Two unlikely bedfellows:
Towards a decolonial unconference methodology

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Abstract

This paper examines a specific unconferencing methodology designed for the HELTASA (un)conference, an international online event held in 2021 in South Africa. Drawing from the principles of unconferencing and decolonisation, the description of the unconferencing methodology in this paper is interspersed with collective autoethnographic reflections, collected through individual and collective writing engagements, to engage with our complex narratives as designers, facilitators, and presenters/participants of this (un)conference. Through selected vignettes of reflective moments in planning and facilitating this (un)conference, we explore opportunities and challenges when adopting both principles of unconferencing and decolonisation in our practice. We end the paper with a discussion of the possibilities of adopting a decolonial unconferencing model in the global South through a colonial matrix of power.

Keywords: collective autoethnography, decolonial conferencing practices, unconferencing, SOTL, South Africa

Introduction

Scholars in the global South continue to call for the decolonisation of the higher education system. In this paper, we spotlight complex and counter-hegemonic ways that move us towards transforming one area of the higher education system, academic conferencing, which we term decolonial (un)conferencing. Unconferencing in the global North has become an accepted methodology to create more engagement in and beyond academic spaces. Many of the concerns of decolonial approaches to teaching and learning match the concerns of unconferencing, such as challenging hierarchical power dynamics and centring participants' voices. However, there are

also substantial philosophical and ideological differences and tensions. We begin this paper by unpacking the history, definitions, advantages, and challenges of unconferencing, first in general, and then highlighting a small but growing body of literature that engages with unconferencing through a critical, feminist, and/or decolonial lens.

We then share a specific methodology designed for the HELTASA (un)conference, an international online event held in 2021 in South Africa. In our write-up, we blend a description of the (un)conference methodology with autoethnographic reflective moments. These reflections were gathered through individual and collective writing engagements, to engage with our narratives embodying the roles of designers, facilitators, and presenters/participants. We conclude by discussing the possibilities and tensions of adopting a decolonial unconferencing model in the global South through a colonial matrix of power as a theoretical and philosophical tool.

Unconferencing

Unconferences are events where participants collectively determine meeting topics, formats, and logistics, prioritising flexibility, and conversation over formal presentations. The concept originated in the mid-1980s (Budd, et al., 2015) to promote more open communication and engagement among participants (Hale & Sekellerup, 2016). Unconferencing as such challenges traditional academic conference models, with their tight structures, high level of formalisation, and regulation and time constraints, that limit flexibility and scholarly engagement and co-development of ideas, as Sweeting and Hohl (2015: 2) argue 'The lecture type format can imply a realist epistemology, treating knowledge as a commodity to be passed on to, rather than constructed by, those listening'. The assumption behind unconferences is that all participants are equally knowledgeable and positioned as experts, and as such, these events maximise informal discussions and networking. Elements of unconferencing, such as the emphasis on active participation, group knowledge sharing, and building on participants' knowledges and experiences, can also be infused within more typical conference programme formats.

Unconferences were originally designed to support engagement in Technology and Design spaces, such as Harrison Owen's Open Space Technology (OST) or hackathons, but have since been adopted in other contexts, such as education and academic staff development. Pioneers in this context include EdCamp, THATCamp, and POD-U, all aimed at bringing together educators and academic staff developers to engage in conversations around learning and teaching. Open Space Technology has four principles that guide many of the unconferencing engagements: "Whoever comes are the right people", "Whatever happens is the only thing that could have happened", "Whenever it starts is the right time", and "When it is over, it is over".

Not all unconferences, however, follow this approach. Other formats include Birds of a Feather, project-driven or curated unconferences, world cafes, fishbowls, ignite, or pecha kucha presentations (for a detailed description of these formats, see Budd, et al., 2015). Although not everyone is familiar and comfortable with the format (Sethi, 2011), unconferences have become popular as they disrupt traditional power relations. Hale and Skellerup (2016) suggest that

unconferencing allows for quicker sharing of ideas, encourages the emergence of personal narratives and challenges traditional notions of learning space, allowing participants to leave the space but also develop relationships that help participants engage beyond the conference (Aldrich, et al., 2022).

While unconferencing's origins were bound to a technology innovation and education space, it gained significance during COVID-19, as virtual conferences across various disciplines sought effective ways to foster engagement (Holman, et al., 2022) and principles of unconferencing were applied to encourage participants' online engagement. However, it is important to note, that while online spaces can create more inclusive and democratic spaces, if properly facilitated, they are still dependent on internet access, stable bandwidth, and participants' digital literacies. While COVID-19 has promoted the use of online spaces for engagement across the world, there are still considerable concerns when it comes to online engagement in highly unequal contexts, such as South Africa (Czerniewicz, et al., 2020). The notion of the internet as a decolonial space is well debated in the literature (Philip, 2021; Kolozaridi & Muravyov, 2021; Couldry & Mejias, 2023). In a conference called "Decolonizing the Internet", it was argued that despite around 75% of the current global online population originating from regions in the global South, the predominant creators of public knowledge on the internet have been white men hailing from Europe and North America (Whose knowledge, 2018). On the other hand, Enein (2023: 263) notes that the '[t]e digital realm has become a platform for the expression and dissemination of post-colonial perspectives, providing opportunities for marginalised voices to be heard and challenging dominant narratives'. This tension underscores the complex interplay between historical patterns of knowledge production and the transformative potential of the digital space, making it a complex space to use to host an event with decolonial aspirations, such as the HELTASA (Un)Conference, as we will discuss in the next sections.

The colonial matrix of power

Decolonial scholars argue that we need new theoretical tools and concepts to understand the "dark side of modernity" (Grosfoguel, 2007; Maldonado-Torres, 2007, 2016), addressing the structural inequality in the global North and the global South. They propose that the notions of "coloniality" and "decoloniality" could help resolve these systemic challenges. Coloniality refers to the ever-present and deep-rooted structures of oppression that have remained in the post-colony long after formal colonisation (or formal apartheid) has ended in our lives (Maldonado-Torres, 2016; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). As an epistemic, ontological, and methodological response to coloniality, decoloniality exposes and dismantles coloniality, manifesting in various modes of resistance like policy, governance, sexuality, language, knowledge, culture, and spirituality. Quijano (2007) builds on philosopher, Anzaldúa's (1987) concept of the "borderlands", contending that global modernity operates on what he calls the "colonial matrix of power". The colonial matrix of power comprises three interrelated and dialectical aspects: *the coloniality of power, the coloniality of being*, and finally, the insidious, hidden and often overlooked *coloniality*

of knowledge. The matrix provides conceptual tools to theorise ourselves, our experiences in hosting the unconference, and the challenges and tensions we navigated.

The *coloniality of power* involves the current neoliberal struggles over the economic inequalities between the global North and South, where the latter faces environmental/climate change catastrophism, poverty, un- or under-employment and apartheid, amongst others. In higher education, neoliberal logics are reinforced through the growth of managerialism, performance management instruments, ratings, rankings, quality assurance, increased student fees, casualisation and the precarity of academic labour and others, aiming to make global South universities more "attractive", "desirable", and "competitive" with global North counterparts (Gachago, et al., 2023).

The *coloniality of being* stems from the flawed Cartesian rationality of *cogito ergo sum* ('I think therefore I am') (see Moriarty, 2008). The "I" refers to the colonising heterosexual European white man, claiming legitimacy and universality in race, gender, sexuality, knowledge, culture, and spirituality. Those with different ways of being are rendered "othered" and must be civilised and controlled. This sets up a decolonial challenge in how ontology (the European white body) is collapsed with epistemology (rationality and thought). Thus, beginning for us the early stages of the coloniality of being as a mode of imperial/colonial/apartheid contact, occupation, and domination.

Finally*, the coloniality of knowledge*, classified by decolonial scholar Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) as occurring on the 'epistemic line', manifests in how the intellectual conquests of African and global South epistemic traditions, indigenous knowledge and subaltern ways continue to be pushed to the periphery. Read in higher education terms, #RhodesMustFall protests across South Africa (2015/2016) were, among other concerns, about the dominance of the "dead white man" in curricula (Alasow, 2015; Mpofu, 2017; Nyamnjoh, 2017), with black and women academics being forced to encounter the unpaid, unseen, unrewarded "care work" as the black nannies in the university (Magoqwana, et al., 2019). What we could term the "knowledge otherwise", this includes a call for the greater presence of indigenous languages in all facets of the academic project, challenging the dominant view, that as a result of the colonial encounter, when indigenous languages are used, they are incapable of expressing knowledge to the same extent as the languages of the colonisers (Veronelli, 2015).

Unconferencing: A decolonial reading

As mentioned before, unconferencing emerged as a Tech/Design methodology and most literature stems from this space. There is a very small body of literature, though, which adopts the unconferencing methodology as a critical device. The reflections on the Unsettling Feminism(s) unconference held in 2011 in Chicago are an example of such an exception. This unconference intentionally applied feminist principles, such as embracing the use of different languages and genres (i.e., music and poetry), integration of multimodality (drawing, doodling, crafting), allowing for personal narratives to drive engagement, creating spaces for vulnerability but also trust, and centring usually marginalised stories, which created 'spaces for theoretical,

political, and personal resistance; and provoked reflection' (Sethi, 2011). Another example is Aldrich, et al.'s (2022) paper, in which they reflect on a series of conferences to promote a critical engagement with occupation-focused professions, arguing that applying elements of unconferencing in events, but aligning them to critical pedagogies' foci on fostering active learning and dialogue, lead to an enthusiastic community of practice.

In exploring unconferencing as a potential decolonial device for the above-contested higher education context in the global South, this paper aims to add to this small but growing body of literature. Lampel, et al. (2020: 5) contend that unconferencing operates on the epistemic assumption of equal and valid voice(s) in knowledge creation but also recognises the multiplicity of knowledges among participants. They suggest that the unconference model prioritises the conditions for 'social interaction and knowledge sharing rather than programmatically structuring these activities' in a limited and highly organised manner. They use words like "open", "freewheeling", and "democratic" to argue that unconferencing enables pluriversed voices in knowledge creation. Furthermore, King, et al. (2023) highlight how traditional conferences function as sites of inclusion/exclusion, positioning participants either at the centre or the margin, based on their scholarly standing, positionality, and output in the field. Reading their work, unconferencing as an idea presents an alternative as it provides a counter-hegemonic way of thinking beyond those established hierarchies and begins to give access and voice to those previously isolated to the periphery.

Research design

We are four individuals from four different universities involved in writing this paper. We employed collective autoethnography (CAE) to explore and capture reflective moments during the planning of the (un)conference. Autoethnography involves actively reflecting on personal experiences while immersing oneself within the context of gathering data (Gant, 2022). It contradicts the prevailing positivistic approach rooted in European traditions that emerged during the Enlightenment era (Santiago, et al., 2016). Through CAE, we were able to experience a methodology which resulted in a work that echoed our voices and not merely the result of following a prescribed and restrictive protocol.

As designers and facilitators of the (un)conference, we were deeply embedded in this event, enabling us to harvest and analyse our lived experiences collectively. We had worked together throughout the process of conceptualising, designing, and implementing the unconference throughout 2021, but continued meeting regularly after the event to reflect and debrief on our experiences. We intensified these meetings and reflections (both in writing and orally) when encouraged to contribute to this special issue. As such collaborative autoethnography takes the potential of autoethnography and strengthens it by including multiple researchers, and, in so doing, generates a richer pool of data from multiple sources (Roy & Uekasa, 2020). Furthermore, the inclusion of multiple collaborators results in multivocal data (Hernandez, et al., 2017) and as the generation and analysis of narratives is collaborative produces more nuanced and complex accounts (Gant, et al., 2019).

We started our research by drawing a timeline of the design, planning, and facilitation of the (un)conference. We then provided a description of how the (un)conference unfolded, identifying critical moments across our journey of unconferencing. We wrote up vignettes around these critical moments and collectively discussed and reflected on these vignettes. Finally, we collectively decided on themes emerging from these narratives and our reflections and analysed these through the colonial matrix of power.

This was not a straightforward process. Data collection and generation in collaborative autoethnography studies tend to be iterative, rather than linear (Roy & Uekasa, 2020), and if collected over time tends to be multifaceted (Hernandez, et al., 2017). In our many meetings, we read through each other's writings, responded, and challenged each other's perspectives. Our personal, professional, and contextual backgrounds are varied and as such our experiences and views of the world:

Daniela is an academic staff developer and scholar at a large research-intensive university. She is white, of European descent. She is interested in equity-oriented learning design for blended and online spaces.

Mlamuli is based in a research centre at a large comprehensive university in South Africa. He is an African decolonial educator and scholar. His research interests include theorising higher education transformation and decolonisation in the global South, student movements and re-thinking the public university beyond the neoliberal colonisation.

Sisanda (at the time of writing the paper) was an academic at a university of technology. She is Xhosa and her work focuses on media and rhetoric studies, as well as multilingual education.

Leanri is a learning designer at a university of technology. She is a white Afrikaner woman with an interest in educational technology.

We believe that this multiplicity of experiences, backgrounds and knowledges has enriched us immensely and we are hoping that this richness can be felt in our paper as well. In this instance, collective AE allowed us to capture the richness and complexity of shared human experiences while also acknowledging and embracing the unique perspectives of each (Wężniejewska, et al., 2020) as it involved multiple researchers capturing reflective moment using narrative stories. We are aware of critiques of CAE, such as the consequences of self-disclosure, or question of ethics clearance, or lack of thereof (Mendez, 2013). However, we follow Roy and Uekasa's (2020: 385) argument, that in particular in the crisis of the pandemic, and the continuous post-pandemic trauma, 'examining society through ourselves can avoid the unnecessary exploitation of the researched others', while making sense of our own experiences.

The Journey of the 2021 HELTASA (un)conference

This section describes our (un)conference methodology, with selected narratives around critical moments that were identified along the timeline of the unconference, highlighting both opportunities and tensions of this methodology as a decolonial device.

Conceptualising a decolonial unconference

The year 2021 was challenging for South Africa due to the COVID-19 lockdown, which caused enormous pressure on the country and the higher education sector. Academics and students were burnt out and isolated (Gachago, et al., 2022) and manifested high levels of Zoom fatigue. Organising the 2021 HELTASA Conference in the "traditional'" conference format seemed unworkable because we needed spaces to reconnect, engage, share, and re-energise ourselves. So, when the HELTASA chair suggested moving towards an unconference model, it was met with interest and curiosity, even if only a few members of the HELTASA committee had attended an unconference before and even fewer of us had organised one. To introduce the concept to the broader HELTASA community, a webinar was organised, where Mlamuli was invited to help us explore what a decolonial unconferencing model could look like, in alignment with Heltasa's support for decolonial teaching and learning approaches.

> Mlamuli: *On 8 May 2021, I held a dialogue titled 'Unconferencing: A Decolonial Perspective.' Addressing two main issues, I critiqued traditional conferencing models for hindering social justice goals, emphasising the need for vibrant critical engagements. I saw different aspects, such as having a "keynote speaker", an "expert", and a 15–20-minute presentation session and Q&As, not materially suitable for such vibrant critical engagements. Secondly, I proposed unconferencing as a bottom-up, non-hierarchical, open, inclusive, and democratic alternative, seen as counter-hegemonic.*

Initial programming of the event: Negotiating a compromise between tradition and innovation

After this webinar, an event team was formed, comprising colleagues experienced in the unconferencing methodology. Daniela, who had organised an unconference before albeit not a decolonial one, and Leanri, experienced in online conferencing, both became part of this team. This team drafted a concept note, discussing unconferencing and decoloniality and highlighting possible overlaps but also tensions. The concept note stated:

> While unconferencing focuses on flattening hierarchies and creating spaces for more engagement, their aim is more around equality (i.e. to give everyone equal space) rather than equity (to understand our different positionalities and create diversified approaches for engagement).

This tension was to accompany us throughout the process of organising this event, leading to prolonged discussions to get a collective agreement on the final format, as Leanri shares in the following reflection:

> Leanri: *Our initial programme draft suggested open spaces with minimal facilitation and no traditional presentations to maximise participant engagement. However, compromises*

were made after feedback sessions involving all decision-makers. We kept to traditional paper/poster presentations, allowing more time and limited open space. Despite our frustrations with this compromise, we recognised the importance of accommodating diverse needs. For example, one of the reasons for not having a completely open space programme was that it would be difficult for academics to get funding and time off to attend an event like this. Even though the programme became more structured, we remained committed to our unconference methodology, combining participant-driven sessions with institutional guidelines and participants' expectations.

The first programme (see Figure 1) that was drafted spanned five half-days to avoid participant fatigue. It was a compromise between those of us who favoured a more open unconferencing model and others who were less familiar with the format. The term *HELTASA (un)conference* was coined to emphasise inclusivity, creating space for both traditional conference elements and principles of unconferencing.

Focus	Time	Session
Opening provocation (keynote or panel or other)	30 - 45 minutes	08.30 - 09.00
Initial Discussion of Provocation (random breakout rooms)	15 - 30 minutes	09.00 - 09.30
2 parallel sessions (Theme/question per session) • 4 conference presentations (max 10 minutes each) • Fishbowl - lead by facilitator (20 minutes) plus 20 minutes open discussion plus 5 minutes wrap-up	45 minutes 45 minutes	09.30 - 11.00
Tea Break	30 minutes	11.00 - 11.30
2 parallel sessions (Theme/question per session) • 4 conference presentations (10 minutes each) • Fishbowl - lead by facilitator (20 minutes) plus 20 minutes open discussion plus 5 minutes wrap-up	45 minutes 45 minutes	11.30 - 13.00
Open discussion (optional) in different rooms (less structured)	30 minutes	13.00 - 13.30

Figure 1: Original programming for event

Each day featured a provocation rather than keynotes, followed by small group discussions in response. Then two 90-mins sessions were scheduled, across two rooms, with a maximum of four conference presentations (at 10 mins each), followed by a facilitated conversation between the presenters and the audience, we called *fishbowls*. Each day would end with a collective harvesting opportunity to collect participant feedback. We suggested a slightly different format for day 5 including sessions following an open space methodology, possibly the most 'unconference' element of the event.

While this programme was designed to maximise on participants' engagements, while offering structure and support to participants not as used to these more open formats, we encountered resistance, as Daniela shared below:

Daniela: *To create more engagement during the conference panels, we selected fewer presentations than normal, allowing more time for questions, discussion, and interaction. Similar presentations/papers were grouped, and presenters were encouraged to engage with each other's extended abstracts/papers beforehand. We kept presentation times very short and offered others, whom we couldn't select as presenters, the opportunity to share their research as poster presentations beforehand and then join the conversation after the presentations - thus the fishbowl idea. However, this new approach was met with resistance by some. I recall one of the presenters, to whom we extended this offer, expressing disdain that we suggested he presents his paper as a poster and not as an actual presentation. He consequently withdrew his submission. It was interesting to see how this different kind of programming, intended to create more space for engagement and less 'talk', did not sit well with participants used to the more traditional, formal ways of doing things.*

The importance of language

From the start of conceptualising the event's communication, language was a prominent consideration. The concept note was planned for translation into various languages, including a multimodal version with sign language interpretation and subtitles. A strategic communication sequence was designed, starting with a save-the-date announcement, followed by a call for proposals, reminders, and ongoing updates to build excitement and engagement leading up to the event.

Sisanda who was part of the media and communication team for the event, reflects on the importance of language.

Sisanda: *When reflecting on the issue of languaging at the design phase, I consider all of these and focus on three types of languaging issues: languaging as it relates to considerations around word choice, syntax and sentence structure; languaging as it relates to the multimodal forms of communication, and lastly languaging as it relates to the lingua franca used.*

Unlike my usual communication experience, language and communication for this event involved extensive and collective decision-making. Most of the committee contributed to various aspects, including the save-the-date document, which was collaboratively crafted during a meeting with input from most coordinating council members. The first version looked like the figure 3. The document was then round-robined for further input, where members gave more detailed individual feedback and suggestions. The final version that went out looked like the image 4.

Media and Comms

• Save the date: proposed format – TEXT and audio visual
• Monthly contributions from the teams: text and audio visual
• Content of contributions
    • Think pieces based on project theme
    • Announcements for events in the run up to the conference
• Format of contributions
    • Text
    • Audio visual
    • Screengrabs of online activities
• **Request: Please be available to assist with content** ☺
    • Consider allocating someone in your team to 'deal' with me

Figure 2: Media and comms strategy
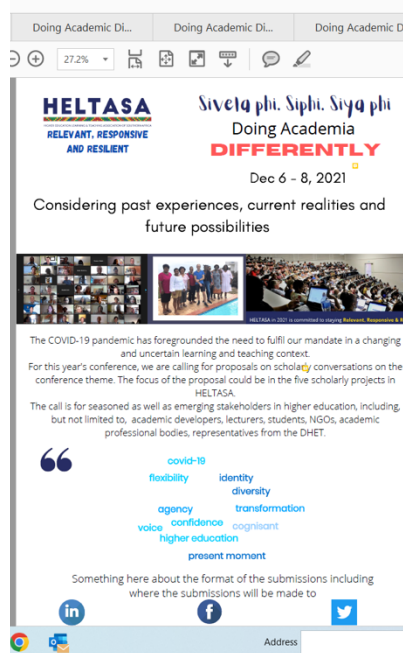
Figure 3: First draft 'Save the date'   **Figure 4**: Final draft 'Save the date'

The save-the-date document was thoughtfully designed, carefully considering each word, each aspect of syntax, and placement. The conference theme, 'Sivela phi, siphi, siya phi' ('Where do we come from?', 'Where are we?', and 'Where are we going?'), along with the notion of the (Un)Conference, aimed to be inclusive and challenge the traditional academic conference format. The catchphrase 'Sivela phi? Siphi? Siyaphi' became central in subsequent event communications, emphasising multilingual elements and the collaborative exploration of questions rather than making claims.

The second aspect of languaging relates to the multimodal ways we hoped to communicate. The goal was to balance the conventional text-based academic call for papers with a creative approach. We initially planned to incorporate sign language through an interpreter but had to opt for text-based translations in various languages due to some logistical challenges:

Sisanda: It is a pity that we could not or did not do more to explore the option of multimodality, specifically as it related to sign language and videos, in our communication. We pursued multimodal communication with text and audio-visual elements. The intention was to balance academic norms with creativity. While sign language interpretation didn't materialise due to logistical challenges, we provided text-based translations in various languages.

Selecting and designing the online space

While the media and communications team focused on language, the events team explored options for the best platform for the event. Remo, a virtual event platform, was suggested for its interactive and immersive conference venue simulation. Despite being costlier than Zoom, Remo's 2-dimensional rendering and avatar networking offered the desired experience for the (un)conference. Some of the features we were especially excited about were:

- A 'Main Stage' that spotlighted a speaker or group with chat, poll and upvote/downvote features,
- Round tables where attendees could have separate conversations in between main stage presentations,
- Customisable virtual spaces,
- Profiles that attendees could edit and others could view, and
- A virtual booth with a stage for sponsors that was always accessible.

The first step in preparing this space for the (Un)Conference was designing the backdrop. We decided to go with a camp theme where the roundtables are illustrated as fireplaces, surrounded with tree stumps and African mats as seating, accessed by simply clicking on them. The main stage was illustrated as a bonfire in the centre, as seen in Figure 5 below.

To create engagement and collect and curate participants' feedback and input, we also extensively used Padlets[1]. An introductory Padlet allowed presenters and attendees to share their bios, while session-specific Padlets facilitated sharing resources, collecting input, and curating feedback. These Padlets served as valuable resources beyond the event conference.

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[1] Padlets are online pinboards, useful for brainstorming, organising discussions, collecting ideas and in general sharing user generated information, see www.padlet.com
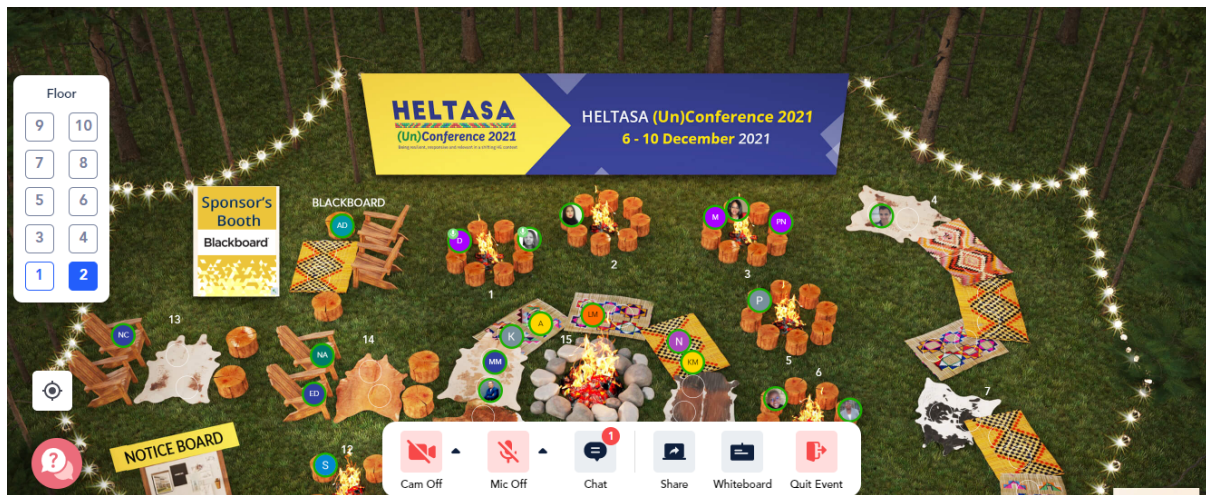
Figure 3: Screenshot of main stage in Remo

The limits of unconferencing: Managing participants' expectations

Once their submissions were accepted, participants were asked to submit extended abstracts / short papers or other outputs before the (un)conference to allow for previous engagements of all presenters with the papers in a session and the kind of short presentation/extended engagement we had planned. We proposed that participants submit proposals in response to specific questions from the scholarship projects, which would group the submissions accordingly. We had seen this work in previous unconferences and had aimed to replicate this idea of coming to the unconferencing space with questions, rather than answers, emphasising the openness of the methodology. Each of the five scholarly teams of HELTASA reviewed abstracts in their area, selected presentations or posters and communicated outcomes. Teams initiated pre-conference engagement through webinars and collaboration spaces in the hope that this would start conversation and engagement early, and would also allow the community to join a scholarship project and get more involved in the HELTASA work more broadly. Again, this led to confusion and resistance among participants, not used to this methodology, as Mlamuli describes in his reflection:

> Mlamuli: *There were deep confusions and anxieties about the (Un)Conferencing presentations. Unlike the usual 15/10 minute split, we were asked to write abstracts encouraging questions and presenting key ideas rather than traditional papers. The conference organisers informed us that we didn't need to present papers in the traditional way, but rather to flash out key things/ ideas/ takeaways that we felt were important in our work. This meant that we mostly needed to come up with questions for our fellow presenters in our shared theme. This led to calls and WhatsApp groups to share papers and provide feedback. It was not easy coming up with any useful questions though, and so in the end, the presentations themselves ended up feeling more like traditional conference-ish ones …*

Additionally, we invited two decolonial scholars for a pre-conference workshop to continue exploring the relationship between unconferencing and decoloniality, to continue our exploration of opportunities and tensions of our methodology.

Mlamuli: *After listening to Masixole and Siya (at one of these workshops on decoloniality and unconferencing), I questioned my initial assumption of aligning the decolonial agenda with social justice. I had considered unconferencing's open space possibilities and inclusive forum as potential connections to decolonial goals. However, I now found myself leaning towards black radical intellectual traditions, advocating for an Afrocentric perspective in higher education transformation and decolonisation. While I remain uncertain about the extent of unconferencing's decolonising impact, I believe the model's inventiveness, inclusivity, and accommodation can initiate the path towards an emancipatory decolonial agenda.*

Implementing the (un)conference: The final event

The final programme balanced unconferencing ideas with familiar conferencing language to accommodate participants unfamiliar with the approach. We used terms like *provocations* and *collective engagements* instead of keynotes and Q&A sessions but omitted confusing terms like fishbowls. Four days followed a more traditional conference format, while the last day incorporated open space and alternative interventions.

Figure 4: Final programme[2]

Upon entering the virtual space, participants chose their seats around fireplaces, where they could unmute and share video feeds with others in the same fireplace. Networking was

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[2]   The final programme can be viewed here: https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1GN1F3OtmGvKserTahL_N0PRRItSZqDPFGtIU47_83r0/edit?usp=sharing

possible by moving between fireplaces. When a provocation or presentation began, attendees were directed to the main bonfire stage for engagement. Afterwards, they could move around the open space freely and engage with others around their fireplace. Daniela reflects how this mimicked a 'real' conference space while allowing for the kind of democratic, informal interaction we were aiming for.

> Daniela: *The chosen video conferencing platform resembled an actual conference, allowing participants to pick seats and chat with others at the same table. We used this feature extensively, especially around the provocations at the start of each day. Participants introduced themselves before the provocations, mimicking informal coffee chats. Afterwards, they shared thoughts and feedback, answering the provocateurs' questions. For collective harvesting, we held 'mini harvesting' sessions at the end of each day, using fun prompts to collect participants' words and phrases on Padlet or word clouds. This approach started each day relaxed and informal, fostering engagement and interaction.*

Speakers for the provocations were thoughtfully selected to include diverse voices and engage in meaningful conversations. Instead of typical keynotes with Q&A, we invited students as provocateurs and formed panels for shorter but diverse inputs. Provocateurs posed questions to the audience, fostering collective engagement, as Mlamuli shares below:

> Mlamuli: *As part of our commitment to a more inclusive, decolonial, and democratic un(conferencing) space, we sought to incorporate what we initially termed the "youth voice" to challenge hegemonic voices in typical conference forums. The panel featured philosopher Siseko Kumalo, feminist scholar Simamkele Dlakavu, activist Xolani Dube, scholar Camalita Naicker, decolonial legal scholar Ntando Sindane, and scholar-activist Molaodi wa Sekake. This platform allowed us to prioritise youth voices in knowledge production while hearing marginalised perspectives. Dlakavu cautioned against hetero-patriarchy in decolonial studies, and Kumalo highlighted the marginalisation of Black bodies in knowledge-making. Sekake drew on the struggles of the forgotten and oppressed, urging us to address their plight. This youth voice(s) provocation pushed us to address the challenges in higher education and consider ways forward. It also allowed us to hear the work being done in the margins. Sekake, who wrote the influential text "Meditations from the Gutter", drew on the lives of the wretched of the Earth who continue to try and breathe in the zone of non-being. These forgotten ones often die in the pit latrines, are ignored by the state, experience crippling hunger, are under-employed and tend to die premature deaths. Those whom Sekake reminded us about live in what Du Bois and Ndlovu-Gatsheni call living below the colour line. Thus, the youth voice(s) provided the much-needed provocation that would help us think seriously about the different challenges facing us in higher education and what should be done going forward. The panel members loved their session and remarked how they rarely get invited to share their*

thoughts on such a prominent forum. Moreover, although they were nervous about accepting the invitation initially (it took several phone calls and one Zoom session to confirm 😊), they appreciated the conversation and wished for longer engagements.

After the provocations, collective engagements, and mini-harvesting, we held two parallel 90-minute sessions. Presenters offered short inputs (max 40 mins), followed by engaging conversations, between both participants who had presented and those who shared their posters beforehand. These sessions constituted the conference's heart, fostering the rich conversations we aimed for. Conversations were facilitated by members of the different HELTASA project teams, whose role in creating engaging spaces was crucial to create spaces of engagement and belonging as Daniela explains:

Daniela: *HELTASA consists of different scholarly project teams. We collectively designed the programme with the project team leads. Each project team was responsible for selecting, programming and facilitating their presentations, involving many people. While some had previous online facilitation experience, others learned through experimentation and COVID-19 challenges. The facilitators of each stream did an amazing job at keeping the conversations flowing and creating a buzz in their sessions.*

However, not all presenters experienced this engagement as equally successful. Especially the poster presentions, aimed at allowing non-presenters an equal voice and opportunity to engage, did not always work as planned, as Sisanda shares below:

Sisanda: *During my poster presentation, I expected attendees to engage with the poster beforehand, fostering broader discussions. However, it became a more typical presentation format, with presenters fielding questions. Perhaps attendees had not prepared or fell into familiar roles as questioners. The facilitators tried to maintain an open discussion, but our academic habits may have influenced the dynamics.*

The final day: Creating an open space for experimentation and improvisation

The final day followed a different format combining open space methodologies and concluding with an open mic session. The day started with some chair yoga, where the attendees were led through some restorative breathing and movement exercises by a fellow attendee. This was one benefit of the open space seen in action. The yoga session was not scheduled and was only realised because a facilitator noticed one of the attendees specialised in using yoga to improve the workplace. They got in touch, and she was happy to facilitate a few minutes on that last morning. It was well received, and many attendees switched on their video feed, showing themselves breathing and moving along. The first formal session of the day was structured with a panel of provocateurs focusing on Reflexive Praxis, prompting the attendees to reflect on their own reflecting practice. Attendees were then given the rest of the morning, closing the loop by

workshopping action steps for the way forward based on where they felt they were and where they came from. The session was called "Open Mic"; the stage was left open, and anyone could take the mic and share their input. The session was intended to wrap up the entire conference and leave attendees with a summary of their experiences constructed by themselves. The Media and Communications team put together a fun video summary to put the final bow on the week, as Sisanda shares below:

> Sisanda: *An idea emerged to create a news-style video clip summarising the (un)conference's first four days. This novel approach aimed to hand the microphone to participants and foster reflection like journalists. The final production featured tweets, quotes, and reflections, using multilingualism. Attendees freely shared varied reflections afterwards, appreciating the surprise element's creativity and multimodality. By breaking the norm, it encouraged unexpected engagement among attendees.*

> *Another innovative addition to the conference on that last day was a surprise praise poem delivered by a team member. Praise singing in academic spaces has become more common in South Africa, but this poem's retrospective use to reflect on attendees' experiences was unique. As part of the team, the poet captured the event's spirit beautifully, incorporating various languages and references to team members and developments. Oddly, there was no ululating during the online delivery, likely due to muted microphones. Nonetheless, attendees showed their appreciation with thunderous applause using reaction icons on the platform.*

Reading our narratives through the colonial matrix of power

The above narratives and experiences can be understood in terms of the colonial matrix of power and its focus on the coloniality of power, coloniality of being, and finally, the coloniality of knowledge (Quijano, 2007).

Coloniality of Power

As discussed before, the *coloniality of power* refers to the twin conditions of modernity and colonisation that continues to construct, shape, and influence our lives. Cesaire (1955) reminds that it is conceptually, empirically, and metaphysically impossible to think of western modernity (and civilisation) outside of colonial violence. Put differently, western civilisation, modernity, and colonial violence are part of the same bigger project that is designed to de-humanise, silence, and disregard the socially constructed Others. For Escobar (2007), this reflects what he calls the "colonial difference" to refer to those who are outside of western modernity as they are deemed inferior, deficient, sub-human and non-being. The HELTASA (un)conference set out to challenge this logic, through this radical idea of reimagining what a legitimate, valued, and recognised conference ought to look like, and the different (and othered) voices it ought to bring in. We were deliberate in encouraging a diversity, or what Mbembe (2016) would call a pluriversity of

voices into the forum. This includes the way we thought about collective decision making as well as tackling the challenges of tradition conferencing that always loomed large.

Emerging and collective decision making process

Unconferencing was new to us, HELTASA, and the academic space in South Africa. There were no blueprints, roads to follow, or experiences from elsewhere, which we needed to make our own. It took time, particularly as HELTASA works as a collective, and we had to bring everyone along. While this often meant complex decision-making processes and many iterations of, for example, programming before we could negotiate a format that would engage everyone, it also allowed for collective ownership and, maybe more importantly, for a format that would speak to the highly diverse audience that HELTASA represents. The results of such negotiations might not be necessarily as radical and 'different' as (at least some of us) might have wanted it to be, but it was a format that was contextual and accepted by the majority (although not all) of our participants. Consequently, dreaming up, conceptualising, designing, and facilitating and now reflecting on the (un)conference might be as if not more important than the actual output, i.e. the (un)conference itself.

Traditional structures loom strongly

Academia globally, possibly even more so in the global South, are highly traditional, conservative spaces with well-established structures, practices, and processes (Hlatshwayo, 2022; Heleta, 2016; Mbembe, 2016). There is a clear separation between those who are seen and recognised as specialised knowers and experts in the field, often signified through keynote presentations meant to give us a sense of the current challenges facing an educational field and offering us some solutions on what is to be done. Although we were committed to dislodging this hierarchical and unequal power relations in knowledge production spaces, we still nonetheless encountered challenges as the resistance was strong. Change is difficult to implement, and resistance to change is strong. In many of our reflections, we can see how our intentions for the (Un)Conference failed in response to participants' expectations and engagements. The final output was to be a 'different' academic conference, as 'different' as such an established practice with its funding requirements and institutional regulations and guidelines could be. Pragmatically, the final output was a traditional conference with some innovative or creative elements. This might have to do with how we communicated, mirroring our emerging journey and the understanding that some of what would happen was difficult to explain and needed to be experienced. Retrospectively we could have signposted clearer that we encouraged different ways of thinking and engaging, but we strongly believe that even that would not necessarily have led to a different engagement. What we ultimately achieved was possibly a compromise between the initial idea of unconferencing and what we, as South African academia, are currently able and prepared to accept, but that also made it a format uniquely ours, responsive to our needs and established practices.

Coloniality of Being

The coloniality of being is concerned with who is seen as human, as the norm, and how is 'othered' and the consequences of the 'othering'. It has to do with the spaces we create and who is made to feel as if they belonged. It has to do with how we relate to each other and what we value. Challenging rationality and centring affective engagement was highly important to us. We see the coloniality of being challenged in how we facilitated the different sessions, the look and feel of our conference, and our deliberative focus on using multimodalities and inclusive communication tools that allow an expansion of who is included in the conversation.

Centring affect

As mentioned before, 2020 was a challenging year for all of us, and what we needed from the 2021 HELTASA (un)conference was a space or process to re-energise and revitalise ourselves, to connect and feel some affective engagement with our colleagues (Gachago, et al., 2023). From the onset, the journey of unpacking, understanding, contextualising, and designing the (Un)Conference gave us energy and enthusiasm. A challenge that, although often slow and frustrating, pushed us out of our comfort zone as we collectively designed something new. We needed that space to tease out what unconferencing could look like in our context. This space allowed us to reconnect effectively with each other, experience and welcome a range of emotions, from curiosity and excitement to anxiety, frustration, and stress (Sethi, 2011).

Extreme attention to (local) detail

There was a strong focus on creating space where we feel like we belong, where we own the space, where we are home. One of the strengths of the (Un)Conference committee members was their unwavering attention to detail and care towards every little element of the larger project of the (un)conference, ensuring that the African/local/decolonial ethos of HELTASA was felt throughout the event. From language to the platform to the design of banners and other promotional materials, to surprise elements such as the praise singers, conference organisers were unapologetic about centring African tradition and culture, making the (Un)Conference a unique (South) African experience.

The limits of online

While our focus was on creating engagement and a space for conversations, this space had to be online. Online engagement in a diverse context like South Africa is rugged and unequal (Czerniewicz, et al., 2020). Poor networks, load-shedding, unequal access, and the (in)affordability of data caused unequal engagement patterns across participants (Sarkodie & Adams, 2020; Spaull, 2015; Gould, 2018). Further, multiple responsibilities and limited ability to focus on online engagement affected our ability to participate. We were aware of this and tried through facilitation and through offering various ways of engagement, synchronous and asynchronous, to mitigate against these challenges.

Coloniality of knowledge

Finally, the coloniality of knowledge is concerned with what knowledges and voices are centred in spaces such as our (Un)Conference. From the beginning, be it the conceptualisation of the event, the programming, invitation of provocateurs, or facilitation, there was a strong focus on centring diverse voices. From inviting students, decolonial scholars, practitioners, musicians, artists, communities, and stakeholders in and outside academia and carefully structuring the engagement with these actors, a decentring of usually dominant voices was foregrounded and a centring of voices we would usually not hear empathised (Hlatshwayo & Shawa, 2020). This allowed for troubling and challenging hierarchies, power and the positionality of knowers or experts (Alasow, 2015; Mpofu, 2017; Nyamnjoh, 2017).

English remains the lingua franca

When it came to the use of language, however the existing hierarchy was largely maintained. Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1997: 9) argues that for the coloniser,

> language was the most important vehicle through which that power fascinated and held the soul prisoner. The bullet was the means of the physical subjugation. Language was the means of the spiritual subjugation.

This posture still exists. The (un)conference had some intentions to disrupt linguistic hierarchies by for example translating the concept note and planning to include sign language, although the latter did not materialise. For the most part though, it was a missed opportunity.

English dominated all aspects of engagement, reinforcing the fact that because of the legacy of colonialism, it is the preferred language in academic settings, even in contexts like South Africa where it is a minority language. This is rooted in the view that indigenous languages are incapable of expressing knowledge to the same extent as the languages of the colonisers (Veronelli, 2015).

Given that the conference was held online, a space that has the technological features for translations and subtitles, there would have been scope to disrupt this tendency, and in so doing incorporate multilingual sessions to accommodate diverse linguistic backgrounds. There could have also been provisions made for the submission of proposals and abstracts in multiple languages to broaden the representation of knowledge.

Conclusions and recommendations

The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 allowed us to rethink and reconsider the different ways that knowledge is disseminated and transmitted in our spaces. Through some deliberative and reflective moments, we adopted an unconferencing methodology framed by decolonial thought as an alternative and inclusive space to create a forum for a critical dialogue on the crucial issues that affect higher education in the global South. In this paper, we have attempted to do two things. We first made a case for why we believed that unconferencing could

offer an opportunity to broaden the knowledge-sharing spaces, allowing all voices to emerge and thrive. Secondly, and through a collective autoethnographic approach, we focused on our complex experiences as the creators/designers/facilitators of this (un)conference; we share our narratives and experiences and what we see as the emergent tensions in delivering this type of unconferencing against the call for decolonising our higher education spaces. Our narratives revealed both opportunities and tensions between unconferencing itself and decolonisation, with the latter arguing for the re-centring of marginalised voices as central, while the former calls for the diverse and pluriverse voices to all have an equal footing and parity of participation. Thirdly, we also realised that the 'traditional' forms of conferencing loomed large in our lives, with some of the participants (and unconferencing planners) feeling uncomfortable with the *new-ness* of the approach and arguing for a return to "familiarity". Our narratives also revealed the struggles for an effective engagement online through the unconference methodology, the emergence of an organic collective process in our planning processes, our attention to detail, and our complex attempts at re-centring marginalised voices. Most importantly, we learnt from our reflections that by letting go of our expectations about what unconferencing usually entails, we allowed ourselves to create an engagement space that was indeed ours collectively.

Thus, based on the above discussions, we propose and recommend the following:

- The tension between unconferencing and decolonisation is real. Further research is still required on bridging this gap and ensuring that the inclusive and democratic space (unconferencing) is also a decolonial one with marginalised voices and bodies still being a central focus. How to align these two strategic visions is a complex mission.
- Current research on unconferencing essentially focuses on one type of unconferencing, premised on a radically open space methodology. Future research could potentially introduce different unconferencing types available to us. This could introduce different methodologies that could be better suited to our diverse global South context.

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