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CHAPTER 9

Narrowing the geographical divide: A critical reflection of an affordance of the Covid-19 pandemic for collaborative professional learning and development

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Abstract

Globally, Covid-19 has disrupted practices within higher education forcing us to relook at how we engage, what we do and how we do things. The pandemic has changed how we teach and how our students learn. It has also changed the way we, as professionals working in higher education, do our work including how we interact with each other. While much has been taken away from our lived experiences and daily realities because of the need to live carefully and safely for ourselves and others, there are some very real, innovative, and genuine affordances that Covid-19 has promoted that provide current realities and future possibilities that are quite different from our past experiences. In this critical reflection we explore how we – four individuals from different universities across South Africa working

together on the Student Learning Scholarly Project (SLSP) of the Higher Education Learning and Teaching Association of Southern Africa (HELTASA) – are communicating, collaborating, and learning in ways where, among other things, geography no longer matters. In spite of our physical separation, we are able to work together in ways that create and maintain momentum, generate a plethora of new ideas for consideration and action, and in many ways, produce more materials and products to enhance the student experience of higher education in South Africa. We will consider and reflect on what this different way of working means to us, both individually and collectively and what it means for higher education for the now and for the future.

Keywords: professional learning, community of practice, collaborative engagement, geography

Introduction

The many challenges and constraints that resulted from the Covid-19 pandemic and concomitant lockdowns in 2020 are well documented. The South African (SA) higher education (HE) sector was not exempted, with the rapid shift to Emergency Remote Teaching and Learning (ERTL) (Hodges *et al.* 2020) placing the spotlight on the many inequities and inequalities still entrenched in the sector (Czerniewicz *et al.* 2020). Nevertheless, the sudden accompanying shift to remote modes of working resulted in some unique affordances for academics and academic development professionals working at different institutions across the country. In this chapter, we deliberately adopt the model of reflection proposed by Rolfe, Freshwater and Jasper (2001), which provides the space for a reflective exploration that integrates theory and practice. According to this model of reflection, when reflecting on practice we are called to consider the following questions: the "what",

the "so what" and the "now what". Our "what" (Rolfe *et al.* 2001) is a personal reflection on our current role(s) in HE at our respective institutions. We explore our journey and experiences as members of the professional organisation, Higher Education Learning and Teaching Association of Southern Africa (HELTASA), with a particular focus on our collaborative work as the HELTASA Student Learning Scholarly Project (SLSP) team. By overlaying the experience of living and working through a global pandemic, we offer a "so what" reflection (Rolfe *et al.* 2001) in terms of what this pandemic has meant for HE, in general, and what it has meant (and continues to mean) for our collective and collaborative work as members of the SLSP. Finally, we offer a "now what" reflection (Rolfe at al. 2001) that shares lessons we have learned as friends, colleagues, and collaborators through our work for the SLSP and what these lessons could mean for HE in the future; in terms of what it looks like, how learning and teaching take place, and how collaborations could look and function in a post-pandemic world.

Theoretical elements

This reflective discussion is underpinned by the principles of Ethics of Care (EoC) and Communities of Practice (CoP).

Ethics of Care (EoC)

The theory of EoC starts from the premise that as humans we are inherently relational, responsive beings and the human condition is one of connectedness or interdependence (Gilligan 1993). An EoC directs our attention to the need for responsiveness in relationships, in which everyone has a voice, is listened to carefully (in their own right and on their own terms) and is heard with respect.

Community of Practice (CoP)

A CoP is described by Wenger (2010: 179) as a "social learning system which forms when there is a shared area of interest and members are committed to this community of interest." CoPs allow members to interact and learn together. Through these interactions they develop a shared practice (Wenger 2011). This is an accurate description of our SLSP CoP. Although linked to a professional body and necessitated by our work as members of HELTASA, the social dimensions of our CoP are significant to this chapter. Lave (2001) as cited in Edwards (2005: 57) emphasises how a CoP becomes a "...structuring environment..." that "... produces or allows certain ways of participating...". During ERTL, our SLSP CoP became such a structuring environment for us as individuals and a collective, which allowed us to interact, participate, and learn from one another despite the geographical distance among us.

"What": Personal journeys with HELTASA

In the four vignettes that follow, we present our respective journeys and experiences as members of the professional organisation HELTASA. We are four academics and/or academic development professionals from four different public universities in SA, contributing to HE in SA in different capacities. Our affiliation to HELTASA is voluntary and additional to our daily jobs.

Danie: The Assistant Dean

I am a mid-career academic who works in the Faculty of Commerce, Law, and Management (CLM) at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), where I hold both the position as CLM Assistant Dean for Teaching and Learning, and Head of the CLM Teaching and Learning Centre. I have for some time been intent on becoming actively involved

in HELTASA by being more than just an organisational member, both to be able to contribute in meaningful ways to SA HE on a national level and for personal development and growth. The opportunity to become part of the HELTASA leadership presented itself in early 2021. At the time, there was a call out for expressions of interest to be submitted to the organisation and a colleague encouraged me to do just that. After some time, I was informed that my submission had been successful and that I would be working as one of four members of the HELTASA SLSP – as the designated Scholarly Researcher. Becoming part of a student-focused scholarly project made sense to me, as my work and research focuses on student learning, success, and support (broadly speaking) within the SA HE context.

HELTASA's recent reshaping meant that there were numerous new individuals who had become part of its leadership. To introduce new members to those who have been part of HELTASA for some time (and *vice versa*), an orientation and induction session was arranged for March 2021. Owing to constraints imposed as a result of the Covid-19 lockdown and following the large-scale shift to remote modes of working, this session was conducted virtually via Zoom on a Saturday morning. It was during this meeting that I was first introduced to some of the members of the SLSP. In time we would come to form an inter-institutional CoP, rooted in our shared passion for student learning, success, and support, and our collective beliefs about EoC principles for our work with students, colleagues, and one another.

By July 2021, our CoP had begun to meet more regularly, necessitated by the work we were doing as the HELTASA SLSP, but driven by a shared sense of support and unity. I found myself looking forward to our arranged weekly check-in meetings, not only because of the exciting

work we were doing and planning as the SLSP, but also because I found the engagements supportive and stimulating. These meetings were productive, usually filled with laughter, and always left me with a sense of motivation and purpose. As a collective, we would check-in with one another during these meetings, but also from time-to-time via our WhatsApp group. Soon I became aware that our engagements were characterised by mutual interest in each other's personal and professional lives, concern for one another, and care. For me it felt natural, as my approach to working in professional spaces has always been informed by care and kindness. However, I became acutely aware of not only practicing this, but of it being reciprocated by the other members of the CoP. In time, we started verbalising our awareness of this element of our weekly engagements and our CoP has quickly evolved to the point where we are co-authoring this chapter.

Nelia: The Senior Tutor Coordinator

I am the Senior Tutor Coordinator within the Centre for Academic Staff Development, at the University of Johannesburg (UJ). My primary focus is to work with tutors and staff to promote integrated tutorial programmes (Clarence 2018). My journey with HELTASA began in 2015 when I became a member. At this point, I did not realise its full potential and was simply happy to attend meetings during the annual conference. As a member, I soon realised that membership afforded me the opportunity to network, collaborate and share practices which were pertinent to my field and context. In 2018, I became the co-convener for the HELTASA Special Interest Group (SIG) on Mentoring and Tutoring. As part of this team, we became very vocal and intentionally created opportunities to promote student peer leadership to support student learning and success.

HELTASA has continuously morphed to ensure that groupings remain relevant and play more significant roles. This resulted in the HELTASA SIG on Mentoring and Tutoring becoming the Collaborative Learning Community (CLC) for Tutoring and Mentoring. The aim was for CLCs within HELTASA to be more representative, and to create opportunities for collaboration and active engagement. My role as co-convener continued within the CLC for Tutoring and Mentoring where a CoP was established that created opportunities for interaction and shared practice. In addition, our interactions were framed by EoC which shaped our relationships and connections. With the advent of the pandemic, all face-to-face meetings were suspended. I was fearful about how our CoP would be able to continue to contribute to HELTASA when we could no longer meet in person. However, throughout 2020, the CLC for Tutoring and Mentoring met online when needing to respond to directives. These interactions were work-driven and outcomes-based. My interactions with the CLC team were engendered by the relationship and connections that had been formed over the number of years that we had been working together. This connection and relationship made it easier to relook at ways of doing and relearning how to use technology to further our cause.

In 2021, just when I was comfortable with the way in which the CLC was operating, HELTASA once again transformed itself. This transformation was to ensure that it was relevant, responsive and resilient (HELTASA 2021). Online meetings were held to orientate members to the new HELTASA structure, to clarify roles, and to introduce new role players. These meetings were very generative. The CLCs were replaced by Scholarly Projects. I was asked to be the Project Manager for the SLSP. The thought of working with colleagues from diverse institutions was exciting as I am always open to learning and to finding new ways of

doing things. This would also potentially allow for the formation of a new CoP.

During our weekly SLSP meetings, I have come to realise that this space is indeed, what Cook-Sather (2016) terms a brave space. A space where one can take risks knowing that they will be acknowledged and supported. This space also provides an opportunity for each team member to temporarily drop their academic identity in order to reveal an exceptional human being with multiple identities. Brave spaces can only exist if interactions are framed within EoC (Gilligan 1993). These meetings are also characterised by care and compassion as each one of us invites the other into their personal space (Searles 2020) - something that did not form part of our pre-Covid experience. Through our interactions we have been able to form a CoP shaped by our common interest around student learning and success. Within this space, each team member continues to contribute towards a collective which promotes student learning and success.

Arthi: The Chemistry Lecturer

I am currently a chemistry lecturer in the Mathematics and Science Education Unit, in the Teaching Learning and Development Centre at Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT). I started my journey in academic development in 2013, with over 15 years of lecturing experience in the field of Science. Entering academic development was scary, but it brought new experiences and lessons. To help adapt and learn, I quickly enrolled in various teaching and learning workshops, training, and short courses. Some of my duties in the Teaching and Learning Development Centre, in addition to lecturing chemistry, are my involvement in professional development, coordination of various student support interventions such as student consultations, academic

advising, coordinating a peer mentorship programme, and leading the university's first-year experience (FYE) programme. To manage these tasks, I am extremely reliant on technology, and often find ways to use technology to ease how I engage with these tasks. Being a naturally curious person, I often enjoy learning about new technology and educational tools to create another dimension of interest and improve engagement. I find that if used correctly, technology can improve time management, extend reach of involvement, and cross boundaries that are sometimes difficult to navigate otherwise.

I have been part of HELTASA since 2014 as a registered participant and later became a member of the Mentoring and Tutoring Special Interest Group (SIG). In 2019, along with Danny, I was selected as a co-convenor of the First Year Experience (FYE) SIG which was then converted into a Collaborative Learning Community (CLC). In 2021, HELTASA was transformed to highlight focus areas, one of which is the SLSP. The uniqueness of being involved in this project during the time of the pandemic has been felt by our team. It is important to note that for me, being a member of the SLSP team – as the designated Scholarly Practitioner - has been a magnificent learning opportunity. Each of my team members come from a different part of the national grid and has different strengths through their involvement in student development and support at their respective universities.

Building a relationship was our first priority to understand who we are, and what we could bring to our team. Creating a safe space to openly discuss, not just our work tasks, but what we are going through in our individual spaces, was a welcome and much-needed approach to understand, respect, and honour each of our expression of being. Taking the time to check-in and reflect on what we are going

through allows us to be realistic about what we can achieve together and timeously, thus improving the effectiveness of our interactions. In spite of our individual responsibilities and demands at our own universities, our team is able to collaborate through the use of simple technology, such as emails, online meetings, free online cloud-based tools, and communication applications (e.g., WhatsApp).

What stands out for me while working with the SLSP team is that time is taken to recognise and connect with the whole person and not just with one another as HE practitioners. Technology allows us to connect anytime, anywhere, but requires an acknowledgement and respect of all individuals' boundaries. Very often we see a dangerous blurring of lines between personal time and work time. The time that the SLSP team took, initially, to really get to know and understand each other and set boundaries was an important aspect to us working well as a team. Treating each other as people first, with an understanding that technology, although useful, is just a tool that allows us to connect, is a valuable lesson.

Danny: The First-Year Experience Director

I am the Director for the First-Year Experience (FYE) at the University of Cape Town (UCT); a position I have held since October 2014. In brief, my role consists of providing strategic direction and oversight for all programming (curricular and co-curricular) and support for first-year students. I am required to work closely with six teaching faculties as well as the Department of Student Affairs (DSA) to ensure that the FYE is and remains a truly horizontal function of the university and to ensure that all incoming students are adequately and appropriately supported as they transition into both the space of HE and the place of the UCT.

My association with HELTASA began in 2019 when I was asked to be a co-convenor of the FYE Special Interest Group (SIG) along with Arthi. This move into a leadership role in HELTASA was most timely for me because, in addition to my association and work with the South African National Resource Centre for First-Year Students and Students in Transition (SANRC) - a national organisation to support HE practitioners working in the FYE space - I was looking for spaces to grow the national conversation, narrative and work of the FYE with colleagues from across the HE landscape (i.e., not only FYE colleagues). The subsequent transition of the SIG to a Collaborative Learning Community (CLC) strengthened the national reach and profile of the FYE in SA.

HELTASA's subsequent move to transform CLCs into Scholarly Projects in early 2021 happened at a time when the world, and certainly the space of HE, was in rapid and constant flux because of the global pandemic that was forcing individuals and communities to find new and innovative ways to live and work so as to honour the need for safety and social distancing. So, not only were new groupings of individuals within HELTASA being formed, but they were being formed at a time when the modus operandi for work was online interactions. Very quickly, four individuals from across the HE sector in SA (both geographically and professionally) came together to form and work together as the SLSP. I am the designated Scholarly Strategist. From the outset our work as the SLSP has been defined and shaped by online conversations, interactions, and collaborations - a trend that, in many respects, has helped the four of us connect - deeply - as caring friends, colleagues, and co-contributors to a growing understanding of the student experience.

"So What": Distant but (caring) together

These individual reflections highlight the unique (and in some ways, common) experiences of each member of the SLSP team. Being part of the SLSP has afforded us the opportunity to become part of a CoP (Wegner 2011) that is rooted in a shared passion for student learning, success and support. Within this CoP, we are able to collaborate and interact in order to develop a shared practice that, in turn, informs our individual practice. Our CoP is grounded in the EoC (Gilligan 1993) that forefronts the importance of responsibility, concern, and relationship to ensure that our voices are heard, are listened to, and are heard with respect. Our CoP has created a safe space where we can be brave (Cook-Sather 2016), take risks, and be vulnerable whilst contributing to the HE narrative.

There is much to be reflected upon and shared about the timing of the creation of the Scholarly Projects within HELTASA. The timing might have been coincidental with the Covid-19 global pandemic, but the way in which this pandemic has shaped our interactions and collaborations has resulted in different, authentic, genuine, beautiful, and caring connections with one another.

Teaching, learning, and collaborating are inherently social activities; activities that have, traditionally, demanded and depended on face-to-face meetings and interactions. The need to slow the spread of Covid-19 coupled with the need to live safely for ourselves and others, however, necessitated a rapid pivot to online teaching and learning to ensure the academic project continued. Furthermore, there was a parallel rapid shift to online meetings and interactions among staff to ensure the necessary conversations, decisions, and support for the academic project also continued. Carol Gilligan (1993) - the proponent

of "The Ethics of Care" might argue that this move to online spaces in the context of a global pandemic is "the ideal of care...an activity of relationship, of seeing and responding to need, taking care of the world by sustaining the web of connection so that no one is left alone" (p. 62; cited in Branicki 2020).

While the lack of face-to-face interactions has taken its toll on the work (for both staff and students) within any given university, it has broken down geographical and institutional barriers for inter-university collaborations. In short, the geography of the online space (Aoyama 1999) is much less limiting than the geography of our world for collaboration. Moreover, perhaps because of our own lived realities coupled with the daily experiences of a global community living through a public health crisis, there is a level of genuine care and concern for one another that is very evident and real in our interactions and collaborations as the SLSP CoP. Not only have we connected as colleagues working to improve the experience of our students journeying through HE, but we have also genuinely connected as human beings and as friends who have and, in some instances, share, similar interests outside of academia. In short, we are mindful and deliberate about caring for and connecting with one another to collectively support each other through this moment.

Given that our SLSP came into being at a time when meeting face-to-face is not possible, it is difficult to imagine what our interactions might look and sound like if in-person meetings were our reality. However, upon reflection, we think that two things would hold true: 1) we would not be meeting as frequently as we do currently in our online space, and 2) while 'small talk' might be a characteristic at the start of our meetings, it is hard to imagine it being as meaningful, authentic, and

immersive as what we are currently doing and experiencing in our weekly online meetings while living through - both individually and collectively - a global pandemic. Thus, while the interest in one another might have been there, the layering of a global pandemic onto our individual and collective lives has elevated our need to be there for one another, to connect with one another, and to support one another. In short, while we might be physically distant, we are very much together in our care, concern, and support for one another.

"Now what": The why of where

Geographers seek to ask, explore, and understand 'the why of where': Why are cities located where they are? Why are socio-economic disparities so pronounced along racial lines? How and why does the built environment facilitate and/or constrain children's daily access to physical activity? Typically, geographers - depending on their speciality - will ask this fundamental question for spaces and places, and at different scales. As we continue to reflect on our roles in HE in our particular spaces of professionalisation and places of employment – including our individual and collective brave spaces - it is abundantly clear that the scale at which we can (and must) collaborate has been forever altered by HE moving into online spaces. While the pandemic forced universities online, with a bit of hindsight we can now see that a lot of what has happened in HE in SA over the past 18 months has been successful. Sure, there have been some failures and important lessons learned, but on the whole, the 'why' of 'where' is moving into a space where the answer is no longer simply 'because of the pandemic.' In other words, the answer to this question of 'why are we _____ online?' (pick your verb: teaching, learning, collaborating, interacting) is and will continue to become more nuanced; it will include such

responses as: 1) it can and does foster and promote more frequent interactions and connections; 2) it can and does foster and promote deeper shared connections; 3) it is a means of opening up opportunities for collaborations in HE and beyond that are geographically independent of a particular location; 4) it is a tool for every university to fully maximise its teaching and research potential while minimising the time spent on travel, and, in turn, reducing carbon footprints; 5) while the world might be very large, geographically, when it comes to collaboration it is actually very small, and honouring the inherent value of the online geography of collaboration helps us (humanity) show care and concern for others and, in turn, help prevent the spread of future epidemics.

In conclusion, if nothing else, the pandemic has shown us and affirmed for us (particularly those of us working in HE) that we can: move the academic project and its associated support activities online. We can work alongside one another online. We can collaborate with one another online. We can bring our full, authentic selves online, and we can care for and support one another online.

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