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Conference Report

Dancing on the Learning and Teaching Waves of Change in Africa

HELTASA 2018 Conference, 20–23 November 2018, Nelson Mandela University, Port Elizabeth, South Africa

Noluthando Toni and Anne-Mart Olsen

Nelson Mandela University

noluthando.toni@mandela.ac.za

Background

Nelson Mandela University hosted the 2018 Higher Education Learning and Teaching Association of Southern Africa (HELTASA) conference from 20 to 23 November 2018. The picturesque South Campus in Summerstrand welcomed 354 delegates to Port Elizabeth and enabled the presentation of 109 papers, 38 posters, and four workshops from across the South African higher education sector.

As hosts of the HELTASA 2018 conference, Nelson Mandela University endeavoured to create an enabling space for delegates across the higher education landscape to engage, converse, build relationships, and contribute towards building a community that will continue to add value to the higher education context, regionally, nationally, and globally.

Conference theme

Higher education institutions in South Africa and the world over are confronted with, and continuously navigate, various waves of change. These include but are not limited to fee-free higher education; financial sustainability in the face of shrinking government funding; producing graduates who function effectively in a globalised, connected world but who are also locally relevant; including the student voice; and decolonisation and transformation of curricula, academia, and academic spaces. Considering these developments and changes, *Dancing on the Learning and Teaching Waves of Change in Africa* was deemed a befitting theme for the HELTASA 2018 conference. In bringing the theme to realisation, it was decided to move away from prescriptive sub-themes and, rather, request presenters to *focus on change and transformation in higher education that relates to one, or a combination, of the rhythms below*:

- Responsive curricula, and curriculum and career pathways
- Higher education pedagogies for sustainable development (including new and/or responsive pedagogies and sustainable assessment)
- Student access and success

- Learning analytics to inform transformative teaching, learning, and support
- Leadership to respond to complexity and uncertainty in novel ways
- Transformative teaching development across the academic career trajectory

In moving away from conventional sub-themes and focussing, rather, on rhythms, we hoped to stimulate and disrupt traditional thinking and paradigms to encourage a measure of freedom, collaboration, liveliness, and innovation within the academic project.

Complexity science literature suggests that it is no longer fruitful to manage and drive change in conventional, linear, mechanistic ways—by generating a strategic priority, determining a course of action, and implementing it to achieve predetermined outcomes. Instead, new paradigms and novel approaches are needed to effect transformative change in a living system such as a university. In complex, uncertain times that demand new ways of being and doing, a nonlinear theory of change and paradigms related to complexity, and a living systems approach provide new perspectives for organisational transformation. Working in these new paradigms and approaches unlocks shared envisioning and then requires acting collectively and creatively in fluid and sometimes “messy” ways by “dancing with systems” (Meadows, n.d., line. 1) to bring about transformation. So, by focusing on change and transformation with new lenses/paradigms, conference presentations, and conversations provided insight into how academics, academic development professionals, and academic leaders are dancing on the waves of change in innovative and creative ways to systemically and organically transform learning and teaching.

Through scholarly presentations and workshops around how learning and teaching are being transformed at universities via engagement with the conference rhythms, robust discussions that challenged and disrupted thinking and paradigms ensued. This critical engagement aligns to the *ERSC* journal’s purpose of promoting educational research for social change and the notion that educational research has the potential of being transformative—particularly through its work with communities and through various participatory research approaches. By engaging with colleagues across the higher education context, the HELTASA 2018 conference foregrounded the critical role of educational research as social change, contributing to the theorising thereof and the dissemination of current research to a broad, cross-disciplinary audience of scholars and practitioners in the field of education, bringing to the fore promising innovations in response to some of the higher education waves of change.

Overview

Given that the higher education sector, internationally and nationally, faces many challenges and pressures that require radical responses and a high level of responsiveness, the HELTASA 2018 conference endeavoured to positively and innovatively rise to the challenges to, in effect, “dance on the learning and teaching waves of change.” In this quest, particularly during this centenary year of Madiba’s birth, delegates and presenters were encouraged to draw on Nelson Mandela’s lifelong commitment to social justice and his unwavering belief in the value of education to change the trajectory of those who are marginalised and vulnerable.

By engaging with the conference theme, rhythms, keynote speakers, pre-conference workshops, papers, and poster presentations the HELTASA 2018 delegates were encouraged to rethink and transform the content of, and the approach to, learning and teaching, their research agendas, and engagement initiatives, to “change the world” through scholarly and societal contributions.

It is fitting, therefore, that the keynote speakers, both home-grown academic stalwarts, André Keet and Chrissie Boughey, have each made a significant contribution to the higher education sector. Both keynote addresses included profound provocations that enabled delegates to gain perspectives on how far we have come and where we still need to go, considering the contextual challenges that we face in higher education such as transformation and decolonisation.

In his address “Differentiating Pedagogy: Rhythms, Dances and Waves,” Keet focussed on the idea that movement holds transformability, and rhythms, dances, and waves are expressions, imageries, and imaginaries of flow, motion. Always pushing at the margins of the standard interpretive regimes of the pedagogical encounter, these movements suggest a perpetual yearning for renewal, regeneration to free surplus energy for greater adeptness and creativity to engage the decolonial project. Keet brought his work on higher education transformation, plasticity, and “plastic” education into conversation with each other and put forward the idea that to dance on the learning and teaching waves of change in Africa implies the sublimation and (de/trans)differentiation of our pedagogical endeavours.

Boughey engaged with the trajectory of the academic development movement in her address, “Academic Development: Where to Now?” She highlighted the shifts in the South African higher education system as well as developments at national and global levels, more broadly. In her address, she highlighted that, to a large extent, the movement has not been able to set a direction for itself despite enormous efforts on the part of those working within it. Her presentation questioned why this has been so, and where the movement needs to go in order to contribute to the development of a higher education system that will serve South Africa well.

The pre-conference workshops included presenters from the national and international higher education sector and focussed on the conference rhythms of “Transformative Teaching Development” and “Student Access and Success.”

“Dancing With, and Sometimes Against, the Beat: Reflective Tools for Developing Yourself and Others in Changing Times,” facilitated by Alison Canham from the United Kingdom, adopted a highly person-centred approach. The workshop was grounded in cultural historical activity theory (CHAT) and a transformational learning cycle (Bligh & Flood, 2017; Engeström, 2007; Holland, 1998) that enabled participants to explore how they are shaped by, and shape, the contexts in which they live and work. By honouring and reflecting on their different stories and histories, participants were encouraged to conceptualise how they could be adaptive, agile, and sensitive in navigating the tides of change without compromising their own authenticity.

Other pre-conference workshops included, “Who Should Be on an Extended Curriculum Programme? Towards a Framework for Institutional Placement Policy” by Ian Scott, “Supporting Development of Students’ Academic Literacy Skills in Everyday Teaching Practice” by Sonya Stephenson, and Pieter du Toit’s, “Scholarship of Teaching And Learning: A Whole Brain Approach to Self-Enquiry.”

All the conference rhythms were represented by the various paper and poster presentations and enabled delegates to conceptualise new “dances,” as they listened to the conference presentations and engaged in discussions and social activities. It was also a conference goal to proactively include the student voice in the HELTASA 2018 proceedings and deliberations, which was achieved through a reduced registration fee and inviting student presentations and attendance.

Reflection

In addition to inspiring delegates to “change the world,” the plenary reflection on the final day of the conference endeavoured to enable the emergence of a shared vision and commitment across the higher education sector in Southern Africa. The final reflection was aptly titled, “Collaboratively Charting the Course for Learning and Teaching and Southern Africa.”

During this plenary session, delegates identified and deliberated on factors that serve as enablers, hindrances, or both in navigating the changing tides of learning and teaching. Taking a multifaceted approach, or using multiple lenses, was described as one of the most useful tools for innovation. Working in teams with people from different environments or contexts with diverse ideas on various platforms does not only enrich the experiences of participants but also increases creativity levels and adds to the repertoire of useful strategies. Student participation was highlighted as another important layer or lens that should continue to be nurtured. When engaging students in learning and teaching, the intention should not be about making deposits, dispensing knowledge, or using them as mere sources of data so that we can make minor adjustments to our practices and curricula development. The level of engagement should go deeper and deliberately tap into their lived experiences prior to, and during, their university studies. This would serve as one of the platforms of forming partnerships for enriching the learning of both students and academics.

As the music changes the dance changes. Each year our students change, we, the lecturers should evolve and be flexible with the sands of time. — University of Venda group

Commitment to the course of working together is essential for development and transformation. It is through collaboration that multidisciplinary approaches and flexibility will be nurtured and, ultimately, turn the tides for the better.

New and transformative methodologies tend to emerge from the process of critical self-reflection. Self-reflection assists in bringing to the fore one’s blind spots, and contributes to the acknowledgement of one’s contribution to old and new challenges. Critical self-reflection also involves being able to interrogate one’s biases, the ability to live with all kinds of discomfort, thinking about the effects of one’s actions on others and, ultimately, make informed choices about what needs to change. Reflective practice in general is a plausible approach for academics to use to enhance their learning and teaching experiences.

Conclusion

By providing transformative educational experiences, and researching and disseminating the impact of these, the HELTASA 2018 conference enabled delegates to conceptualise the development and implementation of learning and teaching approaches and praxes that are truly African and student-centred. Moreover, the spectrum of presentations across the various rhythms in plenary, parallel sessions, workshops, and poster presentations drew from various disciplines, including the field of academic development, and highlighted how these contribute to the transformation of educational research.

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