

Holding a mirror up to Academic Development through the HELTASA (un)conferencing methodology

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Abstract

We, Academic Development (AD) practitioners, question whether AD's objective in South Africa (SA) as a 'liberatory educational and social movement' to enhance educational quality for all students, is effectively pursued. AD practitioners often work on the fringes of the academy, fighting for relevance and legitimacy within an increasingly performative and managerialist academic culture. Despite innovative AD initiatives AD work is criticised for being unresponsive, unreflexive, conformist, and lacking theoretical, scholarly, and critical engagement. We use critical pedagogical praxis, particularly the constructs of critique, reflexivity, power, and self-reflection, to interrogate the continuous tension between AD intention and practice. Through (un)conference methodology, this auto-ethnographic account of individual and collective engagements, using the "holding the mirror up" metaphor, critically questioned the tension and misalignments between the AD mandate and practices. Although in a SA higher education context, this research could be beneficial to HE contexts globally, given the ubiquity of AD work.

Keywords: Academic Development, academic development practitioners, autoethnography, critical theory, (un)conferencing

Introduction

The global emergence of academic development (AD) in the 1970s and South Africa's adoption in the 1980s served diverse purposes. Initially aligned with the post-apartheid transformation, equity, and redress agenda, South African AD practices, rooted in a social justice ontology, aimed



to enhance educational quality for all students, primarily focussing on historically excluded black students (Boughey, 2010; Kloot, 2015). Academic Development (AD) and Educational Development (ED), as well as older terms such as Academic Support and Educational Support, are used interchangeably (Scott, 2009; Volbrecht & Boughey, 2004). This study defines Academic Development (AD) as 'an open set of practices concerned with improving learning and teaching in higher education' (Volbrecht & Boughey, 2004: 58).

Academic Development Practices in South Africa

Academic Development practices in South Africa evolved due to several contextual conditions at specific historical junctures, amongst others, institutional types, disciplinary differences, and a growing acknowledgement of learning and teaching as social practices. Some of these drivers led to sector and institutional-level transformation-oriented policy initiatives to increase student diversity and access for previously marginalised students, such as the development and implementation of extended curriculum programmes (McKenna, et al., 2022; Scott, et al., 2007).

Notwithstanding the gains made in the AD field, the scope of AD work warrants attention. Shortcomings such as impromptu, unsystematic, sporadic, fragmented, experimental, and under-theorised approaches to AD work (Boughey & McKenna, 2016) underscored the need to develop and strengthen institutional and national structures for efficient AD implementation (Moyo, 2018). Despite these initiatives, the current persistently low throughput rates of black students (Mathebula & Calitz, 2018) and increasing calls for decolonisation (Naidoo & Ranchod, 2018) indicate AD is falling short of its mandate. This signals a mismatch between 'access as participation' and cultural conditions such as atheoretical beliefs and learning and teaching discourses (Moyo, 2018) impacting the students' experience and educational quality of AD work.

Academic Development Practitioners - holding the mirror up

Holding the mirror up to our trajectories in HE, we recognise many similarities with the trajectory of AD practitioners in general. Like us, whose disciplinary expertise spans specialising in water and business law, sociolinguistics, emergency medical care, mathematics, and computer studies education, AD practitioners have diverse educational qualifications, which influence their approaches to AD work. Moreover, AD practitioners have multiple service and academic roles, such as teaching and coordinating professional development and undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, as well as serving on institutional and national professional and academic bodies. Unsurprisingly, AD practitioners are described as 'disciplinary migrants who are 'neither fish nor fowl' (Park, 2002: 50), performing hybrid, liminal roles at the "fault lines" between teachers and learners, between academics and managers, and between teaching and research (Manathunga, 2007: 25). Critics suggest that the low knowledge base of AD theory results in ambivalent professional identities (Shay, 2014). Likewise, as we transitioned from our disciplinary homes into the AD field, our varying confidence levels influenced effective engagement in our AD professional roles in institutional and national spaces.

Notably, over the years, some AD practitioners' identities and impact have constantly

changed from being at the periphery of academia to its centre. As social actors, involvement in organisations such as the former South African Association for Research and Development in Higher Education (SAARDHE), now HELTASA, as well as contributions to scholarly discourses in leading South African publications, helped shape policy influencing AD discourses and practices. Moreover, HELTASA's leadership in regional and national professional development initiatives significantly enhance AD practitioners' theory-informed perspectives about specialised learning and teaching strategies in various disciplines. This effectively challenged widespread assumptions; specifically, the notion that holding a doctoral qualification guarantees effective teaching in HE, emphasising the importance of bespoke approaches for meaningful student learning (Behari-Leak, et al., 2018).

The aforementioned transitioning of AD practitioners to social actors is anchored in the construct 'positionality', often called 'situatedness' (Franks in Bolade-Ogunfodun, et al., 2023: 691). Bolade-Ogunfodun, et al.'s (2023: 678, 680) extended understanding of positionality, namely 'entwined positionality', involves a holistic consideration of researchers' positionality. 'Entwined positionality' contrasts with 'value-free objectivist conceptualizations' by foregrounding the 'personhood of the researcher' (Bolade-Ogunfodun, et al., 2023: 696). Through reflexivity, researchers' 'sensory capabilities' and elements of their formative contexts and lived experiences can provide unique 'interpretive frames of reference' to interpret autoethnographic data (Bolade-Ogunfodun, et al., 2023:695). Awareness of our entwined positionality shaped through critical reflective stances (Holmes, 2020) also includes dimensions and frames of reference such as cultural influences, gender, race, affiliations, subjective experiences, linguistic tradition, beliefs, biases, preferences, and theoretical, political, and ideological stances (Berger, 2015; Bolade-Ogunfodun, et al., 2023).

Our ontological understanding that AD practices occur in open educational systems and often unobservable phenomena (Archer, 2000), such as power dynamics or entrenched cultural conditions, influence these practices informed our undertaking to critically evaluate our entwined positionality as researchers and AD practitioners. This process entailed turning our gaze inward and outward as we articulated our vested interest as researchers and HELTASA members in planning, organising, and hosting the (un)conference and commitment to respond to the dynamics of our institutional and broader roles in HE.

We are four experienced black female AD practitioners working in the AD field at different South African HE institutions and serving as Coordinating Council and Project Team members of HELTASA. Our identities and frames of reference shaped our unique experiences and insights, journeys and interactions with diverse students, various institutional policies and practices, and South Africa's history. Drawing on our involvement in academic collaborations, we supported but held each other accountable as we embraced the (un)conference as a unique opportunity to collaborate at the national level and contribute towards the AD mandate. We were continually aware that our entwined positionality was never fixed but was always situation- and context-dependent. For example, understanding that our own 'emotional recollections' and that of the (un)conference participants could be invaluable data sources yet signal discrepancies (Hansen &

Trank in Bolade-Ogunfodun, et al., 2023) or ambiguity, we closely examined the data through 'iterative conversations' and drawing on the extant literature (Bolade-Ogunfodun et al., 2023: 687). Thus, our varied entwined positionality influenced our collaborations and experiences of the (un)conferencing methodology, a process that became a stimulus to reimagine AD work at practitioner, institutional and national levels. This profoundly reflective process strengthened the analysis of our reflections.

The values and aims of learning and teaching in HE and HELTASA's mandate to shape and transform AD practices, our collective experiences before and during the (un)conference and our inherent 'language of critique' (Giroux, 2003: 5) compelled us to question the misalignment and tension between the AD mandate to enhance educational quality for all students and the AD reality. While there have been transformation shifts, the Department of Higher Education and Training (2018) and ongoing student calls for transformative learning approaches highlighted notable challenges plaguing the AD sector. These dilemmas include student access and success, high dropout and low throughput rates and the need for ongoing development of contextually responsive curricula. Further, the critique, as noted by Behari-Leak, et al. (2018) and Peseta (2014), centres on AD lacking theoretical, scholarly, and critical engagement that does not 'speak truth to power'. Likewise, Shay (2012: 311) argues that the AD mandate of centring student success is ineffective in offering 'powerful explanations' in engaging 'rigorously and systematically' with contextual problems. Among others, these calls signalled that AD scholarship and practices require rethinking to remain relevant and responsive in the face of an ever-changing higher educational landscape and contextual realities. This critique resonates with our experiences, prompting us to build upon sector gains and transform our AD mandate to bridge the divide between commitment and transformative change.

Concerns about AD approaches and practices demand meaningful engagement and effective pedagogy to enable further significant transformational shifts. Nevertheless, we acknowledge that HE is a major social structure and that learning and teaching are affected by significant national and international shifts (CHE, 2016). AD is only one (albeit substantial) mechanism shaping teaching and learning. Hence, we recognise the considerable progress made by AD practitioners in learning and teaching and their varied contributions to the AD field (Behari-Leak, et al., 2018), lecturers' professional development and the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) (McKenna, et al., 2022). Regardless of the gains made in AD orientations, approaches and practices, the contextual conditions in HE often undermine AD practitioners, relegating them to the fringes of the academy within an increasingly performative academic culture (Boughey, 2010). This undermining manifests through various forms of misrecognition, with AD units struggling for legitimacy despite occasional recognition of scholarly achievements. This, in turn, influenced the enactment of the AD mandate.

Our theoretical and conceptual framing

Critical pedagogical praxis, a variation of critical theory (Fernández-Balboa, 1998; Palmer & Maramba, 2011), is a philosophical view that questions the political nature of education, the

premise, approaches and consequences of educational practice (Fernández-Balboa, 1998), such as AD work. Drawing on Freire (1970), Fernández-Balboa (1998), Giroux (2010) and McArthur (2010), the following tenets of critical pedagogy viz., introspection, reflectivity, power relations and critique, we interrogate inter alia our preconceived assumptions of participants, our relationship with powerful structures and practices within institutions and broader HE is the focus of this study. These tenets enable us to examine whether our AD practices maintain the status quo as opposed to achieving the mandate of ensuring educational equity and quality in South African HE. Furthermore, through introspection, we unearth our awareness of whether the (un)conference as a space of social interaction has the potential to empower or disempower (Freire, 1998; Palmer & Maramba, 2011) its participants. Critical pedagogy also provides us with a critical, reflexive lens to interrogate whether our relations to powerful institutional knowledge structures and cultural practices may contribute to both the realisation and constraint in fulfilling the AD mandate (Hughes, 2009). We realised that the espoused social and liberatory aspects of AD work require that knowledge structures and cultural practices should be intentional and purposeful in co-creating knowledge and opportunities to critique and debate dominant unresponsive pedagogical practices.

Furthermore, the intrinsic interrelatedness between education and society (Freire, 1998; McArthur, 2010) implies that, as a theoretical construct, critical pedagogy allows AD practitioners to support academics and students intentionally and strategically in exercising their agency when engaging in AD practice. Moreover, framed within an awareness of society and the broader context of HE, such support could catalyse academics to reconstruct how they position themselves in academia. In practice, capitalising on differences and conflict to bring about educational and social change (McArthur, 2010) entails exploring whether and how, in our endeavour to carry forward HELTASA's mandate of being contextually relevant and responsive, we continue to harness differences and conflict within AD work.

Methodological approach

This qualitative study focuses on our reflexive autoethnographic (AE) accounts as insider AD practitioners organising, planning, and hosting the HELTASA (un)conference. Autoethnography, an autobiographical writing and qualitative research approach, enabled us to explore, 'describe and systematically analyse (graphy)' our unique insider experiences to broader, 'cultural experience (ethno)' (Ellis, et al., 2010: 1) and social contexts (Bolade-Ogunfodun, et al. 2023; Custer, 2014), such as the (un)conference). Although AE is criticised as self-exploration and may be viewed as of little value to anyone other than the researcher (Klevan, et al., 2019), it is a 'political, socially-just and socially-conscious act' that challenges established research approaches (Ellis, et al., 2010: 1). Hence, AE is directly aligned with the (un)conference untraditional methodology and is an appropriate approach to question the realisation of the AD mandate in the context of (un)conferencing methodology.

Increasingly, reflexivity is recognised as a crucial strategy for generating new knowledge and strengthening methodological rigour through qualitative research. Whilst reflexivity is

variably defined, we approached it as a process of continual internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation of our entwined positionality as researchers (Berger, 2015; Bolade-Ogunfodun, et al., 2023). Drawing on key aspects of Bolade-Ogunfodun, et al.'s (2023: 687) framework for reflexive analysis 'informed by entwined positionality', we undertook a robust concurrent collaborative AE approach at all stages of this study. Consequently, all researchers contributed, reflecting on available data, jointly analysing the material, and writing the narrative. Since this iterative process was logistically challenging, we frequently converged through online meetings and WhatsApp messages. We uploaded documents and pertinent materials onto Google Drive, enabling universal access for all authors and enhancing collaborative efforts and decision-making at any time. These individual and collective critical reflections served as an impetus to hold a mirror up to AD, gather rich data, look backward, forward, and inward, and interrogate the misalignment and tension between the AD mandate and the AD reality. Overall, AE was beneficial in evoking the richness, layers, nuances, depths, and mysteries of the lived experiences of our (un)conferencing methodology from a position of knowing from within.

Prompted to hold the mirror up to further scrutinise our personal and collective reflections considering prevailing emerging trends, we engaged deeply with ourselves and reflected on existing AD practices. In this process, the (un)conferencing approach pushed us to critically rethink AD within an innovative framework. We offer insights into how the (un)conference methodology, as an innovative and inclusive context for meaningful and collaborative engagements, could be a stimulus to reimagine AD work at practitioner, institutional and national levels. Our reflections instilled the hope and conviction to transform our AD practices.

Practical application of critical pedagogy enabled us to tap into the (un)conference-generated data and resources available in the form of participation, observation, and introspection through individual and group dialogues and reflections, and participant conversational engagements to build a narrative that invoked our lived realities as AD practitioners and organisers of the HELTASA 2021 (un)conference. In building this narrative, we critically explored how these social engagements empowered or disempowered (Freire, 1998; Palmer & Maramba, 2011) participants, viz., AD practitioners, other academics, and students. At times we brought an insider perspective (Adams, et al., 2017) when we explored our individual personal experiences from both positionalities; at times, an implicated perspective (Stoller, 1997) when probing our 'situatedness' (Franks in Bolade-Ogunfodun, et al., 2023: 691) and combined experiences as members of the HELTASA team and our role leading up to the (un)conferencing event; at other times we shared an outsider perspective (Stoller, 1997) when collaboratively unpacking the lived experiences of participants at the (un)conference event. These experiences arose through participant-driven conversations we facilitated as critical, reflexive AD practitioners.

Our shifting between independent reasoning and interaction with one another resulted in valuable group collaborations. In doing so, we also guarded against silencing each other's voices but instead purposefully sought ways to empower each other in co-creating knowledge and analytical insights about our data. Unlike hegemonic assumptions and entrenched traditional cultural practices within institutions, which bestow credibility based on academic hierarchy, our

empowering strategies included acknowledging, validating, and strengthening the contributions of each member of our research team. Since ethical concerns in AE are associated with the values in interpersonal relations (Ellis, 2007), we remained cognisant of the sensitivities of others' contributions to our AE accounts and therefore intentionally and strategically intertwined our ethnographies with narratives from our engagements with other (un)conference participants.

Findings and Discussion

We present our critical self-reflections as a vignette looking backward, forward, and inward, questioning our complicity in the misalignment and tension between the AD mandate and the AD reality. Despite working in institutions with different ideological understandings, we harnessed our diverse experiences and insights to explore the self and our contexts, and reimagine and recommit to AD work, using collective power and effort to change the status quo.

Turning the mirror inward: Reflective glimpses

As long-standing members, we felt we were 'gaining social capital' (Bolade-Ogunfodun, et al., 2023: 689) when stepping into our changed responsibility and leadership roles of the HELTASA team. Our decision to collaborate with a renowned AD cadre of trailblazers was informed by our ingrained self-transcendent values to contribute meaningfully within our sphere of influence. Although we recognised a seamless alignment between our disposition and HELTASA's humanistic core values, our inner critic subjected us to relentless images of our occasional subaltern positioning within our work contexts and some social spaces. This emanated from our discussions of experiences and insights, elaborated below.

Despite our tenure in academia, professional and academic qualifications and accolades, identities as stalwart members of our communities and trajectories into HE portraying personal sacrifices, commitment and a strong work ethic, we, in varying degrees, were often relegated to being outsiders amongst 'real' academics, viz., discipline experts (Thomas & Cordiner, 2014). Further engagement with participants during (un)conference activities and our critical reflections underscored this imposed AD positioning. This subaltern positioning, which constrains the capacity to enact the AD mandate and diminishes the roles and status of AD practitioners, is the reality of most AD practitioners.

As mentioned, AD practitioners' ambivalent identities (Park, 2002) are reflected in their having to traverse respective service and academic roles. Given the divide between AD work and general academic work (Peseta, 2011), focusing solely on AD work posed significant personal and professional challenges. This glaring reminder of the tension between academic and AD roles demanded that we confront the persistent divide to enable us to move forward and gain full recognition as professionals. As put forward earlier in this paper, a critical pedagogic lens could be meaningful in addressing this tension, cultivating new ways of being, knowing, and becoming (Barnett, 2009), and fulfilling the espoused AD mandate. As such, the (un)conference engagements and our critical reflections highlighted the importance of including student voices in curriculum development and collaborating more effectively with relevant stakeholders to carve

a more meaningful and central position in the academic project. Being on our personal journey as transformative AD practitioners, we would often peek in life's mirror, questioning whether our 'cultivated' and critical gaze embodying a particular 'institutional gravitas' (Peseta, 2007: 17) are not mere illusions.

When the idea of (un)conference was first mooted, we were apprehensive but reluctant to express our fear of failure or not getting 'buy-in' from the traditional university community. (Un)conferencing was unfamiliar terrain - uncharted waters requiring us to think out of the box on a large scale. We were initially hesitant but, at the same time, empowered to step into new roles and responsibilities and think differently about ourselves, our capacities and capabilities. We thrived in the collective, rejuvenating energy and reflected on the personal cost and professional sacrifice required to radically change the traditional conference methodology. Looking inward, we recognised the frustration and doubt about our effectiveness as change agents, who, despite a commitment to change, were complicit in resisting collaborative, more holistic approaches to change the status quo in AD work. We thus boldly acknowledged our 'social and political responsibilities' (Fernández-Balboa, 1998: 47) and started to confront our insecurities.

Inspired by collective thinking, we re-imagined paradigm shifts and transformative, change-oriented practices that could open spaces for collaboration. We envisaged that such partnerships would yield holistic, systemic approaches, including developing curricula to facilitate our students' learning paths and the transformation of knowledge during the (un)conference and beyond. Transformative thinking also involved dismantling the deficit, homogeneous views of students to celebrate their individuality and support their potential to succeed. Our informal Communities of Practice (CoPs) offered social spaces for collective creative thinking and resource development. In these participant-driven, equitable social spaces, we were challenged to unlearn conventional, unresponsive practices. These CoPs are invaluable resource holders (Archer, 1995; Behari-Leak, 2015) to take the AD project forward. Author 3 observed that we benefitted from the collaborative spaces within HELTASA and the networks we formed during and beyond the (un)conference:

HELTASA is well-placed as a resource where colleagues can benefit from knowledge sharing.

During the initial conceptualisation stage of the (un)conference, a self-reflective activity was another critical moment that introduced one of many personal liberatory phases. Prompted to look inward, exploring whether our goals, positions, and personas (Thompson, 2021) resonated with the scope of AD and HE, we unpacked these three interrelated dimensions. This activity deeply challenged us in considering our future contributions to AD work, involving purposeful collaborations with others, taking risks, exploring our creativity, and realising our potential in traversing and dismantling imagined and arbitrary boundaries. We realised that the affirmative, supportive, yet boundary-pushing culture within HELTASA and the (un)conference could suitably equip the envisioned AD practitioner to address the current tension between the AD practice and

mandate. Moreover, changing the narratives about first-generation black academics like us and our students compelled us to shift our positioning and embrace an exciting opportunity to re-discover and reinvent ourselves.

We had to be unafraid and embrace the opportunities to critically interrogate and challenge the silencing of our voices (Fernández-Balboa, 1998), access and contribution to knowledge, which could hinder fulfilling the intended AD mandate. Author 2 noted that this silencing has many dimensions, such as language to empower or disempower:

The question of language becomes central... our use and experience of language in terms of how we position ourselves or allow others to position us.

Thus, it was necessary to unpack and envision authentic ways of 'talking back' (Fernández-Balboa, 1998: 50) in discerning the challenges and tensions that maintain the oppressive structures that curtail AD work and the status of its practitioners. One of the ways to talk back was to use multimodal scholarship such as song, poetry as (un)conference contributions. This endeavour is ongoing, and we purposefully invited colleagues and students across the sector to do likewise.

We recognised the value of engaging in conversations and idea-sharing across various platforms, prompting us to adopt a forward-looking perspective. Driven by a desire to foster inclusive engagement across diverse audiences, including seasoned researchers and marginalised voices, we embarked on an initiative to transcend conventional boundaries. This initiative involved implementing pre-conference tasks and activities. We targeted two distinct communities, viz., students and individuals within the academic space who, despite possessing valuable insights, often hesitated to share them, or were not invited to take a seat at the table - the marginalised voices, as well as seasoned researchers within the AD sphere.

The first set of pre-conference tasks encouraged participants to submit their reflections and discussions through online platforms like Jamboard and Padlet, offering the option of anonymity. This virtual space remained accessible throughout the (un)conference, allowing diverse participants to engage with the discussions and topics anytime. The second task, tailored for seasoned researchers, promoted scholarship related to academic programme (curriculum) development in HE. We invited participants to share experiential insights on integrating research and teaching into the curriculum through brief voice notes, videos, and other modes. All these submissions were uploaded to the HELTASA (un)conference website leading up to the (un)conference event. This presented a platform to strengthen the collaboration and scholarship of AD. The third engagement, a Coffee Conversation, involved students, academics, and programme developers. This session entitled 'Recentring the Student Voice in Student Feedback on Teaching and Courses' underscored the value of students being co-creators and partners in AD work.

Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the fairest of them all?

Pride and feelings of accomplishment shrouded the anxiety and dread associated with our collective experiences of the conventional conferencing mode and preparing for academic conferences. Had we not tasted the exhilaration yet frustration of responding to conference calls involving bureaucratic processes and a flurry of administrative tasks to secure much-needed conference funding? Had we not dreaded the peer review process in which gatekeepers passed judgments about worthiness or unworthiness? Indeed, it was rewarding to be 'accepted' into the fold by those in power but equally disempowering to have an abstract rejected without any guidance on how it could be improved. Far from being a developmental space, the traditional conference space highlighted our assumed scholarly ineptitude and what we did not know. Although we wholeheartedly supported the call for scholarship and theorisation of AD work, traditional conference engagements generally provided abstract ideas and terminology, challenging us to put these into practice.

Tensions surfaced as we tried to fathom the (un)conference structure, soliciting input for relevant themes for the various (un)conference sessions, reviewing proposals (known as abstracts in traditional conferences) and giving constructive, developmental feedback to participants. The (un)conference methodology attempted to offset such tensions when we provided peer-learning opportunities by including all the submitted contributions and framed our feedback developmentally. We needed to rethink alternative ways to widen access to represent scholarship through voice notes, artistic expressions, and video clips. Author 2 used this opportunity to share her conceptualisation of the tension between lecturers' frustration about professional learning initiatives amid ever-increasing demands characterising contemporary higher education. Below is an excerpt of Author 2's multilingual poem titled *Stalemate or Progress?* through which she creatively shared her interpretation of this tension:

Branded with suspicion
 Ivory tower inhabitant
 Footsoldier of powerful social actors
 Splurging alleged fountain of knowledge
 on lecturers' teaching - curriculum development nogal¹
 Professing an artillery of educational theory
 Disrupting ingrained deficit practices and dominant skills
 barring our youth's access to powerful knowledge and ways of being
 Vuka Sisi!²
 In no-man's land, vulnerabilities abound...

Thus, the (un)conference context where practitioners practically showcased innovations and

¹ *Nogal* is an Afrikaans expression meaning 'on top of that'.

² The English translation of the isiXhosa expression *Vuka Sisi* is *Wake Up, Sister*. isiXhosa is one of South Africa's eleven official languages.

theorised them in a way that made sense to everyone was opportune.

The reimagined ways of enacting AD resulted from insights gleaned from the Coffee Conversation, a precursor to the (un)conference. Unlike many other conversations where academics talk about students and not with students, this conversation brought all parties to the same table to deliberate on the matters of students' experiences as they relate to the design, data analysis and institutional responses to student feedback. Author 2 reflected on the value of including student voices if we are serious about attaining the intent of the AD mandate:

Young people are not shy about showing us our blind spots and reminding us that we still have a long way to go if we honestly pursue being resilient, responsive, and relevant.

As we reflected on the discussions, we collectively realised how the design of questions for module feedback aimed at enhancing the quality of teaching and learning are usually not fit for purpose, too general and not disciplinary-specific, exclusionary, underplaying students' roles in their learning and misaligned to their learning experiences. Furthermore, individual academics' response to the feedback was another point of contention (Nsibande & Garraway, 2011; Nsibande, 2020).

Consolidating the Coffee Conversation, the (un)conference engagements accentuated the imperative to shift from talking about students' learning experiences to recentring student involvement in curriculum design and designing course activities responsive to students' interests, needs, and contextual realities. Author 4 shared this sentiment and highlighted the possibility of a better alignment with the transformative imperatives of the AD mandate:

In AD, we want that parity of participation where everyone's voice is included... but when we try to put students in the centre, are they in the room... in most cases, the students are not in the room. The (un)conference methodology has forced us to have the students in the room...to ensure democratic participation because transformation is about democratic participation, to change the status quo.

The strong views about the urgency of understanding the central role of students' context and being co-creators for meaningful and engaging curricula resonated with us as we reimagined AD work. Although our undertaking to continue inviting students into academic spaces highlighted our initial shortcomings, it provided opportunities to reimagine ways of practising AD work with those central to our work: the students. Author 1 offered an example of being more effective when engaging with students and capitalising on their knowledge and expertise.

We do not make assumptions about what we think they might need. The issue of data was identified by them and we arranged to allocate additional data.

This conversation was a turning point as we acknowledged that considerable gains in AD

work juxtaposed with missed opportunities to respond to, amongst others, issues of power, voice, and inclusivity in a meaningful and sustainable manner. Like the Coffee Conversation, the (un)conference offered a platform for all voices to be heard. Looking inward, the conversations and experiences during the (un)conference allowed us to be reflective, openly confront, and start unbundling the persistent self-doubt about our ability and legitimacy as black academics in the AD space. These engagements opened vistas of empowerment to articulate the frustrations and criticism we were subjected to in enacting the academic project. At the same time, we questioned our complicity in these tensions as we shared coping strategies, such as collaboration and new avenues of communication like group chats to protect ourselves in exclusionary AD environments.

Drawing similarities with our collective experiences and the literature, we recognised the vulnerable positioning of academics and AD practitioners whose fulfilment and a sense of purpose are curtailed when their contributions are not valued or considered irrelevant. Such disempowered positioning also shows how differently AD practitioners are received or welcomed within different faculties at the same university. Fricker (2013: 1317) labels dismissive practices as 'epistemic injustice' and alerts us to its significance when 'someone is wronged in their capacity as a knower'. Regardless of the context, different ideological understandings of the AD project (Leibowitz, 2014; Niven, 2012) as portrayed by some institutions reneging on governmental directives and their espoused commitment to adequately support staff to attend capacity-building initiatives such as that of the (un)conference, are equally harmful. To a certain extent, these experiences echoed our own since only some of our institutions provided sufficient funding to attend and engage in all the (un)conference sessions. Therefore, looking inward and outward, we embraced our humanity and vulnerabilities as we illuminated and explored the values and standards we ascribed to as AD practitioners. Author 2 confronted her vulnerability head-on:

We have to look deep into our teaching practices and ask the difficult questions. Do I want or like this? What worked well for me? What does it mean for me, my practice, my students, and my colleagues?

We thus consider the (un)conference a unique opportunity to respond to these gaps and enact change as we collaboratively explored, illuminated, and unpacked the different spheres from which tensions between the AD mandate and AD reality existed. At the same time, we were challenged to interrogate the values and standards we ascribed to and embrace our humanity and vulnerabilities. Author 2 noted that this would assist in our quest to design AD spaces to disrupt the status quo:

The (un)conference was also an opportunity for us not only to reflect but also to disrupt in the sense that we were now enacting those ideas that could make a difference.

In response to the critique about the fragmented nature of AD work, we capitalised on the

strong emphasis in (un)conference methodology on collaboration, inclusivity, representation, and networking to enlarge our institutional and regional footprint. We recognised the potential value of such collaborations within and across departments and institutions. We confirmed that collaborations enable us to draw on the collective knowledge, expertise, and support of various stakeholders (students and staff) to improve curricula. Furthermore, we were reminded that although obtaining the buy-in from all stakeholders may be arduous, it promotes teamwork and out-of-the-box thinking.

As shown in the literature and demonstrated by participants' eager participation in our sessions during the (un)conference, considering alternative forms of engagement and representation of scholarly work in academia has pedagogical and social values (Hale & Besette, 2016). As such, preferred creative modes (e.g., written, audio, visual, audiovisual) did not diminish the rigour and clarity of participants' scholarly work. Although it cannot be seen as a panacea for preventing the marginalisation of any voice or input, (un)conference methodology has many affordances, such as centring on the relational, contextual, and voluntary contributions, which enable participants to demystify and present their views as an essential aspect of the collective contributions (Hale & Besette, 2016).

We envisaged that sharing our work publicly would create a sense of community and inclusivity amongst participants and serve as opportunities for rich engagement. Moreover, the (un)conferencing methodology provided safe spaces for critical reflection and debate on how best to continue supporting our students and institutions in meaningful ways. Participants debated the role of resilience and anti-fragility in AD work as we engaged and collaborated with students and each other. On reflection, we realised that we have shown, in the face of unexpected and sudden changes and challenges of HE, that we have been adequately resilient. However, deeper thinking and action are needed to understand and embrace the value of anti-fragility.

Inviting participants to respond to inputs and contributions using visual and textual formats without time constraints created a living archive of scholarly and creative work with unlimited access. In addition, the (un)conference methodology extended conversations and could inform practices as participants spent time interrogating each other's work, posting wicked problems, questions, and opinions. This illustrates the empowering space of the (u)conferencing methodology and proved to be liberating as participants voiced their ideas without fear of victimisation or ridicule for presenting alternative or provocative views and beliefs. Author 2, through her poetic imagery eloquently and powerfully articulated her views:

I juxtapose the well-meaning intentions of academic developers and lecturers' honest yet legitimate retaliation despite a commitment to the academic project. Lecturers' outcry signals an urgency to raise the white flag figuratively and engage critically and collaboratively to rediscover a shared vision and realistic, meaningful ways to enhance teaching and learning through curriculum work.

In turn, commenting on or affirming contributions in the Zoom chats, Jamboards and Padlet

yielded robust, scholarly, more interpersonal discussions among participants, expanded networks, and set the tone for future collaborations.

Illuminating our nuanced experiences

Frequent 'glimpses in the mirror' assured us of our growing confidence as the conceptualisation and shaping of the (un)conference became visible with each engagement, as the moving parts of this grand-scale academic event started to fall into place. As a collective, we reminded ourselves that integrating learning and teaching across all HE structures was the responsibility of all academics rather than only that of the AD community. Looking backward, inward, and forward to articulate our individual and collective capacity and capabilities, we recognised that we are at a juncture to either continue the status quo (albeit the successes) or choose to restructure and reimagine AD work.

With HELTASA's support, we collaborated with our scholarly team members to strategically capitalise on enabling mechanisms, such as HELTASA's transformation-oriented mandate. Despite being new to our leadership positions within the restructured HELTASA, our collegiality, collective expertise in academia, and collaborative leadership have provided a rich resource that informed our interactions and allayed our fears to enact the mammoth task of resilience, responsiveness, and relevance in HE successfully. Doing so involved theorising about and beginning to refocus the tools, perspectives and practices in curriculum design and implementation as part of AD work. Our direct engagements with different roles and responsibilities within the (un)conference context afforded us a space to begin to unlearn, learn, approach, and implement AD work true to its mandate.


Conclusion


This autoethnographic journey held a mirror up to the self, our context, and our experiences as we interrogated AD practice, confusing professional AD identities, and the misalignment between the AD mandate and AD realities at the coalface. Our reflections took place against the HELTASA (un)conference methodology, which encouraged autonomy and enabled authentic and equitable 'participant-driven' engagements. Our insider roles in planning, organising, and hosting the (un)conference event were the stimulus to confront our discomfort and challenge the disjointed nature of AD work. Including and acknowledging student voices and recognising reflections on our vulnerabilities and agency, we explored, illuminated, unpacked, and reflected, drawing on collegiality, collective knowledge, expertise, and collaborative leadership in academia. These engagements allayed our fears and concerns and bolstered an empowering space to begin to think differently and innovatively about AD. Notwithstanding, critique concerning the approaches, orientations, and scope of AD work reminds us that the tension between the AD mandate and AD reality still requires our critical engagement and action.


Our autoethnographic reflections on the HELTASA (un)conference methodology invited us to foreground the value of collaboration, inclusivity, representation, networking, and co-creation to strengthen and develop AD work, forging a closer alignment with the transformative AD


mandate. In doing so, we were reminded that the inclusive and enabling nature of AD work should transcend the boundaries of all HE institutions and be the mandate of all academics who resist optical illusions about the AD field. Holding the mirror up, it is evident that we should continue strengthening collaboration among HE stakeholders to restructure and reimagine AD's vision and purpose, striving to reach our goals at practitioner, institutional and national levels.

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