Shifting mindsets from conference to (un)conference:
A collaborative reflective perspective on conceptual disruption

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Abstract

The move from the traditional academic conference format to a loosely defined format of unconference can be contentious and spark a robust debate on the conceptual disruption of conferencing. As part of HELTASA's strategic plan of re-structuring and re-imagining its vision and purpose, it initiated a new way of conferencing; participant-driven and participant-focused. Through self-reflective written narratives, this paper explores three academic development practitioners' experiences in planning and reflecting on the HELTASA's (un)conference. We share our accounts of (un)conference as a conceptual disruption to the traditional conference format, concepts, and ways of doing and being. Qualitative data were collected from the three written narratives through a collective descriptive autoethnography research design and methodology. The insights collected are applied to the Conceptual Disruption Framework which proposes a tripartite framework for conceptual disruption, which distinguishes conceptual disruptions occurring at three levels (individual concepts, clusters of concepts, conceptual schemes), taking on two forms (conceptual gaps, conceptual conflicts), and leading to three distinct levels of severity (mild, moderate, severe). Using this framework, we describe our personal thoughts and perspectives in engaging with the novel approach of (un)conferencing. We probe into the potential of collaborative reflection to gain deeper insights and understanding of our shift from a traditional academic conference to a HELTASA (un)conference. We explore the discomfort, displacement, and learnings of the intentional disruption of our conceptual understanding of (un)conference practices. This paper highlights our shifting mindsets as we reflect and interrogate our thoughts and perspectives on the conceptual framing of (un)conferencing. The analysis of the data reveals that the engagement in the conceptual disruption of (un)conferencing together with the engagement with the concept planning and event provided the environment and atmosphere where the team appreciated brainstorming conceptual understandings, self-reflecting, and exploring different perspectives. This study provides empirical evidence of strength in collaboration, the building of conceptual disruption as a community of practice and possibility of (un)conferencing being a shape-shifter

in higher education. At an interpersonal level, the process allowed us to self-interrogate the conceptual disruption, unpacking our thoughts and shaping our own thinking. The paper asserts that shifting mindsets from conference to (un)conference, involves conceptual disruption which is a messy process and requires a level of trust, openness, adaptability amongst all members of the organising team.

Keywords: autoethnography, conceptual conflict, conceptual disruption, conceptual engineering, self-reflective narratives, unconference

Introduction

Academic conference events are a global phenomenon that provide valuable opportunities for academics and professional staff at universities to present their research, learn about cutting-edge research, network, meet new people, and build strong professional relationships with other colleagues in their field. Hauss (2021) adds that academic conferences bring together a complex network of academic and non-academic professionals to discuss and disseminate new knowledge. He elaborates that the practice of 'conferencing' also includes activities that go far beyond the exchange of information to constitute social spaces for engagement and a significant vehicle for generating scientific and societal impact. Although academic conferences can be regarded as communities of practice that contribute to continuing professional development, the format of these conferences remains very rigid and restricted to open engagement. Traditional conference formats are often described as 'back-to-back' and 'sage on the stage' (Anderson & Anderson, 2010: 13), and using unidirectional communications (Ravn & Elsborg, 2011). Ravn and Elsborg (2011) further identify the following six critical issues that conventional conferences follow: too much lecturing, too little time for digestion and reflection, often frustrating group work, workshops as a misnomer, experts' panel as just more one-way communications, and the 'Network Lunch' not being a networking lunch. Zuber-Skerritt (2017) adds that many academic conferences do not seem to offer sufficient opportunities for delegates to engage actively in collaborative learning from dialogue, interchange, and critical reflection.

This paper focuses on the conceptual disruption that occurred during the HELTASA 2021 (un)conference. According to Löhr (2022: 838), the term conceptual disruption refers to

> any intentional or unintentional challenge or interruption of how the individual or group has intuitively classified individuals, properties, actions, situations, or events, leading to classificatory uncertainty, i.e., uncertainty about the application conditions of a word or concept.

As part of HELTASA's strategic plan of re-structuring and re-imagining its vision and purpose, it initiated a new way of conferencing, being participant-driven and participant-focused. The move from the traditional academic conference format to a loosely defined format

of (un)conference can be contentious, which may spark a robust debate on the conceptual disruption of conferencing. As three members involved in the planning of the (un)conference, we had to grapple with the change from HELTASA's annual conference to HELTASA's (un)conference, which initially led to significant disruption of established beliefs, social norms and practices of how academic conferences should be conceptualised and structured. This paper delves into the accounts and challenges experienced in engaging with this new concept of (un)conference and the transition in disrupting established structures within academic conferences. Siemens, et al. (2008) state that the unconference format has brought about a radical shift in conference planning. They highlight that the unconference format is self-organised and the approach is focused more on distributed and informal control and less on the medium of delivery and the emergence of community knowledge. In the unconference format the conference organisers play an impactful role, with facilitating networking and self-organisation being important cornerstones of the unconference format.

In 2021, HELTASA took on this challenge to transform the way it delivered its academic conferences in the past. The HELTASA conference planning committee took a bold step to introduce an (un)conference methodology during the Covid-19 pandemic and the very first HELTASA (un)conference was presented online. The online (un)conference approach provided a platform for more diverse voices and perspectives during the multi-modal presentations. The introduction of keynote provocation panels brought in more robust discussions and voices of all participants. It was an incredible online (un)conference experience filled with a rich exchange, heart-felt sharing and camaraderie among participants. The intentional shift to be more inclusive and open to dialogue engaged all participants at HELTASA's first (un)conference. Compelling dialogues through workshops, poetry, videos, posters, and other modes resulted in knowledge sharing and meaningful engagement. Topics on decolonial love, accessibility, ubuntu[1], transformative pedagogies and collective agency were some of the dialogues at the (un)conference that took place on the online platform. The conceptual disruption to the traditional conference format by HELTASA during the Covid-19 pandemic saw two key focus areas being explored: the (un)conference approach and the use of online technology-enhanced and social media methods of delivering the online (un)conference event. Spilker, et al. (2020) highlight the critical role of technology in enhancing new landscapes as conference formats undergo innovations that focus on amplifying social learning. Their study highlights the use of social media at conferences as contributing to a greater potential value to conference attendees in terms of efficient information sharing and networking. They add that application and value of social media as technology-enhanced academic conferences for community building and enduring professional development should be further explored. The shifting educational landscape coupled with rapid technological advancements and the calls for higher education to be responsive and relevant contributed to HELTASA's radical shift to reconceptualising its annual academic conference. This is following Hopster, et al. (2023) who argue that the disruption of

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[1]Ubuntu is an ancient African word meaning 'humanity to others'. It is often described as reminding us that 'I am what I am because of who we all are'.

concepts may also be due to social and/or cultural disruptions, i.e. social dynamics, often fostered by emerging technologies, whereby important aspects of human society are prevented from continuing as before, provoking normative disorientation, and giving rise to a variety of ethical and social challenges (Hopster, et al., 2023: 143).

Introduction to the three authors

The research team consisted of the three female authors from different institutional contexts and academic backgrounds, with a total of over fifty years of higher education experience amongst us. Author 1 is a learning and teaching specialist located in the Deputy Vice-Chancellor Academic's office and works closely with academic and professional support staff and students to enhance student success at an institutional level. Author 1 is also the deputy vice-president of HELTASA. Author 2 has been working within the field of Academic Development since 2011 at a university of technology. Her experience in academic development spans across student, staff and curriculum development. Author 2 is also the project lead of the HELTASA's Professional Learning Project. Author 3 is a learning and teaching specialist at a university of technology, with experience in curriculum development, staff development and student support. Author 3 is the lead for the HELTASA Teaching Awards task team.

All three of us are members of the HELTASA Coordinating Council and hold different positions within the organisation, however, we came together in this research to self-reflect on the conceptual disruption that occurred during the HELTASA 2021 (un)conference.

Conceptual framing

The dominant concepts that underpin this paper include, conceptual disruption within the context of (un)conferencing by analysing the collective descriptive autoethnographies of the three authors. The narratives contain their reflections in terms of how these conceptual disruptions impacted thoughts, emotions and practices, and ethnographies as a research method where the authors themselves became the subjects of study. With reference to these collective ethnographies, the authors developed written narratives that were first-hand accounts of reflection-on-action and reflection-in-action of the HELTASA (un)conference. These reflective narratives served as data for analysis using specific emergent codes. The Conceptual Disruption Framework introduced by Marchiori and Scharp (2024) is used to analyse our reflective narratives

Conceptual disruption

There seems to be a dearth of literature on 'conceptual disruption' in terms of how understandings of concepts, practices and events are disrupted, when change is introduced after decades of similar formats having become the norm. Within the context of academic conferences, the format and programme outline has generally been the same for decades, both nationally and internationally. For example, conferences would be in-person, a call for abstracts according to a specific format would be made, the conference would commence with keynote speakers, and presentations would be formal 20-minute research papers, posters, or workshops.

Given the limitations of in-person interaction resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic, which in itself was a conceptual disruption, the change to (un)conference was necessitated by having to think differently about current and future conferencing norms. Löhr (2022: 838) notes:

> We have a case of a conceptual disruption as soon as the ordinary non-reflective equilibrium of concept application is interrupted or disturbed or as soon as we are forced to make a conscious conceptual decision about the proper application conditions of a concept that demands reflection and reasoning.

The term "(un)conference" signalled an intended shift in conferencing that challenged the 'equilibrium of concept application' (Löhr, 2022: 838) and demanded reflection and reasoning as to what the term meant as a concept and in the application. As aptly stated by Löhr (2022), this new (un)conference concept had to be internalised, which would likely lead to conceptual uncertainty with respect to whether the authors understood the implications of what (un)conference meant. This uncertainty and conceptual disruption, however, was shared by other members of the planning committee 'who may have never heard of the linguistic change or intervention but who still assume an interpretive common ground' (Löhr, 2022: 839). Before the Covid-19 pandemic, the term 'conference' had a specific connotation within the academic fraternity, with certain set expectations and practices that remained constant. Although conferencing moved online during the pandemic, the conference format remained relatively the same as before the Covid-19 pandemic. The advent of the (un)conference for HELTASA 2021 not only signalled a different term linguistically but challenged the status quo of academic conferences by disrupting cultural norms and entrenched practices of yesteryear. This linguistic disruption as one example of conceptual disruption, is considered to be

> the conceptually most disruptive aspect of introducing a new concept by means of concept replacement or the change of the use of a word is that the old world (especially if it had an important use and function) brings with it some baggage that is difficult to ignore. It often takes time to establish a new use of a term. (Löhr, 2022: 838)

Although the concept "(un)conference" initially evoked thoughts and emotions of uncertainty, as (un)conference planning unfolded and with continued discussion amongst the planning team, the use of (un)conference became commonplace as understanding became clearer and the anticipation of change became evident. In order for us, the authors, to have a deeper conceptual understanding of (un)conference this required us to actively engage with critical reflection on how each of us as individuals and as a collective interpreted (un)conference.

Conceptual disruption framework

In our reflections on the conceptual disruption and our experiences in engaging with the new concept and the (un)conferencing event, we were guided by the Conceptual Disruption

Framework introduced by Marchiori and Scharp (2024). The tripartite framework emphasises the levels of conceptual disruptions (mainly occurring at three levels: individual concepts, clusters of concepts, and conceptual schemes); it takes on two forms (conceptual gaps or conceptual conflicts) and leads to three different degrees of severity (mild, moderate, severe). Regarding the level of conceptual disruption, a disruption to a conceptual scheme relates to a phenomenon where the conceptual scheme that existed in a phenomenon previously is no longer applicable to that phenomenon. A conceptual change speaks to a change in function, 'and not to the constitutive principles of the concepts in question' (Marchiori & Scharp, 2024: 18). Conceptual disruption may affect multiple concepts, i.e., a conceptual cluster, simultaneously which in turn, may bring about disruptions in related concepts. Similarly, at the third level, conceptual disruption may affect cluster concepts relating to traditional conferencing, which prompts disruptions in related concepts (noted in Table 1 below). For example, the conceptual disruption in HELTASA (un)conferencing, concepts such as the shift to proposals from abstracts and provocateurs from keynote speakers, elicited different conceptual understandings in conceptual conference clusters, with the use of (un)conference presenting a conceptual disruption of an individual concept.

Table 1: Taxonomy of Conceptual Disruption

	Level of disruption	Type of disruption	Severity of disruption
Conceptual disruption	Level 1 Conceptual scheme	Conceptual gap	<u>Mild disruption</u> (does not give rise to conceptual uncertainty)
	Level 2 Conceptual cluster	Conceptual gap	<u>Moderate disruption</u> (when it gives rise to conceptual uncertainty, but can be with a more permanent and adequate solution
		Conceptual conflict	<u>Severe disruption</u> (gives rise to conceptual uncertainty which cannot be meaningfully mitigated before it is addressed and solved).
	Level 3 Individual concept	Conceptual gap Conceptual conflict	<u>Moderate disruption</u> <u>Severe disruption</u>

(Adapted from Marchiori & Scharp, 2024: 5)

From Table 1 above, conceptual disruption is shown at each level and classified according to the type of disruption and severity of disruption. In our reflections of the (un)conference event and coming to grips with the new concept and ways of being and doing we were able to identify types of disruption and levels of disruption on the individual concept and our conceptual scheme as a whole. We highlight our own discomfort, challenges and affordances that arose from the (un)conference concept and event.

Reflection and reflective practice

Although understandings and practices of reflection and reflective practice evolved over the years, the purpose, action, and outcomes of reflection stem from Dewey's (1938) theory of inquiry which postulates that reflection is to look back over what has been done to consider what has been learned to apply these learnings to further experiences. Rogers (2001) provides an overview of reflection and reflective practice as a transformative construct, drawing on seminal theorists and researchers such as Dewey, Schon, Boud, Mezirow, and others. Rogers' (2001) exposition reveals the complexities of different interpretations and practices that give credence to the limitations of having 'conceptual clarity' (Van Beveren, et al., 2018) on understandings of reflection and reflective practice. Rogers (2001) notes that reflection is a cognitive process requiring the individual's active engagement, and that, 'ultimately, reflection intends to integrate the understanding gained into one's experience to enable better choices or actions in the future as well to enhance one's overall effectiveness' (Rogers, 2001: 41). Similarly, in a study conducted by Van Beveren, et al. (2018: 4), it was found that 'reflective practice generates new perspectives on one's own perspectives, as well as, more fundamentally, entirely new belief systems or consultant philosophies'. They note further that at the interpersonal level, reflection is considered useful to develop an awareness of the other in relation to cultural identities, spiritual beliefs and socio-economic realities, while on a social transformational level, critical reflection is intended to, 'reconstruct new interpretations of a situation, new forms of knowledge and new social structures' (Van Beveren, et al., 2018: 6).

In this paper we draw on elements of reflection derived from empirical research (Rogers, 2001; Van Beveren, et al., 2018; Palacios, et al., 2018; Weiringa 2011). Within the context of this study, reflection and reflective practice were based on:

- Personal active engagement in relation to reflection after action, i.e. reflection on a past (un)conferencing event,
- Cognitive processes and shifts in thinking that took place during and after the (un)conferencing event,
- Generating different and/or new perspectives for future similar events,
- Developing an awareness of how others in the South African higher education fraternity might perceive (un)conferencing and how this might disturb their cultural identities as presenters in a different space to conventional conferences held over the years, and
- The need to reconstruct new interpretations of (un)conferencing 'with new forms of knowledge and new social structures' (Van Beveren, et al., 2018: 6) that might not align with thinking, practices and norms associated with previous academic conferences.

Schon (1991) suggests two levels of reflection: reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. The reflection process for reflection-on-action is undertaken after the event that initiated the process. However, Schon (1983) offers a departure from the perception that problems for reflection are necessarily reflected upon after the event. He suggests that reflection-in-action as

a concept allows for continual interpretation and reflective conversation with oneself about the event while applying the information gained from past experiences to inform and guide new actions and thoughts. The focus of this paper relates to focus-on-action i.e. reflecting on the first (un)conference *after* the event took place in 2021, largely prompted by online engagements necessitated by the Covid-19 pandemic.

We draw on Schon's (1983) reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action, which accentuates the need for ongoing reframing, reconsideration, and individual and collaborative reflection of before, during and post the (un)conference. We critically reflect on the following question: To what extent did the (un)conferencing practices create a conceptual disruption contributing to HELTASA's strategic vision of the three 'Rs', Relevance, Responsiveness, and Resilience that aims at shape-shifting toward social change?

Acknowledging our experiences in planning the (un)conference provides a source of knowledge that is valuable in reflective practice. Robins, et al. (2003) describe reflective practice as a tool that allows the person reflecting to understand themselves, their personal philosophies, and the dynamics of their participation in the event more deeply. The process of engaging in reflection not only provides a personal resource that can be accessed in other similar contexts but is also a tool that empowers individuals who use it.

Methodology

This study is located within the interpretivist paradigm, which encompasses a range of paradigms 'concerned with the meanings and experiences of human beings' (Williamson, 2006: 84). A phenomenological study was undertaken using collective descriptive autoethnography as an approach to highlight the existential shifts in our contextual understanding on (un)conference methodology used by HELTASA. We describe our personal thoughts and perspectives in engaging with the novel approach of (un)conferencing and the conceptual disruption that accompanied the event. Using collective descriptive autoethnography allowed us to collect personal memory data, interview each other and analyse each other's reflections to gain a better understanding of our (un)conferencing experience. Ngunjiri, et al. (2011) regard autoethnography as being self-focused and context-conscious. It allows researchers to produce meaningful research grounded in personal experience. Some researchers regard autoethnography as a contentious qualitative research methodology that speaks from the heart about existential experiences (Anderson, 2006; Denzin, 2006; Adam & Bochner, 2011). However, Francis and Hester (2012) point out that self-reflection as a systematic methodological approach, positions the researcher as part of the social world just as any other individual, and in this regard, the beginning of a social inquiry can be the researcher's own experiences and activities in which they can self-reflect upon.

As part of the collaborative autoethnography (CAE) methodology (Chang, et al., 2013; Roy & Uekusa, 2020), we used written narratives to place ourselves within the (un)conference context, as we reflected on our engagement in the planning of HELTASA's first (un)conference event in 2021. Although Roy and Uekusa's (2020) study on collaborative ethnographies relates to CAE as

a research methodology during the Covid-19 pandemic, distinct parallels may be drawn with these authors using CAE as a research approach. Roy and Uekusa (2020: 384) aver that:

> Qualitative researchers should consider using their own first-hand experiences … as a rich source of data … [and] we could study society through ourselves … CAE in this regard, is deemed to be a useful, ethical, and self-empowering research method.

In keeping with the central tenets of collaborative autoethnography, i.e., reflection and collaboration, in this study we self-reflected on the planning and engagement of the event with the use of written narratives or vignettes. The three narratives allowed for multiple voices and perspectives, which increased the source of data and information from a single researcher to multiple researchers to contribute to a more in-depth understanding and learning of the self and others (Roy & Uekusa, 2020; Govender & Timm, 2024).

Written narratives can be described as short stories, and recollections of actions, which are explored and styled contextually and include written texts. Ricoeur (1984) views narrative as the retrieval of past experiences, in which its shaping is drawn from recollection and memory. Bruner (2002) highlights that from the start of constructing stories, time and space, and memory and imagination become fused. Bruner (2002) describes this process as dialectic meaning-making between what was expected and what happened. These narratives review lived experiences of the past and predict future possibilities.

The use of self-reflexivity and dialogical analysis of our own narratives can be considered acceptable for productive qualitative research. The use of collaborative reflections on the self-narratives provides a methodological option in which the researcher is both the instrument and the data source in the study (Chang, et al., 2013). According to Roy and Uekusa (2020), such a methodological option allows a group of researchers to turn their collective self-narratives, observations and experiences into rich qualitative data by researching themselves rather than others in the study. Through this collective reflective method, we explore our positionality as researchers, our own biases, beliefs and personal experiences on the (un)conferencing methodology used to reflect on the conceptual disruption according to the levels and types of conceptual disruption applying Marchiori and Scharp's (2024) conceptual disruption framework. Hopster, et al. (2023) caution that when considering conceptual disruption, it is imperative to remain sensitive to various problems that remain in the background of the concepts. They articulate two principle concerns to substantiate their apprehension: firstly, the determination of the most appropriate framing is subject to contestation, as what may be regarded as a conceptual gap by some may be understood as an overlap by others. Secondly, the discourse surrounding conceptual disruption may imply a somewhat unified and tangible understanding of concepts, potentially fostering the notion that the meaning and scope of concepts are invariably well-defined, and that a singular dominant concept or conception is susceptible to disruption. Such an interpretation may suggest that the meaning of the concepts is clear-cut and there is a greater degree of conceptual consensus than actually exists, thereby disregarding significant levels of

differences and diversity. In reflecting on our own narratives and analysis of each other's we were intentional to ensure that all voices, framing and levels of differences and common ideas were considered.

Emerging themes aligned to the conceptual disruption framework
Conceptual disruption: the shift to (un)conference

At the heart of concepts and conceptual interpretation lies the depth of individual understanding, meaning and 'semantic richness' (Dove, 2018: 2) that each person or organisation assigns to concepts in use. Dove (2018) refers to 'embodied cognition' as it relates to how concepts are conceptualised and become part of how individuals experience a concept such that the concept and the experience are often intertwined. He notes that 'embodied cognition posits an intimate link between cognition and experience, and a great deal of our experience is with language itself' (Dove, 2018: 3) In this context, the 'conference' concept over the years, became the embodiment of in–person dialogue with a daily programme starting with keynote speakers, followed by oral paper presentations, workshops and poster presentations. This was the default understanding and expectations of an academic conference. The conference experience became synonymous with the conference concept.

Within the South African context, the well-known "embodied cognition" of the academic conference was disrupted to an unknown academic (un)conference and signalled more than a conceptual linguistic shift. In other words, the HELTASA planning team adding the bracketed prefix "un" to "(un)conference" was an indication that the previously held conference notion and experience was about to change, but to what extent, would be determined as the (un)conference planning unfolded. Initially, each of us had different interpretations of what (un)conferencing would hold. The excerpts from the self-narratives below suggest a difference in thinking and attempts to conceive of what (un)conferencing meant and embodied. As noted by the various authors:

> Author 1: *Getting to fully understand the (un)conference methodology was not easy as I had never attended an (un)conference event or heard any of my colleagues talk about such an event.*

> Author 2: *My assumptions of (un)conferences deviated from the norm. There is a lack of structure or no format; it would be more 'arts-based' where delegates will be able to present in poetry, dramatizations, role play. It would be open and free flowing with no predetermined programme.*

> Author 3: *The term (un)conference signalled a difference in the norms of how conferences were previously conducted, but those differences were yet to be clarified.*

The previous conceptual scheme was the traditional conference with abstracts, keynote speakers and presenters. The excerpts reveal a common conceptual conflict of the unknown given the conceptual gap between what was, i.e. how conferences were conducted, and what would be, i.e. what the (un)conference would entail. It was telling that members of the conference planning task team grappled with how to interpret the concept"(un)conference". The challenge was not only about trying to make sense of interpreting the linguistic change, but also about how the concept was used, why the prefix "(un)" was in brackets and what this might mean for an innovative HELTASA conference. The authors had individual ideas, but no collective vision of (un)conferencing at the outset, which led to insecurities, uncertainties and conceptual conflict.

The linguistic and experiential conceptual disruption could be attributed to '*this loosely defined approach [that] was a difficult concept to grasp*' (Author 1). As with the rest of the planning team, we tried to make sense of the concept first in order to translate this to the different conference methodology that emerged.

An apt summation of the conceptual disruption that the term (un)conference elicited is captured by Author 1:

The term (un)conference was unsettling … I assumed that the (un)conference would be different but was unsure what these differences would be. When analysing the denotation, '(un)' signals a difference from conference norms, but the brackets before 'conference' suggests that academic conference norms would remain in certain aspects, such as having keynote speakers.

That the term '(un)conference was unsettling' presents an example of severe conceptual disruption at first This was indeed how the (un)conference panned out, with elements of the "traditional" conferencing interspersed with elements of difference to encourage discussion, interaction, engagement, provocations and dialogue, as much as the online environment allowed.

Implications of conceptual disruption at the concept level brought about curiosity, conversations, and collaborative thinking to arrive at a collective understanding of (un)conferencing which led to the emergent conference theme loosely translated to, "where do we as HELTASA come from, where are we now and where are we going t". This embodiment of reflection in- and on-action encouraged different dialogues, discourse and design, not to be different, but to be relevant and responsive to changing higher education contexts.

All three of us experienced a conceptual disruption regarding the shift from conventional conferencing to (un)conferencing which impacted our entire being - experiences, thoughts and feelings. According to Sudhakar, 'disruption takes a left turn by literally uprooting and changing how we think, behave, do business, learn and go about our day-day' (Sudhakar, 2018: 2).

The conceptual disruption of our beliefs about what academic conferences should encompass *'was a bit daunting at first as the word (un)conference conjured images various images of chaos and mayhem in my mind''* (Author 1). These feelings of being unprepared, lost, uncertain and discomfort were experienced by all three authors as we navigated through the

messiness of organising and executing the (un)conference. All three authors initially experienced severe conceptual disruptions that changed to mild disruptions as conceptual gaps between conference and (un)conference narrowed (Marchiori & Scharp, 2024).

Conceptual engineering: Changing mindsets

Riemer and Johnston (2019) capture the notion of disruption as a change so fundamental and seemingly radical that is often beyond recognition by individuals that are experts or operate within that particular field. In planning for the HELTASA (un)conference, we reflected on the conceptual disruption to the traditional format. Some of our immediate concerns related to the radical change to academic conference concepts that were known to delegates attending conferences. We had to shift our thinking and actions from the preplanning stage to implementation and evaluation phase.

This was a new experience for many of us, we had to learn new ways of ensuring that we did not lose sight of engaging with the conference delegates and providing opportunities to network with fellow colleagues. The quote below highlights the severe conceptual disruption and conceptual gaps experienced in grappling with the (un)conferencing concepts:

> Author 1: *Although we were embracing our new key strategic pillars of being relevant, responsive and resilient, we needed to get our minds around moving from a traditional conference format to an (Un)conference format that was less structured and allowed for more dialogue, openness and creativity. Moving towards a common understanding of (un)conference methodology was not an easy task. A quick Google search to try and familiarise ourselves with the new concepts and actions assisted in unravelling this disruption to our understanding and thinking.*

This loosely defined concept of (un)conferencing was difficult to grasp. Immediately our thoughts went to the prospective (un)conference participants. We found it exceedingly difficult to conceive of the (un)conference format, which initially seemed unmethodical as we tried to clarify our own understanding of what (un)conferencing means and how this would be enacted for the first time in South Africa. We were experiencing a moderate conceptual disruption due to conceptual conflict. Much was at stake with the first HELTASA (un)conference given the history of HELTASA which was known for being an enabling environment for academics and academic specialists to start their conferencing and publication journey. The following quotes relate to some of the conceptual conflicts that we contended with based on our own uncertainties and insecurities:

> Author 3: *The success of the first (un)conference would hinge on whether regular members would still find a conference home for their understanding, perceptions and comfortability of whether they would continue to attend future (un)conferences.*

Author 2: *The HELTASA annual conference is one that many academics, learning and teaching professional staff and academic developers look forward to sharing their research, scholarship of practice and building on their publications would they be comfortable with the new call for proposals than abstracts and dialogues instead of presentations?*

Although we struggled with these conceptual conflicts, we were simultaneously excited and apprehensive about the changes that were about to take place in conferencing. The comments below signal a shift from a severe to a mild conceptual disruption as the authors gained a clearer understanding of (un)conferencing:

Author 1: *I was open to seeing what the (un)conference of 2021 had to offer …, it was inevitable that the norms of academic conferences would change.*

Author 2: *it was an exciting new way of doing conferences, which allowed for open spaces for dialogues and being creative.*
Author 3: *It levelled the playing field where everyone participated as equals. All learnings were acknowledged as being important as it contributed to professional growth.*

Our initial reaction to this seemingly radical change slowly shifted as we began to engage collaboratively on (un)conferencing. Although there were many differences in both traditional and unconference methods, the choice depended on the intention of the organisers and how they deemed fit to engage with their participants. The HELTASA delegation intended to disrupt and bring to the fore more participant engagement, prioritising interaction, collaborative learning and peer-to-peer knowledge exchange throughout the (un)conference event. Marchiori and Scharp (2024: 12) refer to this process as 'conceptual engineering' which refers to eliminating conceptual conflicts by redefining old concepts in a new way that allows the concept to be applied to particular situations.

These excerpts of the three authors straddled the uncertainty of what might transpire, as well as holding the promise of change. The references to 'open spaces', 'creativity', and the inevitably that 'norms of academic conferences would change'*,* suggest that there was an expectation of change by challenging current norms and practices held sacred in higher education over the years. Shifts in thinking were concretised as we traversed distinct phases of unravelling disruptions of (un)conferencing, to the point that the need for change became imperative rather than an emergent outcome. This was a stimulus to extend the bounds of disruptions in (un)conferencing, to the possibilities of disrupting our own thinking and practices in our roles in higher education spaces. Challenging existing norms seemed less daunting given the shifts that we encountered in collaboration with others. However, extending the bounds of disruptions that we experienced would require a critical mass and collaboration of common purpose for transformative change to be affected in the university context. For example, changes

to curriculum, learning, teaching and assessment should be paramount but often remain unchanged because disruptions relate to personal discomfort of university staff.

New vistas of conceptual disruption

The (un)conference space is a potent one as it 'celebrates autonomy encourages the emergence of our personal narratives because the unconference challenges traditional notions of learning space redefining the locations, relationships and structures by which we communicate and build understanding; and because of the unconference's democratic-participatory structure' (Hale & Bessette, 2016: 9). After the conceptional disruption the conceptual change happened. We did resist at first as we felt we were not ready to move out of our safe and comfortable cocoons. Transformation was an interactive process of inward and outward change. We were continually reflecting on the changes that were happening within as we knew that *'...we must find new ways of doing and of being in Higher Education'* (Author 1).

The process of (un)conferencing was expressed in the following comments by the authors:

Author 1: *...it was a very engaging experience...It was a lovely and empowering space to work within ...The (un)conference provided a wonderful place to learn and grow.*

Author 2: *It provided us with an alternative way to participate in conferences and organising conferences and it created more open discussions and networking ... it got us to rethink new ways of doing and engaging with academic work. ... It did contribute to my own professional development.*

Author 3: *The (un)conference format opened up new vistas of conference thinking, doing and being.*

From these reflections, it is evident that from conceptual disruption emerged a realisation that accepted concepts can be contested and lead to novel ways of planning academic conferences, which has the potential to transform the higher education landscape.

Conclusion

Given the need to reflect on previous (un)conferencing events to explore learnings and developments for possible future (un)conferences, we as three task team members who were directly involved with planning the event, developed written narratives in the form of ethnographies to document personal experiences and emotions of the novel journey before, during and after the (un)conferences. We each held distinct roles and responsibilities in planning the (un)conferences with each self-narrative being bespoke to the roles, responsibilities, experiences and learnings that occurred.

The narratives present personal reflections made manifest due to conceptual disruption from "conference" to "(un)conference", and the emotions and uncertainties that this initially

evoked, but simultaneously foregrounds the journey that we traversed in embracing shifts, changes and innovations that might not have been. Crossing boundaries from severe conceptual disruptions to mild conceptual disruptions, from the known to the unknown might well have presented challenges. However, this study provides empirical evidence that challenging the norms of traditional conferencing presents opportunities for change. The process allowed us to self-interrogate not only our thoughts and actions in the conceptual disruption of (un)conferencing but to go further and self-interrogate other related concepts of our roles in academic development and as black females working in the higher education sector. Although (un)conferencing as trialled by HELTASA in 2021 became a shape-shifter, for us as three academic development practitioners in higher education as it encouraged different thinking, actions and implementation that epitomised resilience in our respective positions. The conceptual disruption that started with a linguistic shift of a bracketed prefix, un, resulted in waves of change in our personal and organisational norms and practices that could well become the new norm if this is pursued. In conclusion, the engagement with the (un)conferencing conceptual disruption required trust, adaptability, and open engagement amongst all HELTASA members that formed part of the organising team.

Author Biographies

Subethra Pather is currently the Learning & Teaching specialist in the office of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor Academic at the University of the Western Cape (UWC). She plays an important role in enhancing UWC's student success initiatives. Prof Pather is UWC's Lead for the Siyaphumelela Student Success project funded by the Kresge Foundation. She is Deputy President of the Higher Education Learning and Teaching Association of Southern Africa (HELTASA). Prof Pather is the manager of UWC First Year Experience (FYE), First Year Peer Mentoring, Academic Advising and Tutor Enhancement Program at an institutional level. She is also involved in a regional project on Designing for Social Justice Partnership (DSJP) in South Africa and an international project on Mentoring Meaningful Learning experiences at the Center for Engaged Learning at Elon University in USA. Her research interests are located within the higher education field with a particular focus on supporting first-year student access, transition, retention, and success. Her extensive academic publications and academic presentations are located in this field. She is also involved in several national and international networks in first-year experience and student-staff partnerships to advance student success in South Africa and her research agenda.

Rosaline Govender holds a Doctorate in Education from UKZN and has been immersed in the field of academic development since 2011 at the Durban University of Technology (DUT). Her extensive expertise in academic development extends across student, staff, and curriculum enhancement. At the institutional level, she has contributed as a member of various task teams, including General Education, Siyaphumelela, and the Philosophy of Education. Within the Higher Education Learning and Teaching Association of Southern Africa (HELTASA), she plays key roles

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Desiree Scholtz is the Assistant Dean: Learning and Teaching in the Faculty of Business and Management Sciences at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology. Her focus is on student development, academic staff development and curriculum development, which are also indicative of the areas of research and publications. As HOD Curriculum Development at Fundani CHED for three years, she facilitated the transition and qualification development from HEQF to HEQSF qualifications at institutional level. A previous position at Fundani CHED, included co-ordinating the National Benchmark Tests, which was also the focus of her PhD thesis. Desiree is a member of the HELTASA Co-ordinating Committee, and represents HELTASA on the National University Teaching Awards committee. She contributed to developing the NUTA Framework and the NUTA Processes and Procedures.

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