

Exploring Discomfort and Care in the Experience of a National Academic Staff Development Programme

Elizabeth de Kadt¹ and Jeff Jawitz²

¹University of Johannesburg

²University of Cape Town

Corresponding author: edekadt@uj.ac.za

(Submitted 30 August 2018, accepted 25 November 2018)

Abstract

This paper explores the use of the pedagogy of discomfort and care in the Teaching Advancement at University (TAU) Fellowships programme, an innovative staff development programme in South African higher education. Our analysis of participant experience of the programme through the lenses of the pedagogy of discomfort and care draws on reflective commentaries submitted by the participants. We found that the initial experience of discomfort was widespread despite the relative seniority of participants. Elements of care built into the programme provided important support, activated agency, and formed the basis for a network of caring relationships among participants. Participants acknowledged these relations as key to their personal and academic growth during the programme and were seeking to extend these beyond the end of the programme.

Keywords: Academic staff development, discomfort, care, higher education, South Africa

Introduction

This paper explores the use of the pedagogy of discomfort and care in the Teaching Advancement at University Fellowships programme, hereafter referred to as the TAU programme, an innovative staff development programme in South African higher education. The significance of an analysis through the lenses of discomfort and care for staff development in South African higher education institutions was first demonstrated in the Community, Self and Identity project (Leibowitz et al., 2012). Members of the project subsequently used the political ethics of care to evaluate professional development for teaching and learning at a South African university (Bozalek et al., 2013). The two lead authors in the above studies were members of the TAU development team, and, as such, the learning from these two earlier projects formed points of reflection around TAU, both during the conception of the programme and during subsequent evaluation and analysis. Although the TAU programme was not explicitly conceptualised in terms of discomfort and



care, these concepts provided valuable lenses through which to understand both the decisions taken by the organisers, the interactions during TAU, and the development achieved by participants.

The TAU programme arose out of the experience of organising and supporting the educational development community in higher education in South Africa over several decades through the Higher Education Learning and Teaching Association of Southern Africa (HELTASA) and its predecessors. As part of this process, in 2009 National Teaching Excellence awards were established as a joint venture between HELTASA and the Council on Higher Education. However, after several years, the awards team acknowledged that – given the disparities between institutions in South Africa – the awards were being made almost exclusively to applicants from well-resourced institutions, and hence not addressing the inequities in the South African Higher Education system. A different approach was clearly required, and the TAU programme emerged out of these considerations.

The TAU programme

The TAU programme was conceptualised and then piloted in 2015-2016 to support the development of a cadre of academics across the South African public higher education sector as scholars, leaders, mentors, and change agents in teaching and learning in their institutions or disciplinary fields. To achieve this goal, TAU works with experienced academics who have been acknowledged for their teaching excellence, and is designed to assist them, within a supportive and collegial environment, to extend their knowledge of and ability to play an active role in educational development.

The programme took place against the backdrop of a South African higher education sector that is struggling to develop a unified integrated system (Webbstock, 2016). A three-tier hierarchy of traditional (i.e. research-intensive) universities, comprehensive universities, and universities of technology dominates the landscape, along with the valuing of research over teaching. The sector is being further challenged by recent student protests demanding free higher education and a decolonisation of the curriculum (Heleta, 2016). The TAU programme aligns itself with efforts to increase the levels of awareness about the inequities in the sector, and to promote collaboration across institutions – in short, to contribute to social justice in South African higher education.

TAU was designed as a 13-month programme (from January 2015 to January 2016) of three five-day residential Contact Sessions (Units) held at six monthly intervals, with distance engagement continuing in between. The programme was structured around three key themes: being and becoming a change agent in higher education; the Scholarship of Teaching and learning (SOTL); and expanding understandings of teaching excellence. Each participant was required to design, develop, and implement an individual project within an enquiry group. They were required to submit a report on this project, along with a reflective piece on the participant's experience of TAU and a (joint) enquiry group poster, at the end of the programme. Of the 52 participants selected from 22 South African public universities, 50 completed all programme requirements for recognition as TAU Fellows.

Theoretical Framework

The notion of a pedagogy of discomfort (POD) for use in social justice education was initially conceptualised by Megan Boler (1999, 2003). Boler's initial question: 'What do we – educators and students – stand to gain by engaging in the discomforting process of questioning cherished beliefs and assumptions?' (Boler, 1999: 176) was developed further in work with Zembylas (Boler & Zembylas, 2003), and subsequently taken up more broadly (Bozalek et al., 2014; Engelmann, 2009; Leibowitz et al., 2012; Tronto, 2010; Zembylas, 2015; Zembylas, 2018; Zembylas et al., 2014). The POD has emerged as an approach in social justice education and was recently defined as 'a critical pedagogical approach that aims to disrupt hegemonic taken-for-granted assumptions about social structures and relations. This approach encourages individuals to engage in critical thinking that explores the relations of power inherent in habits, practices and knowledge' (Leibowitz et al., 2012: 37). In implementing this pedagogy, Boler (1999: 176) notes as an important component 'the emotions that arise in the process'. The POD aims to encourage 'critical inquiry at a cognitive as well as at an emotional level' and requires 'positive emotional labour' (Leibowitz et al., 2012: 38–39; see also Boler & Zembylas, 2003: 108). Instances of the POD typically bring together members of both dominant and marginalised groups with their differing hegemonic ideas, both of whom are likely to experience discomfort (Boler & Zembylas, 2003: 115; Leibowitz et al., 2012: 3.) Importantly, the POD has been defined as a relational practice, which can allow difference to be explored as 'creative energy' (Boler & Zembylas, 2003: 128) and enable participants to 'gain a new sense of interconnection with others' (Boler & Zembylas, 2003: 127; Bozalek et al., 2014: 4.)

In early use of the POD, little differentiation was made between discomfort on the one hand, and pain and suffering on the other. However, Zembylas (2015: 11 – Endnote) has recently noted that '[p]ain and suffering are not the same feelings as discomfort; they are much stronger and they are linked to injury or harm', and has further emphasised the need for a distinction by highlighting the link between 'discomfort' and the term 'comfort zones': he suggests that discomfort be understood as 'the feeling of uneasiness that is disturbing someone's comfort' (Zembylas, 2015: 11 - Endnote) by 'challenging cherished beliefs and assumptions about the world' (Zembylas, 2017: 9). There is now widespread agreement as to the 'proactive and transformative potential' of discomfort, as defined in these terms (Zembylas, 2017: 7) and hence as to the value of discomfort for social justice education.

At the same time, the care of educators for their students is the 'very bedrock of all successful education' (Noddings, 1992: 27), and this raises concerns about 'how far educators can "push" their students and use discomfort as a caring pedagogical practice ... how far can one go with pedagogies of discomfort until we stop calling them caring teaching practices' (Zembylas, 2017: 9-10). Increasingly, researchers are drawing attention to the 'tensions and ambivalences' (ibid.: 19) in the act of caring teaching, which cannot avoid being 'entangled in some form of ethical violence' (ibid.: 16). In his recent work, Zembylas (2017: 14) has sought to reconceptualise caring teaching in terms of minimising ethical violence and expanding relationalities with vulnerable others. The active and productive

empathy with others that can thus be promoted contributes to enabling change and transformation.

Care for the well-being of those experiencing the pedagogy of discomfort can minimise ethical violence, and this is all the more essential in that deep-seated emotions are likely to be involved (Boler, 1999: 176). In theorising care, therefore, we draw on Joan Tronto's work which has moved discussion beyond families and dyadic relationships and rather 'portray(s) care as holistic and as a broad, public and political activity' (Bozalek et al., 2014: 3). Fisher and Tronto (1990: 40) have defined care as follows: '[o]n the most general level, we suggest that caring be viewed as a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our "world" so that we can live in it as well as possible'. Furthermore, as Bozalek et al. (2014: 4) note, '[c]are, as a theoretical framework, foregrounds relational and connection-based aspects of human beings rather than seeing humans as atomised individuals'. Care is undoubtedly a 'relational practice' (Tronto, 2010: 161).

The 'safe space' metaphor has often underpinned discussion around 'caring teaching' (Boostrom, 1998; Davis & Steyn, 2012; Roestone Collective, 2014), especially as regards engagement with the pedagogy of discomfort; however, this metaphor is increasingly being critiqued. Boostrom (1998: 407) has noted the danger of 'safe spaces' as involving the 'mere expression of diverse individuality', and the power of the 'safe space' metaphor to 'censor critical thinking' (ibid.: 406), rather than accommodating and promoting 'intellectual challenge and personal growth' (ibid.: 407). Davis and Steyn (2012: 35) speak of the 'false dichotomy that sees challenging students and supporting them as mutually exclusive'. Safety, they argue, cannot be construed as the 'absence of conflict', and is too often 'mistaken for comfort' (ibid.: 33). What is required is a caring environment which is able to respect emotions and comments, while challenging problematic ones (ibid.: 35). As noted above, care is a relational practice, and hence creating such safe spaces will involve the 'relational work of cultivating them', rather than 'static and acontextual notions of "safe" or "unsafe"' (Roestone Collective, 2014: 1346).

TAU was not set up as an example of the POD and focused on social justice implicitly rather than explicitly. At the same time, the TAU programme was developed by a team with considerable experience in both the POD and social justice education. It was in hindsight that the roles of both discomfort and care in TAU became explicit and were considered to provide a useful lens to understand the responses of participants and the substantial developmental impetus of the programme.

In a context such as TAU, which targeted the professional and personal development of senior academics, discomfort is likely to be experienced when hegemonic 'ways of thinking', including ways of behaving, emotional responses, beliefs and assumptions are challenged. Many of these 'ways of thinking' will relate to participants' academic disciplines. Despite ongoing change in the nature of higher education, 'academic staff continue to attest to the power of the discipline as a unifying force in shaping academic identity' (Krause, 2012: 188). Other 'ways of thinking' will relate to participants' institutional 'home', and specifically, given the South African hierarchy of traditional (i.e. research-intensive) universities,

comprehensive universities and universities of technology, to the institutional type. One participant commented that when she moved from one institutional type to another: 'It felt like I had landed on the moon'. At the same time, discomfort arising from individual personality traits should not be overlooked. It will be necessary to examine the ways in which challenges to all these 'comfort zones' of academics were occasioned during TAU, and importantly, to acknowledge that discomfort and responses to discomfort emerged not only at a cognitive but also at an emotional level – the latter a factor which in itself may occasion additional discomfort, given that emotions generally do not form part of academic discourse. These many-faceted experiences of discomfort can be envisaged as moving participants towards critical reflection, expanding the borders of their comfort zones, and ideally allow them to achieve a 'new sense of interconnection with others' (Boler & Zembylas, 2003: 127).

However, to avoid ethical violence, discomfort should be balanced by caring. Caring will be broadly understood as 'including everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our "world" so that we can live in it as well as possible' (Fisher & Tronto, 1990: 40). On the one hand, it may be useful to understand care in terms of the strategies adopted by the conveners in developing and running the programme – this would involve a top-down approach to the analysis. On the other, understanding care as a relational practice appears to be particularly significant for an analysis of TAU, and this suggests that close attention needs to be paid to the relationships that were established during TAU, and to the impact of these relationships in alleviating any discomfort experienced. Caring relationships are likely to have involved both cognitive and emotional responses to the programme. Finally, it will be important to consider whether the care that was invested in, and emerged from, TAU was simply sanitising, seeking to create 'safe spaces', or whether this also allowed space for critical thought and development.

In this research, therefore, we endeavour to answer the following: What elements of discomfort and care surfaced in the final written pieces submitted by participants reflecting on their experience of the TAU programme, and what was their significance in the self-reported growth of these participants? To what extent did the combination of discomfort and care in TAU succeed in creating a context within which recipients did indeed experience significant academic and personal growth?

Research Process

Our primary source of data for the research was the four-page reflective piece submitted by each of the 50 participants at the end of the programme. We also drew on the final evaluation questionnaires submitted by participants, as well as on programme documentation more broadly. We adopted a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1994) to analysing the data within a framework of discomfort and caring. We coded the 50 reflective pieces independently using systematic thematic analysis and then met to establish agreement. After several cycles of coding in this way, we mapped out the elements of

discomfort and those of caring which became evident, including caring which was provided by both the programme organisers and the participants themselves.

The authors themselves were positioned as participant observers and drew on their experiences as members of the management committee and as enquiry group advisors on the programme as additional sources of data.

Analysis of the data

The Initial Experience of Discomfort

The extent to which TAU participants experienced discomfort became abundantly clear from the reflective reports, where many, at the start, expressed feelings of initial discomfort in strong terms: they wrote of feeling disorientated, intimidated, overwhelmed, terrified, unnerved, daunted, apprehensive, uncomfortable, isolated, vulnerable, incompetent and inferior. Closer analysis revealed six main sources of this discomfort:

- an initial lack of clarity as to what TAU was actually about, and what would be expected of participants;
- lack of familiarity with educational discourse;
- being required to work in groups;
- coping with diversity in experience and authority of participants and institutions;
- the pressure and work 'overload' in Contact Session One; and
- the proposed use of digital communication and collaboration tools.

An initial lack of clarity about the nature and expectations of the TAU programme was perhaps to be expected, given that it sought to introduce an innovative approach to staff development, and that this was the first time the programme had run. Participants had been provided in advance with information about the ethos and goals of the programme and key expected outcomes, but at the outset levels of uncertainty and apprehension were clearly high. This was in part because of a wide-spread (though mistaken) initial expectation that the programme would focus on teaching and learning expertise:

I thought that, at last, we will be given an opportunity to focus on methods and strategies of teaching and learning at tertiary level, as opposed to the focus on research and research outputs.

Unit One took me by surprise from the time we were sent the programme for the unit. I had expected a greater emphasis on teaching and sharing our experiences and contributions that had led to us being recognised by our teaching excellence awards.

Many participants were clearly disconcerted to find that TAU was much more strongly focused on the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning and on sectoral issues in Higher

Education, such as low student success rates, the differential between success rates of white and black students, and the inequities between institutions. Much discomfort also focused on the individual project, and on the group poster, and what exactly these would involve:

Initially I was very confused (and hence, being me, very anxious) about what was required in terms of the group project especially, but also about the scope of the individual project.

A second area of discomfort for some was the unfamiliar educational discourse introduced during Contact Session One. Facilitators sought to introduce participants to the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SOTL), in terms of an educational research discourse with which few were familiar, and the theoretical framework chosen as an example turned out to be out of the reach of many. Hence the SOTL theme undoubtedly took many participants out of their disciplinary 'comfort zone', and the response was at times couched in emotional terms:

I was terrified at the idea that I will have to do social science research in the project.

I could not shake off the feeling that I had been thrown into the ocean of unfathomable depth.

I felt as if I knew nothing about Teaching and Learning (. ...) I was so overwhelmed by all the information given that I did not know what to take on board at that stage and what to ignore.

Coming in I also experienced a sense of arriving in another country.

A further element of discomfort for many participants was the considerable extent to which group work was incorporated into the programme. Particularly during the opening stages of the first contact session, participants were placed in regularly changing groups, specifically to promote networking and collaboration across disciplines, institutions and levels of seniority. The groups established ranged from informal and short-term groups to the long-term enquiry groups (see below). In the reflective reports, several participants spoke of themselves as 'introverts' or as 'loners' who had been seriously challenged by these interactions:

I am inherently introverted, thus ... where I am expected to share my own personal reflections was intimidating.

I believe in group work and having conversations with people, but because of my own introverted personality I sometimes struggle to interact in a group task (. ...) I sometimes found it challenging.

Initially I thought the arrangement of the TAU project contacts sessions did not make sense and I had a sense of discomfort, probably due to that I particularly do not like group work.

The only thing that really hindered me from learning more during the contact weeks was my own shyness and introvertedness.

I am at times a rather impatient person, thus not always diplomatic enough to wait out a result or contribution from one of the members of the ad-hoc groups (. ...) The group work outside our own fixed enquiry groups was trying, to say the least (I suppose I am just like a student in the respect that I do not like enforced group work); especially in Unit One the constantly changing group composition (no doubt arranged in such a way to facilitate meeting everyone) was exhausting and unsatisfactory.

In addition, coping with diversity in experience and authority of participants and institutions occasioned considerable discomfort for some participants. At times substantial differentials in levels of institutional prestige or professional seniority were involved within group work situations. This challenge emerged partly from the unexpected diversity¹ in the group of participants, who ranged from well-published professors with many years of experience to relatively recent appointees still busy with their doctorates:

Almost 90% of the TAU participants were either Professors or Doctors. And me being young and "black", I felt that I didn't have much to offer.

When I first looked at the list of attendees of the TAU first session, I saw all the names started with either Prof or Dr and mine only started with Mr. Initially this made me feel like I am going to be playing in the field where I might be the smallest player.

I am a young academic with only 10 years' experience needing to discuss and debate with seasoned academics.

¹ Participating institutions were explicitly requested to nominate senior members of staff for the programme, yet nominations included less experienced members of staff. For instance, nine participants were still working on their doctorates (and hence still in relatively junior positions), and 11 had not received formal recognition of their excellence in teaching.

At the other end of the scale one participant commented on the difficulty of 'being a senior academic in a group with people who were mainly junior', and a second claimed that most of the participants 'were junior staff members in their institutions'.

Many participants experienced considerable discomfort through work 'overload' in Contact Session One. Developing the programme had presented considerable challenges to the Programme Committee. Given that participants, while acknowledged as excellent teachers, were primarily disciplinary specialists with research expertise in their discipline, it was agreed that we would need to introduce them to the discipline of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, and to broader perspectives on higher education in South Africa. Unit One attempted to do that in a programme which ran from morning to around 9pm on most evenings. Feedback through the regular evaluations revealed how immensely challenging, and exhausting, some participants experienced this to be: 'The sessions are too long and one can hardly keep awake after supper'; 'very exhausting'; 'I am not firing on all cylinders, not able to comment or make valuable input'; 'I think there are some very tired participants ... this has pushed a few people way over the limit'.²

Finally, some participants clearly experienced discomfort when expected to use digital communication and collaboration tools to maintain contact with the enquiry group in between the Contact Sessions. Our initial decision had been to encourage the use of Google Docs, with which many participants were not familiar. The workshop on Google Docs in Unit One was not successful and attempts to use Google Docs were aggravated by the unsatisfactory levels of Wi-Fi reception available at the first workshop venue, despite our attempts to ensure adequate provision. This meant that many participants who were not successful in using Google Docs might well have put this down to their own inadequacy, when issues of connectivity might have been to blame.

The extent and intensity of the discomfort initially experienced and revealed primarily through the analysis of the reflective reports, came as something of a surprise to the programme developers, given that the participants were, in most cases, senior colleagues with considerable experience and expertise.

Overcoming Discomfort

In contrast to the discomfort experienced at the start of the programme, evaluations at the end of the TAU programme were strongly positive, with participants having moved far from discomfort towards fulfilment and enthusiasm for the programme and the new understandings and roles that had emerged. Indeed, many participants thematised their reflective report in terms of a journey, in which they moved from initial uncertainty and apprehension to enthusiasm and acknowledgement of their growth as academics and individuals. Not only was TAU enjoyable – 'I have had an amazing journey with TAU'. 'Wow!

² At the same time, some subsequent participant reflections – towards the end of the TAU programme – indicated that Unit One had set the tone for the programme as a whole, and signalled the serious engagement expected of participants: 'The packed program we had in Unit 1 instilled in us a sense of urgency that really is required for the work we were doing.'

What a great experience!' – TAU was also experienced in terms of significant personal and academic growth: To quote three participants: TAU was 'life-changing'; 'TAU transformed my mind'; and 'I have a sense of having stepped out of a building into the South African sunshine.' Discomfort had clearly been mediated by a variety of elements of care.

The following analysis of this move beyond discomfort will begin with a discussion of the 'caring' strategies adopted by the programme conveners and include the responses of participants to these strategies. We then turn to considering care as a relational practice and analyse the significant caring relationships that developed within TAU. It was these caring relationships (which largely emerged within the strategies of care offered by the organisers) which, as many participants reported, were crucial to their personal and professional wellbeing and development during TAU. These relationships appeared both to offer safety and to provoke critical reflection. In many cases, what was at the outset experienced as a source of discomfort evolved, during the year, into a source of care.

Providing a Caring Environment

An initial element of care built into the programme was provided by the environmental elements of the three contact sessions, which ran at three different hotels or conference centres. Venues with a 'retreat-like' quality (and deliberately not within a city context) were chosen, where participants would feel 'special' and cared for, and which would support the envisaged engagement required. The venues sought to remove participants from their home institution, in order to free up time and space for focus and reflection, which was also acknowledged and appreciated:

The break up into units with a week spent away from work was tough – there's always work to catch up with when you get back, but actually there's no other way to do it. It granted me the leisure of focusing just on TAU, thinking and being at one with the scholarship of teaching and learning and being able to focus.

Furthermore, TAU was extended over a period of 13 months, on the assumption that learning and growth require time, which was also well received:

I enjoyed the process of TAU being run over a year because the amount of learning that happened not only to me, but to others too, needed that incubation time. TAU is a process that could not be shortened or hurried.

Developing a Responsive Programme

Using a developmental evaluation approach, regular feedback was collected from participants, especially during Contact Session One, and where possible responded to immediately. The TAU Programme Committee monitored the feedback and adjusted the programme appropriately throughout the 13 months, seeking to respond to the diversity among the participants.

For instance, in response to the feedback as to 'programme overload' in Contact Session One we redesigned Contact Session Two to engage more explicitly with the care element, and participants appreciated having more space for individual and group-work, for access to advisors, and simply time out for what were termed 'creative activities' – yoga, singing, artwork of various types, beach soccer etc. These aspects of broader well-being were then carried through into Contact Session Three.

Support for the Individual Projects

In spite of the initial high levels of discomfort, many participants reported finding the individual TAU projects of great value to their development. In the final evaluation, the individual project was mentioned 49 times, by 28 participants, as being of 'great value'. Several care elements contributed to overcoming the initial discomfort: elective sessions focusing on different aspects of education research methodologies; the availability of the advisors to give supportive feedback and advice; and feedback and support given by members of each enquiry group, and by participants more broadly.

Design Elements of Care

Three design elements were subsequently identified by participants as having played a central role in supporting participants and enabling a caring environment.

Firstly, we explicitly attempted to undermine established academic hierarchies by avoiding the use of professional titles, and by valuing every participant's ability to contribute to discussions. Positive responses to this design element emerged strongly in the participants' reflective pieces. Participants indicated that, during TAU, they had felt able to move beyond differences of discipline, institution, and hierarchy and been free to engage, from their individual position and perspective, in a commonality of purpose. They indicated that this had been achieved by the non-use of titles, by the respect with which all were treated, and through the regular engagements in discussion groups diversified in terms of institution, race and seniority. Importantly, participants felt that they had been able to move beyond seeing themselves as a 'lone fish swimming against the stream' and become part of a community which had broadened beyond a single discipline:

I felt I was really part of the team (...) (where) everyone's opinion is valued.

I liked the idea of the entire TAU group of participants operating at the same level without considering office titles or ranks. This embraced the idea that all of us were there to learn from one another.

It was also humbling that the project members treated each other equally with respect and those who are perhaps of high standing within their institutions did not use such status to impose their position.

The sense of community that surprisingly quickly emerged from within the TAU group was in my view also facilitated by the very structure of TAU, which brought together a group of lecturers in a space outside of the normal academic environment. The space was not defined as yet and there were no real power structures, hierarchies or relationships that framed the space. In my view this allowed us to really escape the very limiting context within which we normally operate in our institutional structural settings and within our disciplinary silos.

In traditional academic environments, there tends to be very little interaction across disciplines. Participants repeatedly noted that close interaction with colleagues from other disciplines had resulted in new exciting relationships and a broad sense of community, which had in turn provoked new insights:

My mind-set was completely transformed when I had to interact with colleagues from law, medicine, performing arts, marketing, accounting, etc.

Despite a wide experience of HE training in South Africa, I have not been part of such a multidisciplinary... process and the merits of this approach to capacity development are greatly underestimated. Many endeavours in this country bring like-minded individuals together, and I now realise how significantly this limits the learning experience for all. The TAU programme is unique in this sense, and ... it is the greatest strength of the programme.

The single biggest facilitator of my learning experience in the TAU programme has been the diversity of the group in terms of institutions, contexts, disciplines, but at the same time the universality of the objective of teaching advancement. I was constantly amazed at how easily I could relate to challenges posed by colleagues from ostensibly very different contexts. This gave me a real sense of a community of practice to which I felt that I could actively contribute and from which I could receive input that greatly broadened my own perspectives.

Finally, support was provided for the growth of relationships across institutions by problematising the institutional hierarchy dominant in South African higher education. Information about the broad South African higher education sector was received with considerable interest and new understanding, given that most participants were at best only informed about their own institution. This impacted positively on participants from institutions at all levels of the current hierarchy: in some cases, it awakened the realisation of privilege, in others it created an awareness that institutions lower in the hierarchy might well have greater experience in dealing with less well-prepared students:

I realised that I needed to appreciate the work that is happening at our historically black universities, because these colleagues had a greater challenge than I did in taking underprepared students forward and therefore I could learn from them. (This reflection came from a member of an elite institution.)

One of my greatest fears was that I came from a university that was previously disadvantaged and I was a part of a team that consisted of individuals that come from elite universities (. ...) However, to my surprise, after my interaction with the team, I realised that the issues of concern for my university were similar if not common across all universities and I became conscious and aware of the fact that we all aim to accomplish a common purpose irrespective of which university we come from.

It was realisations such as this which made possible the emergence of relationships between participants from very diverse universities and reduced some of the initial discomfort being experienced.

Several participants reflected on the substantial impact of a TED talk offered by Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie, 'The Danger of a Single Story', which was included in a discussion of change and transformation and which problematised the use of stereotypes. As one participant commented: 'I believe it was also useful for the interactions among the participants at TAU as we all too come from different backgrounds and have had different experiences'.

A second design element which played a key role in situating TAU as a site of care were the enquiry groups. Enquiry groups were constituted during Contact Session One, taking into account participants' interests and intended individual projects but also levels of expertise and diversity, and each was allocated an advisor. Enquiry groups were intended as key sites for intense discussion that would require a level of intimacy over the three sessions, as well as sites of support for individual projects and for learning and sharing of experience. Each enquiry group was required to produce a group poster that reflected the collective outcome of the individual projects. This challenged participants into making their enquiry group function well. In the reflective pieces, the enquiry groups were largely experienced as supportive. Here, too, what was initially experienced as discomfiting evolved into a source of care. In the reflective reports, Enquiry Groups were mentioned 53 times as 'playing a key role', by 31 participants. The enquiry group was credited with 'opening up a new perspective for me'; they appear to have functioned as 'safe spaces' within which critical thinking could take place.

The third design element was the appointment of advisors to guide the enquiry groups. These were experienced academics, in most cases from an academic development background and with experience in staff development. At the outset of the programme, we were not clear just how important the role of advisor would become, but the participants' feedback confirmed that in almost all cases, very valuable inputs had been given by the advisors, both as regards the individual projects and the group posters, and on a more

personal level, and they had contributed substantially to the success of the enquiry groups. In the reflective reports, advisors, at times referred to as “mentors”, were mentioned 34 times by 21 participants, as ‘playing a key role’:

XXX, as a mentor, has been inspiring and encouraging throughout the whole process.

“Hats off” to our mentor, YYY. He is a thoughtful leader who inspired us to achieve more from the TAU programme. He was able to get six diverse people to work together on a project through deliberate and disruptive guidance.

The group was intimate, and the group advisor was very active and excellent with focusing the ideas for our small projects.

The TAU advisor system was the best experience of the programme.

The Agency of the Participants in Generating Care

This, then, was the context created by the programme developers, in terms of the various strategies adopted, which – it was envisaged – would allow new behaviours and ways of thinking to emerge. However, care in TAU was not limited to these elements. They in turn provided the context for caring relationships to emerge – relationships which, according to the participants, were crucial to their growth during the programme. The point made in the literature, that care is a relational process (Tronto, 2010: 161), was aptly confirmed by the TAU programme.

A key goal of TAU was to promote collaboration – collaboration across disciplines, seniority and institutions. Successful collaboration, however, presupposes a relationship – and a relationship which involves trust:

As a small team of four individuals, we became very close, and we supported each other despite some challenges that we experienced as individuals (. ...) We began to trust each other.

Collaboration, together with cognates such as collegiality, team and community, was mentioned regularly in the reflective reports; some comments made it clear that this also included friendship at a more personal level. According to the participants, these underlying relationships were crucial to the personal and academic development (‘learning’) that took place; it was these which allowed the initial discomfort to be overcome. In setting up the programme, we had not anticipated the strength of these relationships nor how significant they would become.

Such coming together as a team required time, and face-to-face meetings were an essential part of the process. Many entered their first meeting with their enquiry group with

'initial misgivings ... we could not have been stranger bedfellows...'; 'We were a 'chance' grouping of five participants... we had, somehow, to work our somewhat diverse projects into a single group project.' 'Initially we embraced each other grudgingly and with uncertainty but now we warmly embrace each other and celebrate our ability to work together as a team.' One participant used the metaphor of a fruit salad to describe the enquiry group as it finally functioned: initially, 'I saw us as so many tropical fruits in a basket; mangoes, a pineapple, an orange, bananas etc.... The beauty of the fruit salad metaphor is that each of us could remain ourselves while at the same time creating a synergy with the rest.' In short, these became 'extremely valuable and enriching relationships'.

The close relationships developed within many of the enquiry groups provided a 'lifeline in terms of friendships, support and common interests'. At the same time, relationships also developed across the whole body of TAU participants and were regularly noted as being crucial to the achievement of the TAU outcomes: 'The actual meeting of TAU participants was vital to my learning (...) (through) the opportunity to meet and discuss matters with like-minded, equally passionate people'. One participant defined the term 'Fellowship' as 'a friendly association, especially with people who share one's interests', and continued: 'I had a sense of belonging... During this time, I became aware of TAU as a community of scholars and how to be a critical friend'.

One participant summed up her experience of how these caring relationships emerged, and of their very considerable value, as follows:

I have learned so much from TAU colleagues (. ...) The leisure time we had in the evenings to build relationships with colleagues was as valuable, if not more valuable, than the group discussions and brainstorming sessions. In that time we could get to know colleagues as people, have in-depth discussions about our personal experiences at our various institutions, and come to know one another's concerns and interests as academics and educators, as well as sharing laughs about mutual difficulties. These are the experiences that allow us to develop fellowship feelings and empathy with one another, which is really what facilitates working together, and seeing our similarities rather than our differences as people.

Clearly, the types of relationships that emerged will have varied in depth and nature; but there was a general consensus about the importance of this collaboration, collegiality and in many cases friendship for the achievement of the TAU outcomes. What was clear, too, was that the initial discomfort which had been so clearly expressed at the start of the programme had disappeared completely. Participants had moved 'from the somewhat tentative "wrestling" of the first unit to the unashamed enthusiasm of the final unit; from the strong institutional identifications of the first, to the overwhelming sense of "the collective" of the final'.

As this participant continued:

‘Perhaps this is what it was all about? *“Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu”* – often translated simply as “I am, because you are”, but more accurately “a person is a person through (the agency of) others”. On my own I am isolated, static, vulnerable, and a limited and minority voice, but together (as a community) we are strong, engaged in a multiple-input process, and able to do unimaginable things. We are greater than the sum of our parts.’

In short, as these relationships developed, TAU participants discovered their own agency for caring:

‘I no longer feel like I am a lone misfit. This interdependence creates an agency on a much bigger scale that I can’t ignore and has changed the way I relate to my institution (. . .) What TAU has done is create an imperative to use the agency that I have in other ways.’

This reflection continues with examples such as mentoring and running workshops for others. With this participant, and with many others, caring had begun to extend beyond TAU.

Reflections and Conclusion

The analysis of the TAU programme has afforded the opportunity of considering current thinking around the role of discomfort and care in the professional development of senior academics. The participants in this particular programme were professionals, many of considerable seniority and with significant experience of teaching. It was a revelation as to how many participants spoke of being confused, anxious, disoriented, apprehensive, even overwhelmed at the start of the programme; our ongoing review of the programme sought to respond to these reactions. Yet, by the end of the programme these emotions had been replaced by an appreciation of a significant learning experience.

As anticipated in terms of theory, discomfort was found to be an integral, even necessary part of the learning process in TAU, in that it challenged many existing preconceptions and ways of behaving. Discomfort was occasioned especially through exposure to SOTL and associated research methodologies (including the individual project), the challenge of frequent group work and the group poster, and through the confrontation with diversity of various types. It was these elements which evolved during the course of TAU into significant learning opportunities as evidenced in the final reflective reports of almost all participants.

It was in conjunction with elements of care that this discomfort became productive of learning. Elements of care, introduced by the organisers, sought to reduce the levels of stress experienced, and with some success: these included the retreat-like environment, the

enquiry groups together with their advisors, and the programme slots introduced for relaxation and community building. However, most significant in overcoming initial discomfort was the emergence of meaningful relationships among the participants – relationships which transcended discipline and institution. These relationships became productive ‘safe spaces’, sites of mutual caring, offering support but also encouraging and enabling critical thinking. Participants did not simply feel ‘safe’, rather this experience of safety generated critical engagement. There was evidence of increasing growth of community during the thirteen months, and particularly so from the second Contact Session onwards. These communities were frequently associated with the enquiry groups; but significant partnering and caring also took place outside of the enquiry groups, and among the TAU participants as a full cohort. Participants no longer experienced themselves as ‘out there on their own’, often waging a battle against colleagues and institutions unsympathetic to the significance of teaching and learning. Through the programme they became aware of others in similar situations, and with similar passions, from whom they might learn and who would in turn learn from them.

It can be assumed that the characteristics of the participants, as adults and mature professionals, was a factor in allowing these relationships to develop successfully. So, too, the fact that, from the outset, they were encouraged to reflect on their experience – not least as a means of becoming aware of their own agency. According to subsequent feedback, some of this agency has carried over into their own institutions, in the form of care for others. Several participants also undertook to support the ongoing maintenance of these relationships beyond the TAU programme, through establishing a TAU Alumni group.

The care that organisers of such a programme can implement will necessarily have its limitations, and participants may well not move beyond accepting such care during the life of the programme. What becomes much more significant, in terms of potential for long-term impact, is discomfort which offers participants possibilities for discovering their own agency as providers of care, both to others and thereby also to themselves. Hence, the crucial role of the advisors to the success of TAU, as nurturing the emergence of such agency in the enquiry groups. Admittedly not all the enquiry groups achieved this level of self-sufficiency, but almost all TAU participants commented on partnerships of different kinds which had developed and committed themselves to continuing these. A number of participants had also started mentoring relationships in their home institution and had begun passing on in their own environment the care they had themselves experienced.

Acknowledgements

The TAU Programme was funded by the Department of Higher Education and Training, through their Teaching Development Grant, and the research reported here was funded through this same grant.

Authors' Biographies

Elizabeth de Kadit spent the final six years of her academic career as Executive Director of the Academic Development and Support Division at the University of Johannesburg, where she led the development of structures and policies in the newly merged university in support of student success and staff development. She is now retired and working as a consultant on several staff development projects.

Jeff Jawitz is Coordinator of the Curriculum and Course Design Unit in the Centre for Higher Education Development at the University of Cape Town. The broad project that has shaped his work as teacher, educational developer and researcher has been to help build a transformed higher educational system in South Africa and to help overcome the obstacles that undermine efforts to succeed on the part of students and academic staff.

References

- Boostrom, R. 1998. 'Safe spaces': Reflections on an educational metaphor. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 30: 408-437.
- Boler, M. & Zembylas, M. 2003. Discomforting truths: The emotional terrain of understanding differences, in Tryfonas, P (Ed.), *Pedagogies of Difference: Rethinking education for social justice*. New York: Routledge, 110-136.
- Boler, M. 2003. Teaching for hope. The ethics of shattering world views, in Liston, D. & Garrison, J. (Eds.). *Teaching, Learning, and Loving: Reclaiming passion in educational practice*. New York; Routledge, 117-131.
- Boler, M. 2012. The pedagogy of discomfort as a lens for the CSI project, in Leibowitz, B., Swartz, L., Bozalek, V., Carolissen, R., Nicholls, L. & Rohleder, P. (Eds.). *Community, Self and Identity: Educating South African university students for citizenship*. Cape Town: HSRC Press, 165-171.
- Bozalek, V. G., McMillan, M., Marshall, D. E., November, M., Daniels, A. & Sylvester, T. 2014. Analysing the professional development of teaching and learning from a political ethics of care perspective. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 19 (5): 447-458.
- Butler, J. 2005. *Giving an Account of Oneself*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Davis, D. & Steyn, M. 2012. Teaching social justice: Reframing some common pedagogical assumptions. *Perspectives in Education*, 30 (4): 29-38.
- Engelmann, D. 2009. Another Look at a Feminist Ethics of Teaching. *Atlantis*, 33 (2): 62-71.
- Fisher, B. & Tronto, J. 1990. Toward a feminist theory of caring, in Abel, E. & Nelson, M. (Eds.). *Circles of Care*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 36-54.
- Heleta, S. 2016. Decolonisation of higher education: Dismantling epistemic violence and Eurocentrism in South Africa. *Transformation in Higher Education*, [S.I.], 1 z(1): 8 pages. <https://thejournal.org.za/index.php/thejournal/article/view/9>.
- Krause, K-L. 2012. Change vectors and academic identities: Evolving tribes and territories, in Trowler, P., Saunders, M. & Bamber, V. (Eds.). *Tribes and territories in the 21st century*. New York: Routledge, 186-196.

- Leibowitz, B., Swartz, L., Bozalek, V., Carolissen, R., Nicholls, L. & Rohleder, P. (Eds.). 2012. *Community, Self and Identity: Educating South African university students for citizenship*. Cape Town: HSRC Press.
- Noddings, N. 1992. *The challenge to care in schools*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Strauss, A.L. & Corbin, J. 1994. Grounded Theory methodology an overview, in Denzin, N. & Lincoln, Y. (Eds.). *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 273-285.
- The Roestone Collective. 2014. Safe Space: Towards a Reconceptualisation. *Antipode*, 46 (5): 1346–1365.
- Tronto, J. C. 1993. *Moral boundaries: A political argument for an ethic of care*. New York: Routledge.
- Tronto, J. C. 2010. Creating caring institutions: Politics, plurality and purpose. *Ethics and Social Welfare*, 4 (2): 158-171.
- Trowler, P., Saunders, M. & Bamber, V. (Eds.). 2012. *Tribes and Territories in the 21st-century*. New York: Routledge.
- Webbstock, D. 2016. *South African Higher Education reviewed: Two Decades of Development* Pretoria: Council on Higher Education, 5-56.
- Zembylas, M., Bozalek, V. & Shefer, T. 2014. Tronto's notion of privileged irresponsibility and the reconceptualisation of care: Implications for critical pedagogies of emotion. *Gender and Education* 26 (3): 200-214.
- Zembylas, M. 2015. 'Pedagogy of discomfort' and its ethical implications; the tensions of ethical violence in social justice education. *Ethics and Education*, 10 (2): 163-174.
- Zembylas, M. 2017. Practicing an ethic of discomfort as an ethic of care in higher education teaching. *Critical Studies in Teaching and Learning (CriSTaL)*, [S.l.], 5 (1): 1-17.
- Zembylas, M. 2018. Affect, race and white discomfort in schooling: decolonial strategies for 'pedagogies of discomfort'. *Ethics and Education*, 13 (1): 86-104.