disruption (Buyserie, et al., 2021). Lotz-Sisitka, et al. (2015) explain that "resilient" as a word with an assumed-positive connotation is problematic. They explain that when a system is unhealthy, its ability to be resilient can be quite disturbing (Lotz-Sisitka, 2015: 74). Practices and pedagogies that show a disturbing amount of resilience by maintaining inequity remain neutral and need to be disrupted.

According to Leighton (2022), disruptions are changes (both intentional and unintentional) that alter the routines that we have in place. The goal should be to disrupt habits and routines that are not productive by observing what is being done automatically through repetition and reproduction without any critical reflection on use and value. By identifying those practices that do not serve the organisation, one can create an alternative. Through this disruption, small adjustments can lead to significant improvements. Leaders can amplify the impacts of positive disruption so that teams can leverage it in productive ways for further organisational enhancement. Disruption can thus be seen as a way of destabilising traditional practices by adapting, changing how value is co-created, collaborating, knowledge-sharing and transforming within a value network (Bolton, et al., 2019), to encourage the simulation of PD by fostering a culture of innovation, risk taking and experimentation. In this way corporate agency is enabled and organisations are empowered to confidently manage their unknown futures.

Borrowed from industry (Cope, 2019), PD is often framed in combination with emerging technologies, robots and artificial intelligence, or digitisation in many forms (Riddell, 2018). Used

in HE and elsewhere, disruption is seen as productive if embraced as a potential catalyst for new ways of being in an organisation (Riddell, 2018). Disruption, although emotionally loaded (Schreyer, 2023) can be used in positive and generative ways. For example, to respond to the isolation and alienation experienced across HE spaces nationally, HELTASA launched an initiative known as the "short-and-sharp-and-socially-aware" (SASASA) pieces which was an open call to local and global colleagues to share their experiences of as well as strategies for mediating the losses incurred but also the gains made through the pivot to online teaching. Written as short pieces which were dialogic in nature, we started a national conversation on various topics that colleagues were struggling with, including the digital divide, access to online provision, humanising the machine learning space, and so forth About forty written pieces from a diverse range of academics, leaders, scholars, and practitioners across institutional types were published on the HELTASA website. This included submissions from international colleagues in global contexts.

In many ways, disruptions can also signal renewal and growth (Purcell, 2014), as a means of encouraging a productive, engaged way of doing things and doing them differently. PD can therefore reframe problems and crises as opportunities (Kinchin, 2017: 6). In HELTASA we needed to create opportunities and spaces to engage uncertainty and 'respond to evolving and unpredictable disruptions in the virtual, material, and psychosocial landscapes in which teaching and learning take place' (Buyserie, et al., 2021: 38). Creative disruption is promoted by Cook (2015) to challenge established norms and accepted ways of knowing while fostering positive transformative change. Creative approaches to PD can strengthen inclusive and equitable communities while promoting meaningful transformative change relevant and responsive to the community being served. To build a strong community of practice across the newly expanded HELTASA structure, the leadership engaged in a creative approach to PD to ground relationality and collegial respect.

We are also mindful that disruption does not occur without dissonance (Riddell, 2018). The more disruptive the idea, the higher the likelihood of the significant disturbance to be highly destructive if the context for change is not ready for change. Applying PD to HE can take many forms. According to Riddell (2018), it can mean rethinking governance structures to involve students and other collaborators who are not usually included in decision-making. It can mean balancing support for STEM fields with more resources for a liberal education model with its curiosity-driven and open-inquiry approach to learning. It can mean disrupting the paradigm that values research over teaching in favour of a system that treats teaching as a fundamental component of scholarly activity – and changing collective agreements accordingly (Riddell, 2018).

Real disruption is not in the tools but rather in changing the rules (Riddell, 2018). For HELTASA, disruption did not mean getting rid of people and portfolios but finding new and alternate ways of working with existing components. This is what made the disruption productive. 'As disruptors, our goal is not to vanquish old players. It's to vanquish old ways' (Smith, 2020). The creative choice to disrupt the traditional annual conference for example, was to assess if the

restructuring process, with old, new and more team structures, could work optimally to enable change in the methodological approach to the annual conference.

Research Design and Methodology

As two research participants interrogating the cultural contexts of their experiences to gain insight into their current perspectives on and experiences of issues (Breault, 2016), we used a duo ethnographic methodology (Norris & Sawyer, 2005) to explore the structural disruption of HELTASA. Proposed by Sawyer and Norris (2005), duo ethnography is based on auto-ethnography but involves two researchers working as critical partners to dialogically critique and question social issues and epistemological constructs (Kinnear & Ruggunan, 2019). Duo-ethnography involves co-constructing a narrative and is described as a scholarly conversation, with the topic viewed through the researcher's eyes and communicated via a written dialogue (Gómez, 2013). Duo-ethnographies provide knowledge in transition and, as such, knowledge is not fixed but fluid (Norris & Sawyer, 2012).

A duo ethnographic methodology (Norris and Sawyer, 2005; Breault, 2016; Burleigh & Burm, 2022) is part of a qualitative approach (Aspers & Corte, 2019) but deviates from a meta self-narrative by involving two participants interrogating the cultural contexts of their experiences to gain insight into their current perspectives on an experience of issues related to personal and professional identities (Breault, 2016: 1). In duo ethnography, two researchers working in parallel as critical partners, dialogically critique and question social issues and epistemological constructs (Kinnear & Ruggunan, 2019).

In our case, we considered ourselves sites rather than the topics of the research.

> My life is the site of articulation of an enduring interest, the site where, through writing, my research topic takes shape. My life is not the eventual topic, nor is the eventual topic in my life in the usual sense of "contained" within it. However, the fact that the site is my life makes a difference. My life is not a neutral site; not just any topic configures in that site. Nor is my writing a neutral process that describes a topic that is already there. (Wilson & Oberg, 2022:3)

First proposed by Sawyer and Norris (2005), duo ethnography is based on auto-ethnography.

Data Generation

Breault (2016) asserts that traditional academic training in methodology can devalue the critical conversation and co-reflection of researchers as authentic data generation methods by dismissing it as unscientific. Duo-ethnographies are presented as intertwined intersections that create hybrid identities instead of binary opposites (Asher, 2007: 68). Drawing on auto-ethnography, duo-ethnography uses self-reflective narratives in a collaborative way where two or more researchers engage in a dialogue on their distinct histories on a given phenomenon (Ellis

& Bochner, 2000). The individual self-reflective narratives become a collage of interconnected ideas (Norris, et al., 2012) making it clear that when duo ethnographers collaborate, their voices and ideas blend in unique ways.

Taking a duo-ethnographic approach, we used an unstructured and open interview to gather data and used memory work as a tool to guide the discussion. Memory work, developed to bridge the gap between theory and experience (Onyx & Small, 2001), enables the researcher to tap into the past. It encompasses self-engaging with one's memories by conversing and responding to them. Criticism of memory work has been in relation to the accuracy of the memories retrieved and discussed. Crawford, et al. (1992) shares that the memories are true and not fantasies emphasizing the process of the construction of the meaning of events as the focus of memory-work. As researchers, we agreed to the freedom to reminisce and reflect on any aspect of our experiences in HELTASA's structural disruption, to reflect on our feelings and insights, and to be non-judgmental about each other's memories and experiences. There was huge interaction between the researchers whilst reminiscing with one memory sparking another memory (Mair & Frew, 2018).

As the narratives are deconstructed in collaboration within a dialogic process, they are simultaneously reconstructed with more complex and layered perspectives (Kinnear & Ruggunan, 2019). The telling and retelling of these narratives within the emerging dialectic stimulate imagination and newer ways of perceiving the ordered coherence of the initial narratives (Burleigh & Burm, 2022). For this paper, we wrote reflective and retrospective narratives based on our observations and insights as chair and deputy chair respectively. These prompts were based on HELTASA's history, its structural arrangements, its cultural and methodological propensity for change, its ability to sustain itself via a restructured executive level, and its ability to reflect on its successes critically.

Using these prompts, we engaged in further dialogue using our unique and individual observations and experiences as leadership but also as academic staff developers. We revisited those dialogues and reframed the data generated there for the purpose of understanding the central focus of this paper (and this Special Issue). Our central research question thus focuses on whether disruption, in its many forms and levels, can serve as a productive catalyst for renewed energy and innovation to ensure an organisation's growth and sustainability.

Typically, duo-ethnographers use their lived experiences to navigate situations and provide context in their research through conversational-style writing where both of their voices are clear yet interwoven (Kinnear & Ruggunan, 2019). Our series of critical reflections done in-person and via ZOOM were transcribed and archived as 'raw data'. Retrospectively, we then used this data to write our critical reflections or duologues on each prompt to revisit central themes. In this paper, we adopt a hybrid duo-ethnography approach, presenting conventional sections such as conceptual framing, research design etc as well as excerpts from our reflective dialogue, or duologues, to demonstrate how duo - ethnography might work as an innovative methodology for a focus on a disruptive topic such as the (un)conference.

Data Analysis

With no data engagement for several days, we stepped back from our narratives to create some distance from our embodied experiences to analyse what we had generated. The reflections were first done individually, then together and thereafter the different experiences were compared. What we present here is an analysis of a duo-ethnographic account of our narratives, as intertwined intersections that create the hybrid identities (Asher, 2007: 68) we had to straddle during the years of organisational change. During the conversation, the two researchers compare their experiences with each other. In effect, the authors are both the researcher and the researched (Norris, 2008). The dialogic method helped us to analyse each other's experiences, reflections, and observations (Burleigh & Burm, 2022) so that we could uncover our own creativity regarding the possibilities and options for a new HELTASA.

We present our dialogue (a conversation between many people) as a duologue (a conversation between two persons on a focused topic); from which we derived codes or themes that form part of our analytical frame. According to Chang (2007), data collection, generation and analysis are not separate processes in qualitative research but interwoven with data analysis and interpretation. It became clear that when duo-ethnographers collaborate, their voices and ideas blend in unique ways (Mair & Frew, 2018). In duo-ethnography, writing is a form of data generation, data interpretation, and data dissemination (Sawyer & Liggett, 2012).

For purposes of this paper, we organised our thoughts according to the chronological framework of the disruptions as they occurred. We then organised the narratives thematically and present them here as Duologue 1 and 2 based on chronological leadership timeframes. In other words, 2016-2021 provides the first timestamp when the first author was president and chair of the organisation, after having served on the executive committee since 2014. The second timestamp is 2020-2021 when the second author was appointed deputy chair, after having served on the executive committee from 2017. In the data excerpts that follow, the authors are cited as HELTASA Leadership: 2016-2021 and HELTASA Leadership: 2020-2021, respectively. Both authors contribute to the substantive content of the data for this paper in overlapping ways; thus, the data as well as the analysis and discussions attached thereto, are presented as duologues.

Duologue 1: Productive Disruption of the organisational structure (2020 – 2021)

Duologue 1 focuses on the structural changes piloted as part of the organisational changes in 2020-2021. At the end of 2020, as we watched many universities and members deal with the unprecedented challenges of C-19, HELTASA leadership realised that the organisation needed to restructure itself to respond to crises in general and to re-imagine its vision, purpose, reach, goals, and disposition to prepare for an uncertain future. HELTASA experienced severe challenges to its organisational productivity in 2020 when COVID-19 unleashed its wrath on the world and tested the organisation's responsiveness and resilience in delivering on its mandate. HELTASA was brought to a standstill as the executive committee (exco) reeled from their own challenges

at work and in personal spaces. With the HELTASA exco working under challenging circumstances in their own institutions, many exco portfolios were unable to continue as usual:

> *We were very thin on the ground as our exco capacity was based on voluntary participation. Up till and including the first year of the pandemic (2020), many structural limitations had to be managed and this was becoming unsustainable. The reduced capacity of the exco to function optimally in crisis and change, which in turn threatened HELTASA's sustainability, created the need to envision a different reality for the organisation.* (HELTASA Leadership: 2017-2021)

Recognising the imperative for the organisation to rise above its own limitations and go the extra mile for its members, HELTASA leadership initiated a restructuring process to counteract the pandemic's devastating social effects. We needed to disrupt to create change (Lotz-Sisitka, et al., 2015) because 'what got us here won't get us there' (Cope, 2019: 2). By leaning into vulnerability as a catalyst (Behari-Leak, 2019) to harness the benefits of productive disruption (Bolton, et al., 2019), we turned what could have been a potentially negative disruption into a productive and positive outcome for HELTASA and the sector at large:

> *At this junction, HELTASA faced a huge existential crisis. Were we going to use this moment as a catalyst to 'turn the titanic in motion' and bring about what we thought was a necessary change? Or were we going to slip into silence and inaction and hold our breath till the pandemic passed? At a time when our members needed us most, to create the camaraderie to cope with the physical and social isolation imposed by the pandemic protocols, we knew we needed to reframe the organisation to meet members' needs.* (HELTASA Leadership: 2017-2021)

The organisational structure, which needed more distributed leadership to withstand the effects of crises, had to be disrupted to place HELTASA in a better position to be relevant and responsive to its members. In HE and elsewhere, disruption is seen as productive if embraced as a potential catalyst for new ways of being in an organisation (Riddell, 2018):

> *When it became clear that a more expanded structure was needed where role players could lean on each other to navigate the increasing workload pressures from their institutions, we also realised it was not just an increase in numbers that was needed, but an expansion in the capacity of members to serve the organisation's current needs, optimally.* (HELTASA Leadership: 2020-2021)

The need to expand exco's capability and capacity in turn led to the decision to restructure HELTASA in more nuanced ways. This involved deviating from organisational protocol governed by its constitution. This was disruptive both for the leaders as well as the existing exco, but we

realised it was a necessary intervention. Cope (2019) suggests that active and conscious disruption of the self (in this case HELTASA) is needed to get ahead of the disruption of practices. We had to individually disrupt our own taken-for-granted assumptions of what constituted established traditions and conventions while remaining cognisant of the risks involved.   The aim was to create room for discussion, exploration, negotiation, and emergence to grow and expand (Purcell, 2014). This also meant managing our relationships with external partners:

> *While we were aware we needed to disrupt the self, we could not do so at the expense of HELTASA's members, external stakeholders and strategic partners. HELTASA had to walk a safe path while it acknowledged that internal constraints might or might not also manifest in relational links to external stakeholders such as the DHET and the CHE.* (HELTASA Leadership: 2017-2021)

As HELTASA leadership, we deliberated on the historically predetermined organisational structure that no longer served organisational advancement (Kinchin, 2017). Applying productive disruption to HE can take many forms, including rethinking governance structures (Riddell, 2018). To enact disruption to foster a culture of innovation, risk- taking and experimentation, so that we could confidently manage their unknown futures (Bolton, et al., 2019), we knew that we had to challenge HELTASA's traditions.

The disruption to the traditional organisational structure involved a different method of 'recruiting' members to serve on the exco. Given the urgent need to be responsive first, rather than resilient (Lotz-Sisitka, et al., 2015), we circumvented the timeline in new ways. Previously, the process would have waited for an AGM or official meetings of the organisation. The risk of this procedural disruption had to be calculated well, as deviating from protocol can make people feel uncomfortable as they fear the unknown (Buyserie, et al., 2021). Apart from disrupting comfort levels, disruptions are changes (both intentional and unintentional) that alter the routines that we have in place (Leighton, 2022) and therefore can be unsettling.

> *As we weighed up options, we chose to go ahead with the new recruitment process to 'unsettle' the stagnant and unproductive effects of the current structure. We placed the organisation's needs above comfort and opted in favour of ensuring sustainability in light of the crisis.* (HELTASA Leadership: 2017-2021)

The new recruitment process involved placing a call on HELTASA's website inviting members to join the exco. This open process was used to gauge capacity and commitment (the very aspects that had unhinged HELTASA during C-19) in a transparent way. The Chair and Deputy held interviews with prospective role players to ensure their understanding of capacity, capability, and commitment in the context of volunteer work.

> *This purposeful recruitment of project team leads, and core members increased resources, capability, agility and collaborative opportunities across project structures. Potential role players were given a task to complete. The task spoke to their reasons for wanting to join and what could they bring to the organisational mandates. This bottom-up approach helped to make commitments to the organisation explicit and somewhat binding.*
> (HELTASA Leadership: 2020-2021)

The restructured organisation took effect as a pilot in April 2021, after new portfolio members were recruited, interviewed, and inducted. The new 'recruits' were introduced retrospectively at the AGM at the end of 2021. Interestingly, both disciplinary academics and HE professional staff were recruited indicating a shift beyond HELTASA's initial focus on AD role-players. The disruption of the organisational structure was productive in that it increased the potential of working and responding differently as a responsive organisation. As Cook (2015) suggests, this form of disruption can be used to strengthen more inclusive and equitable communities of practice.

The newly formed Project Teams and Co-ordinating Council enabled a more expanded HELTASA leadership group than before. This "shape shifting" in 2021 gave rise to a set of specific drivers for change namely, Relevance, Responsiveness and Resilience which then became the organising principles and rationale for organisational restructuring and reshaping. These were underpinned by the principles of capacity, capability, and commitment.

> *What became very clear from all the dialogic engagement was the urgent need for reimagining, restructuring and reshaping the organisation to meet its mandates for the current HE context and an unknown HE future. We took our courage for change from listening to the 2020 online conference participants and what they were asking of HELTASA to be responsive and relevant. We then thought about responsive, relevant and resilient as 3 underpinning principles and felt to achieve this we had to expand the then Exec of 8.*
> (HELTASA Leadership: 2020-2021)

Changes to the structure of the organisation

With responsiveness, relevance, and resilience as foundational pillars, HELTASA transformed into a three-tiered structural arrangement to collaboratively advance and strengthen HELTASA's mandate. This ensured increased capacity for strategic decision-making and governance while collapsing a hierarchical structuring and increasing agency as distributive leadership. The new structure expanded to include the HELTASA Advisory Board as the first tier. Chaired by the past president to maintain structural, historical, contextual continuity and sustainability, the advisory body consists of national and global strategic partners. The second tier, the Co-ordinating Council (CC) is led by the President and Chair and includes the Deputy Chairs, Executive Administrator, Legal and Constitutional Portfolio, and the Project Team Leads. This tier involves strategic decision - making where organisational challenges are raised, negotiated, and mediated

collaboratively. The third tier constitutes the Project Teams, currently 2 strategic and 8 scholarly; each with a project lead, scholarly researcher, practitioner, and a strategist. To build capacity and capability, a rotation of roles was encouraged. The Project teams, often in collaboration with one another, create the activities for broad membership participation. The organisation is also supported by diverse strategic partners based locally and internationally to provide think tank opportunities.

To induct our newcomers to the newly shaped organisation in 2021, we hosted an externally facilitated professional development workshop on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusivity (DEI), to explore group agreements and commitments to being open to multiple perspectives. This collective safe space helped us to share our vulnerability and fears as the new HELTASA leadership level.

In stretching our thinking on various aspects, we felt that we were disrupting and discomforting ourselves although necessary, needed mediation. Not everyone was as ready as the leadership for such changes. Some were still in favour of the traditional and thoughts of change brought on anxiety and fears... it felt less stressful to stay with the traditional. As leadership we saw the structural disruptions starting to work but were guided by the emotions of the collective who wanted a blend with traditional for some aspects. (HELTASA Leadership 2020-2021)

Instead of outsourcing the conference hosting to a university, as previously done, the new collective took on the task of hosting HELTASA's annual conference itself, as its first 2021 (un)conference. It was the ideal opportunity to explore new ways of conferencing and to see if expanded participation could enact the vision and aspirations of the reshaped HELTASA, namely, to be inclusive, participatory, dialogical, and open to emerging ideas.

With the expanded structure able to co-create new roles and purposes, we suggested that the new teams use the annual conference platform in 2021 to put the organisational restructure to the test to see if and how it could work. To assess if the expansion does hold capacity, capability and commitment to be more relevant, responsive and resilient as an organisation, we decided to explore if the new structure could host an (un)conference in 2021 and put into play, what had been envisioned as the new organisation. (HELTASA Leadership: 2017-2021)

The HELTASA (un)conference in 2021 (discussed next) became the catalyst for the reshaped organisational structure to get its feet wet. Despite the initial anxieties and lack of experience, the teams jumped in, stretched their thinking, contributed new ideas and worked hard as a collective. Members pitched in and were readily available. It also enabled the academic community at large to participate in an unprecedented conference experience that encouraged equitable

participation and inclusion. This echoed HELTASA's vision to be a socially inclusive and participatory organisation.

Duologue 2 - Productive Disruption of the HELTASA Annual Conference

This duologue focuses on the methodological disruption that happened to and through the annual conference. At the 2018 HELTASA conference, when the HELTASA chair formally introduced the option of the (un)conference and invited the 2019 hosts to consider a different format of engagement, the concept gained little traction. Not many were ready to be disrupted out of their zones of comfort and traditions. The idea of the (un)conference slipped quietly into the background. Unbeknown to us then, 2020 would bring with it, disruptions that would force us to consider alternate ways of conferencing.

When the idea of the '(un)conference' was formally inserted into HELTASA's lexicon in 2018 as an invitation to conference differently, little did we know that we were on the precipice of a major global disruption in 2020, through the COVID-19 pandemic. (HELTASA Leadership: 2017 -2021)

The pandemic gave us no option but to convene our first socially distanced online HELTASA conference in 2020, co-convened by the Central University of Technology (CUT). A blessing in disguise, the online conference platform and mode encouraged us to think out of the box.

Through this online conference, HELTASA made significant strides and gains in becoming a strong voice again in the HE sector in Southern Africa, especially during the pandemic. It reaffirmed its important role in the field of AD and professional development in the context of HE transformation. This moment was the real test of HELTASA's responsiveness and resilience. The success of the 2020 online conference provided new-found confidence that HELTASA could be responsive despite crises. (HELTASA Leadership: 2017-2021)

It was the success of HELTASA's first online conference in 2020 that led the HELTASA leadership to renew its commitment to organisational development and change. The online conference affirmed the organisation's potential to steer its academic community with direction, purpose and affirm its position as a social advocacy voice in times of crises. It also saw an opportunity for the restructuring of the organisation to capacitate it to be able to embrace crises and change. We called this process "shape shifting" as it required an expansion, exploration and experimentation through more role players, voices, and personas to shape the organisation to be better equipped in times of crisis and beyond. It was a time to critically strategise on the transformative shifts required to absent exco's limited capacity, capability, and participatory approaches.

By the beginning of 2021, the newly established HELTASA structure was well prepared to resurrect the option of convening the 2021 HELTASA annual conference as an (un)conference.

This was introduced as a novel and innovative modality to disrupt the way traditional academic conferences foregrounded individual performance and downplay collective participatory action. Leadership saw this as an exciting time and space to rejuvenate and infuse HELTASA with forward-thinking, change-oriented practices that enabled spaces for transformation of knowledge, HE practices and ways of being. We wanted to create a new narrative and archive for HELTASA through re-imagining its main annual event, the conference, to enact our theory of change. These new ways and unfolding challenges are explored by the paper on (un)conferencing methodology as a cultural disruptor in this special issue.

There were many reasons for proposing this particular intervention, the main one being for leadership to see whether the new expanded structure could work as envisaged. Other reasons included challenging conventional ways that silenced and marginalised voices that were not seen to be mainstream.

The overview of HELTASA's traditional conferences revealed patterns of being socialised into a particular way of being conference hosts and participants. HELTASA conferences had become unconsciously complicit in masking power imbalances while reproducing social ills the organisation intended to disrupt and challenge. Traditional conferencing ways that did not leave room for diverse and emerging voices and more dialogical relational building, needed to be challenged and changed. (HELTASA Leadership: 2020-2021)

In many ways this special issue is focused on the various strands that are involved in thinking with an alternate frame. While the 2021 (un)conference was a huge success and achieved many of the immediate goals of the restructuring process, the idea was initially not embraced as quickly and fully as anticipated. Mixed responses to the (un)conference proposal indicated possible threats to a collegial structure. While (un)conferencing as a concept was appealing, some members had anxiety, tension, and uneasiness as to what it meant in relation to doing away with traditional academic conference ways.

This tension is explored as conceptual disruption in a paper in this special issue. As with most change processes, the fear of change and the unknown was a very real constraining and disruptive factor (Buyserie, et al., 2021). We too were exploring a working conception of (un)conferencing and began unpacking what the concept meant for us, in an African HE context. Even amongst the new collective, it seemed that the conception of (un)conference was initially engaged with in its binary form to mean in opposition to or anti. To clarify our intentions, we drew attention to the use of the prefix (un) as a decolonial gesture to question, challenge and even subvert the normal and traditional (Mignolo, 1995). Normalised practice, unless reflected critically on, can become fixed, despite the need for change. Our aim with the (un)conference was to shift participants and stakeholders out of traditional HELTASA conference practices and activate repurposed equitable ways of dialoguing as participants and hosts.

The concept (un)conference was explored through a workshop and a pre-task that looked at what is absented and what is present at traditional conferences. This led to the question around equitable participatory approaches that were more inclusive and invited more interaction from participants at a dialogical gathering. (HELTASA Leadership: 2017-2021)

Work towards the unconference began in earnest, to build rapport with each other and to explore a decolonial, dialogical, equitable and inclusive environment to hold the diverse voices within the new structure and the (un)conference. This decolonial unconference methodology is explored further in this special issue. The Decolonial Project Team led discussions on the (un)conference from the African diaspora perspective. We acknowledged the need to disrupt through equitable participation and to encourage more transformative participatory action that gives voice to the voiceless (White, 1996). Varied formats of open-space dialogic approaches were proposed including panels, collaborative discussions, and critical dialogues. The intention was to bring together critical thinkers in a series of related conversations focused on HE learning and teaching complexities, dilemmas and practices in our context.

The project teams hosted a series of scaffolded learning and teaching events as a build up to the Summit which was the annual 2021 HELTASA (un)conference. Although the (un)conference was an online event due to COVID restrictions, the cultural aspects of dialogic engagements were maintained and even enhanced through the creation of a virtual space that resembled an African indaba. Traditional keynote speakers were replaced by provocateurs who formed panels and were primed to raise questions and lead discussions with participants rather than talk 'at' them. Provocations were followed by immediate reflective discussions opening a dialogic space between provocateurs and participants.

Keynote addresses that generally took too long were replaced with provocateurs to challenge and incite thinking, debate and discussion Various modes of presentations were encouraged. The traditional show and tell oral presentation were also included but presenters had to raise questions for participants to engage. Participants had the opportunity to ask questions and leave comments on a padlet and the chat space. (HELTASA Leadership: 2020-2021)

As a scholarly endeavour, the (un)conference had to engage robustly with knowledge, albeit in ways that drew on alternative ways of being and doing. As noted earlier, the contextual conditions in HE after the 2015 student protests were ripe for this level of change. The question of whose epistemologies were foregrounded to the exclusion of indigenous knowledge, became central and could not be ignored (Behari-Leak, 2019). The (un)conference provided the space to explore different ways of engaging with epistemological diversity to see whether unconventional articulations of 'academic' practice and convention could amplify inclusion and belonging if embodied differently.

In adopting the (un)conference as a methodological disruption, we were responding to students, who under the banner of #RMF and #FMF, had challenged and critiqued the colonial epistemic practices that are reproduced to the detriment of students' inclusion, belonging and ability to thrive. The calls for the decolonisation of HE also challenged academic developers to re-think how they enabled epistemological access and which students were being excluded from such access. (HELTASA Leadership:2017-2021)

For HELTASA and AD, the disruption through the (un)conference meant that we also had to maintain a measure of epistemological openness to see alternatives and diverse ways of viewing our field and our practice (Behari- Leak et al., 2018). AD had to account for its northern and western gaze in its practice and scholarship despite its location in Africa and its target beneficiary being students in Africa. HELTASA had to also wrestle with who exactly is 'underprepared' for the academy (Vilakazi & Tema, 1985): students and staff or the university itself?

The (un)conferencing frame, a form of decolonial practice and methodology involves productively disrupting existing conference practices that disable marginalised voices and minority interlocutors from enacting their ontological density and epistemic explorations. More than its affordances as an open space platform for more participation, (un)conferencing served as a joint and collaborative project to give the reshaped organisational structure the opportunity to experience how different project teams would work, in reality, and harness the affordances of PD (Gachago et al., forthcoming). The (un)conference project was an effective modality to actualise a different theory of change to embed inclusive and socially just ways of knowing, doing and being, enshrined in HELTASA's constitution.

There were conceptual, contextual, cultural and methodological explorations and changes. The concept note included a poem created by the HELTASA team. Traditional conference practices were challenged, and alternative possibilities were sought. (HELTASA Leadership: 2020-2021)

These aspects are further expanded on and explored as a paper on contextual disruption in this special issue. We held an initial workshop to gauge whether the idea of an (un)conference would have traction. The productive disruption to and through the annual conference event meant that the organisation was embracing an expansive and open mandate in responding to HE issues through its dialogue with members. These disruptions took different forms and shapes but were all contributing to the metamorphosis of the organisation as a whole. Through the different conferences, HELTASA and the host university were responding to the transformative provocations and calls that emerged in the sector through students protests and other interventions. It was clear that invisibility, alienation, and marginalisation which were key levers that kept students and staff in a colonial vice had to be addressed. By foregrounding the need for different epistemologies, the new conference methodology invited new voices into the fold.

By addressing the ontological need to be seen and heard, the conference programmes encouraged cultural representation and expression through its expanded list of activities. The conferences that emerged between 2016 and 2020 explored different ways of convening and in so doing challenged the traditional form to open spaces for dialogue and scholarly reflection. This involved a methodological disruption to reinforce the epistemic and ontological disruptions that had been embraced.

Conclusions

In this paper, we engaged with the concept of PD to see if structure and strategy were disrupted sufficiently and meaningfully to make HELTASA responsive and significant. Two levels of organisational disruption occurred directly as a result of the pandemic, namely structural and methodological disruption. Structurally, the organisation changed from being a traditional executive committee of 6-8 members to an expansive leadership group of about 30 members, each shaping and leading a specific area of organisational growth. Methodologically, the annual HELTASA conference became an action-learning opportunity to see if the structural changes introduced would be enhanced by a methodological innovation. We encouraged the newly inducted project teams to participate in hosting an (un)conference in 2021, which became the catalyst for the new expanded team and the academic community at large to participate in an unprecedented conference experience. The net effect of both levels of disruption and change encouraged participatory approaches and inclusive practices in ways that echoed the organisational vision of social transformation.

We are now able to assert that on the two main levels which we identified as sites for PD, namely structural and methodological, we were able to create opportunities for a new structure, culture, and praxis to be born. While HELTASA's structural shapeshifting was experienced as a disruption, it was apparent that it was also a moment of PD that was taken up by the expanded HELTASA community and used as a catalyst towards further organisational change and transformation. Overall, the structural expansion resulted in a more capacitated organisation distributed in leadership with the ability to take on tasks needed for HELTASA to flourish. The increased capacity through the expansion of agents, who worked purposefully on the preparation and presentation of the (un)conference, demonstrated how this potential could be realised, beyond the 2021 moment.

The HELTASA (un)conference 2021 became the catalyst for the academic community at large to participate in an unprecedented conference experience that encouraged participation and inclusion in ways that echoed the organisational vision as socially inclusive. As a novel way to enable marginalised and new members to have their voices heard, the (un)conference succeeded in its aim of productively disrupting traditional conference conventions to address specific needs of HELTASA conference goers. As explored in the paper on the HELTASAFEST22 as an evolving approach in this special issue, we see that the innovations started at the 2021 annual event found new shape and form in the 2022 event. We acknowledge that while the (un)conference still maintained aspects of the traditional conference as a segue for those

reluctant to change, we saw the benefit of disrupting in order to be productive. We have a long way to go before the annual event is an (un)conference in the absolute sense of the word but the 2021 event provides the impetus for more experimentation and creativity.

In response to our central research question which focused on whether disruption, in its many forms and levels, can serve as a productive catalyst for renewed energy and innovation to ensure an organisation's growth and sustainability, we conclude that indeed PD is a necessary intervention when 'business as usual' no longer offers the growth needed for organisations like HELTASA to survive and be sustained. In assessing whether the restructure was sufficient and efficient to embrace our visions, we assert that PD was an important catalyst to create enabling conditions for the organisational change we needed. We 'tilled the soil' adequately to prepare the way for new practices to be ushered in. To create enabling conditions for PD, we used the 2021 annual conference event effectively as the vehicle through which we inducted the new expanded leadership into HELTASA and their roles.

In "reflecting forward", our experiences and insights as HELTASA leadership, excavated through the duo-ethnographic process enabled us to reflect critically on limitations and envision possibilities for the organisation. We realised that to be responsive to crises in general, we needed to disrupt ourselves by disrupting our own taken for granted assumptions. At the same time, we need to do so as an organisation engaging with external stakeholders and strategic members, so we had to walk a safe path to maintain relational links to external stakeholders. To conclude we assert that PD is a critical lever for change if people are prepared well and the conditions are created for entities and organisations to become more expansive and robust.

Author Biographies

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