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# An evolving approach to unconferencing: Reflections from piloting the HELTASAFEST22 scholarly festival

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## Abstract

This article offers insight into the planning and facilitation of a scholarly learning and teaching festival which aims to negotiate the tensions between traditional and creative scholarly engagements in the Southern African higher education context. The aim of this case study is to critically reflect on planning and facilitating a scholarly learning and teaching festival as part of an (un)conferencing approach for HELTASA. The case study adopts a critical reflective methodology, where we reflect on our experiences and perceptions of planning and facilitating/participating in the festival. The article outlines the structure and methodologies of the festival and reflects on the contextual considerations for planning the festival and the positives and challenges associated with facilitating the festival. A major tension that had to be managed as part of the festival was the questions of academic rigour and the choice of a festival by some prospective participants.

**Keywords**: scholarly festival, (un)conference, creative scholarship, critical reflection

## Introduction

The Higher Education Learning and Teaching Association of Southern Africa (HELTASA) is a professional association for educators and other stakeholders in the higher education sector in Southern Africa which has been in existence for more than 20 years. Individual members of HELTASA work for Southern African public and private higher education institutions. The HELTASA leadership is made up of several different project teams that concentrate on various strategic and scholarly focus areas. There are eight scholarly project teams that focus on student learning, digital learning and teaching, and programme development, amongst others.

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HELTASA hosts an annual event at the end of each year. In the past, this used to be a face-to-face conference hosted by a local public university; however, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, this evolved to an online conference in 2020, and an online (un)conference in 2021. In 2021, HELTASA decided to make use of an unconferencing approach which prioritises conversation, reflection, and participation instead of presentation (Budd, et al., 2015). In this way we wanted to promote more dialogue and equitable participation in our events. In this article, we use 'unconferencing' to refer to the concept as described in the literature (Budd, et al., 2015; Lampel, et al., 2020), while using '(un)conferencing' to refer to our adoption of the concept for our HELTASA annual events. This article critically reflects on our evolving approach to offer an innovative scholarly festival in 2022, known as HELTASAFEST22. The aim of the festival was to build on the HELTASA participatory approaches and conversations from 2021 and 2022, and to reflect on the shifts, options, and decisions in a changing South African higher education context. The article provides a review of the unconferencing literature, followed by an outline of the structure of the scholarly festival, and the methodological approach we followed. This is followed by discussions of our reflections of the contextual considerations for planning the festival and the positives and challenges associated with facilitating the festival. We aim to offer insights into how the unconferencing format can evolve, and how ongoing adaptation can create a responsive and reflexive experience that intends to meet the needs of our Southern African context.

## Review of the literature

### *Where participants or scholars gather*

A traditional academic conference provides a space for professionals and researchers to learn about trends and developments in a specific discipline or field (Budd, et al., 2015). Academic or scientific conferences also promote continued professional learning and support formative meeting desires 'to congregate, interact, share work and to network' with peers (Rowe, 2018: 725). The conference organising committee determines the theme, sub-themes, and the presenters, based on peer-reviewing submitted abstracts or papers. The selected presenters then typically share formal presentations with an audience at the conference. Yet, at a traditional conference, often participants feel the most stimulating discussions take place during the breaks in more informal discussions and professional networking (Budd, et al., 2015).

The term unconferencing, which has been utilised for more than twenty years, emerged in the late 1990s out of the software development community (Budd, et al., 2015; Greenhill & Wiebrands, 2008; Lampel, et al., 2020). Harrison Owen coined 'unconferencing' in 1998 after hosting a different kind of conference since the one in 1985 which was then called Open Space Technology. In his book entitled *Open Space Technology: A Users Guide*, he emphasises a participant driven event where attendees can collaborate and share ideas (Owen, 2008). Since then, the concept of unconferencing gained traction. Follett (cited in Greenhill & Wiebrands, 2008) defines an unconference as a:

> Self-organizing forum for idea sharing, networking, learning, speaking, demonstrating, and generally interacting with [others] … based on the premise that in any professional gathering, the people in the audience – not just those selected to speak on stage – have interesting thoughts, insights and expertise to share. … Everyone who attends an unconference… is required to participate in some way: to present, to speak on a panel, to show off a project, or just to ask a lot of questions.

Unconferencing provides participants a unique opportunity to engage and participate in discussions based on various topics in a novel way. Greenhill and Wiebrands (2008: 3) indicate that unconferences utilise Owen's 'Open Space Technology' principles which are that 'Whoever comes are the right people … Whatever happens is the only thing that could have … Whenever it starts is the right time … When it's over, it's over'. The focus is to create a space where participants can share knowledge, collaborate, and have open and meaningful discussions. While the organisation of a conference is typically done by a small group who prepare a formal programme in advance, in unconferences, the decision making is more decentralised, with participants creating the programme collaboratively (Lampel, et al., 2020). As such, this means an unconference is informal and participant-driven and that 'there is no right way or wrong way' to organise unconferences (Greenhill & Wiebrands, 2008: 4) and it prioritises informal networking interactions (Budd, et al., 2015). Thus, participants decide on the agenda, discussion topics, workshops, and often, even the time and venues' (Budd, et al., 2015: 1). Lampel, et al. (2020: 68) highlight that unconferences aim to create 'conditions for social interaction and knowledge sharing rather than programmatically structuring these activities'. Unconferences can take many different forms and structures, but they typically focus on active participation (Hale & Bessette, 2016). The aim is to prioritise conversation or dialogue instead of presentation as participation. As such this serves to disrupt the notion of selected speakers versus attendees or uni-directional communication (Rowe, 2018). It also means that the success of the unconference depends more on the participants than the planning of the organisers (Budd, et al., 2015). The ideal of promoting active participation seemed to align well with the HELTASA value of being responsive to the needs of our members and promoting debate and dialogue about learning and teaching in Southern African higher education.

## *Academic rigour and unconferencing*

A form of expression of the ideals of an unconference, in our view, is the notion of a scholarly or academic festival. There is little literature available about the concept of scholarly festivals. Our view of a scholarly or academic festival is that it is a space to foster collaboration and sharing of scholarly achievements or learnings in a more informal and interactive setting, that creates space for interdisciplinary debate and dialogue. It enables a merger of the traditional academic and alternative forms of research outputs and scholarship practices. Creative outputs include cultural performances, poetry, art exhibitions, workshops, and seminars amongst others (see Barnes, et al., 2020, for an example of creative outputs). A gap that we see in the literature is how to manage

creative forms of scholarship with expected forms of academic rigour in unconferencing. Although, as noted below, we recognise the nature of unconferencing questions notions of academic rigour in traditional conferences, there is little literature that explores the first-hand experiences of unconference organisers (e.g., Holman, et al., 2021) and not within a Southern African context. We aim therefore to contribute our experiences of organising an (un)conference-type scholarly festival from the perspectives of the Global South, as much of the current literature is from the Global North (Budd, et al., 2015; Greenhill & Wiebrands, 2008; Lampel, et al., 2020).

Unconferences can be a valuable way to learn and share knowledge in a more informal and collaborative setting (Lampel, et al., 2020). Traditional conferences make use of peer-reviewed submissions and formal structures (Greenhill & Wiebrands, 2008), leading to academic rigour being taken for granted in traditional conferences. Unconferences challenge the traditional notions of learning and participatory spaces. Hale and Bessette (2016: 10) state that discussions after presentations at academic conferences are very limited and tend to focus on defence, rather than on feedback and 'scholarly exchange and co-development of ideas'. The lecture-format associated with traditional academic conferences treats 'knowledge as a commodity to be passed on to, rather than constructed by, those listening' (Sweeting & Hohl, cited in Hale & Bessette, 2016: 10). Thus, unconferencing challenges traditional notions of the commodification and production of knowledge. In unconferencing spaces, knowledge is now produced, shared, and discussed collaboratively and openly. Hence, one of the benefits of unconferences is that they allow for a more open and free-flowing discussion of ideas. Additionally, unconferences can be a purposeful way to connect with other people who are interested in the same topics (Holman, et al., 2021). The focus of an unconference is shaped by the interest of the participants who suggest the topics. As such, the discussions are more relevant to the participants (Budd, et al., 2015). The structure, or perhaps lack thereof, provides unbounded possibilities for scholarly festival participants for sharing learning and teaching experiences and possibilities across disciplines in higher education.

In addition, unconferencing can be used to support educator professional learning in schools (Carpenter & Linton, 2018) and academic professional learning in higher education (Hale & Bessette, 2016). During the Covid-19 pandemic, when travel and face-to-face conferences were restricted, conferences could be adapted to virtual and unconference formats (Holman, et al., 2021; Seidenberg, et al., 2021). Therefore, an unconferencing approach in the form of a scholarly or academic festival holds value as we argue that Southern African higher education needs to cultivate more spaces for participatory, creative, and innovative scholarly activities.

## Methodology

### *Case study approach*

This research employed a case study approach. A case is a bounded system, which may be simple or complex. It is both the process and the product of inquiry (Stake, 2000). Case study research is useful as a methodology when the researchers want to cover contextual information that they believe is important to the phenomenon of study. The case study approach is a good approach

to use when the researcher seeks to provide an in-depth understanding of a case (Creswell, 2007) and makes use of various sources (Yin, 2009). The case in this study refers to the critically reflexive experiences of three authors who were also organiser-participants of the HELTASA Scholarly Festival in 2022.

### *Critical reflections*

This research uses critical reflection as a research method (Fook, 2011). Many understandings of critical reflection exist (Brookfield, 2009); however, we use the definition of critical reflection as an overall process of learning from and reworking experience (Fook, 2011). It also enables a collective way to research experience (Fook, 2011) being consistent with a phenomenological approach (expanded upon below). Critical reflection is concerned with the reasons for and consequences of actions (Karlovic, 1992). As a higher-order mental process, reflection encourages one to become aware of previously held ideas, opening to new ideas (Holmes, 2015). As a research method, critical reflection is used in qualitative studies to explore 'participants' internal dialogues and analyse their thought processes' (Mohan, 2020: 19).

Critical reflection in research is dialogic, integrative, and transformative in nature. It is dialogic in nature as it creates a shared representation of experience through dynamic interaction (Fook, 2011). Using critical reflection as a research method entails starting the process with participants sharing their stories and presenting their experiences. This reflection may be done in small groups. This reflection may bring about a sense of awareness, which may be used in devising new and better approaches to practice moving forward (Fook, 2011).

Our approach draws on Rolfe, et al.'s (2001) framework of reflective writing, using critical reflection as a research method to explore our experiences of organising and participating in an unconference format in 2022. This framework is based on three questions, namely: What? So what? Now what? This article is centred around trying to answer these three questions. The 'What?' sets the scene through providing an overall description of the event's context. The 'So what?' draws on our experiences, detailing our involvement as organisers-participants in (un)conferencing in 2022. It also involves taking a deeper look into this organiser-participant process, analysing what was relevant and interesting and providing explanations with the use of supporting evidence. Here, there is an exploration of the challenges that we experienced and how these may have influenced the (un)conference. The 'Now what?' involves detailing our key learnings. We use reflection-on-action (Schön, 1999) to detail our experiences. Each author wrote a reflection based on the following prompts:

- When you heard HELTASA was planning to have a scholarly festival as the annual (un)conference in 2022, what did you think? What questions did you have?
- What was your contribution to building up to the scholarly festival? What was the experience like?
- What was your contribution during the scholarly festival? What was the experience like?
- What worked well and did not work well about the scholarly festival? Why?
- What did you learn about unconferencing from this experience?

Critical reflection in research can be transformative in nature as it may lead to changes that can be fundamental and empowering, individually and/or socially (Fook, 2011). For this study, through engaging in the process of critical reflection, we considered how our experience may influence how we approach unconferencing as individuals and as HELTASA team members going forward.

### *Phenomenological approach*

The phenomenological research approach is concerned with synthesising the experiences of individuals who have experiences with the same phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). It does this by looking at people's subjective responses of their lived experiences (Brocki & Wearden, 2006), through providing a rich description of what the persons have experienced and how they have experienced it (Creswell, 2007).

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is a qualitative research approach that seeks to examine people's lived experiences, and how they make sense of them. It allows for people who have a shared experience to reflect on their experiences fully, without any distortions (Alase, 2017). IPA moves beyond description and interprets the meaning of these lived experiences (Creswell, 2013) and is concerned with understanding and interpreting the phenomenon that is investigated using the lenses of participants. It seeks to understand people's personal and social experiences and what these mean to those people who experience them (Brocki & Wearden, 2006). This study uses IPA as the basis for enquiry because it seeks to report in detail as well as interpret our shared lived experience of participating in an HELTASA (un)conferencing format in 2022. Written reflections (in response to the prompts above) were analysed individually and then collectively using inductive coding, based on the 'What?' (what we did), the 'So what?' (our experiences and what shaped them and why), and the 'Now what?' (our lessons and recommendations). The codes were grouped into categories and discussed. Several tensions stood out that were common among us that influenced our experiences. For example, negotiating our planning with contextual challenges, balancing our roles as organisers and participants, managing the traditional conference approaches and new ways of unconferencing, and managing the expectation of academic rigour while encouraging creative forms of expression. An initial thematic analysis was conducted to draw out specific experiences to focus on. Further analysis was then done to interpret and categorise these experiences. The key themes centred around managing the contextual challenges and tensions associated with offering this festival (the 'so what') and the lessons learned and recommendations (the 'now what').

## What happened? An overview of the HELTASAFEST22 Scholarly Festival

Before sharing the findings from the study, it is important to provide a context of the Scholarly Festival and the decisions informing the design and facilitation thereof (the 'what'). The experiences of hosting the HELTASA 2021 (un)conference have been described in other articles in this special issue; as such, this article will solely focus on the experiences of hosting the

HELTASA 2022 (un)conference. As a reminder, we use 'unconferencing' to refer to the concept as described in the literature (Budd, et al., 2015; Lampel, et al., 2020), while using '(un)conferencing' to refer to our evolving forms of adoption for our context. In 2021, HELTASA hosted our first (un)conference, and we realised we wanted to build on our learnings and refine our approaches for 2022. Therefore, the idea was proposed to adopt more of an unconference approach than had been taken previously by not having an overall call for proposals that were then reviewed and allocated to a particular session. Rather, each project team could decide how to structure their allocated sessions. Our approach aligned to the notion of a 'curated unconference' where topics and structures are determined before the unconference and then the organisers create the structures for discussion (Budd, et al., 2015). Lampel, et al. (2020) would characterise this as modifying the unconferencing form to make it more acceptable to audience expectations in our context. Our evolving approach to unconferencing then still retains some of the structural aspects of past HELTASA conferences so that there is some continuity for HELTASA members, particularly those who like aspects of traditional conference formats.

In thinking of how to transition our unconferencing approach for 2022, some of the HELTASA team members had participated in a Mid-Year Festival (MYFEST) in 2022, hosted by Equity Unbound, an online conference that took place over three months. MYFEST participants could choose how they wanted to participate, what type of events that they wanted to engage in and if they wanted to pay for a specific month or for all three months. Thus, the notion of a festival took hold, the idea of an event with a celebratory spirit and less formal convergence of HELTASA members and prospective members. The HELTASA organising team then brainstormed ideas about how we could have a scholarly festival as our (un)conference event. While a theme emerged, no sub-themes were specified and there was no call for submissions, and no review of which proposals would be accepted or not. The organising team collaboratively created a poem titled "Ke Nako!" (It is time) that formed the basis for the festival's 'call' for participation.

The key difference to the previous (un)conference was that each team would be allocated a session during the (un)conference and they could plan and facilitate that session as they wanted to. This emphasised more of an alignment with a decentralised approach to unconferencing (Lampel, et al., 2020). If a project team wanted to issue a specific call for participation, they could or they could decide for it to be an open discussion or any other format they deemed fit. Unlike the parallel sessions in a traditional conference, the scholarly festival would only have one session at a time. The rationale for this decision was that participants could choose which sessions that they wanted to participate in during the festival or participate in every session, encouraging a more flexible and equitable participation approach.

Stemming from these deliberations, the annual HELTASA end-of-year event took place in the week of 5-9 December 2022 in the form of a scholarly festival. The festival attracted over 200 participants, slightly less than the number of participants at the HELTASA (un)conference in 2021. This could be indicative of uncertainty amongst our members of this different way of unconferencing and not having a formal call for participation. The aim of the festival was to build on the HELTASA participatory activities and conversations that had already occurred throughout

the year to reflect on the shifts, options, and decisions in a changing Southern African higher education context. This provided for the overall theme for the festival, and each project team hosted a session that could unpack this theme in different ways. Each session was 2-3 hours in the morning or afternoon.

## What did it mean? Managing the tensions of organising and participating in a scholarly festival

This section is structured around the various tensions that had to be negotiated in putting on the festival (the 'so what'). Our argument is that an evolving approach to unconferencing needs to plan for and negotiate these different tensions.

### *Tension 1: Negotiating the planning and contextual challenges*

The first tension to navigate was when to have the festival. One of the difficulties in organising the HELTASA (un)conference is that it traditionally takes place at the end of the year. This can be quite a challenge due to the higher education academic calendar, where some academics are still involved in end-of-year assessments and have other competing responsibilities, thus a decision had to be made around when to hold the scholarly festival. Aligned to the HELTASA conferences in prior years, the festival took place in the first week of December, with the intention to take advantage of the period after end-of-year assessments were completed, and before university academics and professional administrative staff started their end-of-year leave. Author 2 reflects on the challenges associated with the festival timing:

> *… as this was happening in December I was fatigued and overwhelmed by the year. Things were starting to wind-down at work, marks were coming in, we had planning for the following year and so-forth*.

Another tension to manage was the format (the how) of the festival. One planning consideration to encourage networking among participants was to have the last day as a hybrid session where participants could choose to come to one of four regional venues. The venues were in Cape Town (south-west region of South Africa), Makhanda (south-east region), Durban (eastern region), and Johannesburg (northern region). Initially, a venue was also planned for Bloemfontein (central region) but was not required due to limited interest. The intention was that participants could network during the breaks and in smaller group discussions. However, the participants who physically came to each regional venue were less than we expected and fewer than the number of people who registered to attend Day 5 in person. We assume that the interest in connecting in person had to include consideration of logistics and travel, which may have reduced face-to-face participation. However, we see the incorporation of a 'hybrid' day into the festival as another form of our evolving approach to unconferencing by bringing in opportunities to participate in different forms.

One challenge that the authors experienced related to the situational context of organising an online event, was the energy crisis (rolling blackouts) from the national power utility. South Africans must contend with regular periods of 'load shedding' due to the national supplier not being able to keep up with demand. This had an impact on both organisers and participants who had to go to different locations to stay connected. Author 1 noted that

> *I had to move around between work and home to ensure I had connectivity when I needed it*.

Some participants could not join all sessions because of power issues. Yet at the same time, a positive aspect of the festival was that all the sessions continued as planned without major hitches despite this challenge, although in some cases presenters had to be moved around. These challenges highlight the need for careful planning (what, when and how) while maintaining flexibility and the need to have backup plans to mitigate the impact of contextual challenges.

### *Tension 2: Managing the duality of roles*

A theme that emerged in our reflections that we had to manage dual roles in planning for and participating in the scholarly festival. On the one hand, we had to work behind-the-scenes and organise aspects of the festival, yet we were also participants ourselves. The duality of roles led to much uncertainty. At the beginning, especially for those new to the overall HELTASA team, there was a sense of uncertainty: of what each person's role was in planning for the festival, what the expectations were and getting to know the other team members with whom they needed to work. One author had been part of the HELTASA (un)conference in 2021. The other authors only joined the HELTASA team in 2022 and had not been a part of the (un)conference in 2021. This was an area where we could have better ensured that 'the role of each organizer should be clearly communicated' (Budd, et al., 2015: 4). Author 2, new to the HELTASA team, reflects on the struggles and associated mixed emotions of the dual roles and coming into the festival organising team, having not been part of the HELTASA (Un)conference 2021:

> *In many of the conversations it felt as though many of the things were taken for granted, and so I sometimes found myself having to consciously make sense of it all. I felt like both an insider and an outsider at the same time. This also made me feel a bit anxious, as I knew I had the job of promoting the festival to colleagues and I was not sure if I would be able to do this fully.*

As alluded to in the quotation above, the uncertainty pertaining to roles also extended to uncertainty around goals. The initial planning period building up towards the scholarly festival was both exciting and confusing. At the beginning, there was little clarity of what the scholarly festival would end up like, but it began to take shape over time. Author 2 reflects on the initial introduction to the idea of hosting a scholarly festival:

> *When I first heard about unconference 2022, I was both excited and confused. I was excited because this was something new that I had no previous exposure to, and this was an opportunity for me to learn and grow as a young academic. I was also excited because I was going to be afforded the opportunity to catch a glimpse of a behind the scenes, while also being able to participate as a 'delegate' … I was confused because I had no idea what to expect and also what was expected of me as someone who is part of the HELTASA team.*

Managing these dual roles was not easy during the festival as, although it was an enjoyable experience, it was also a very draining one; in both 'holding' the space together for participants but also being a participant and benefitting from the discussions and learnings. Author 1, who was also a project team leader, summed up their experience of the festival as

> *It was a frenetic week for me. But ultimately it was a lot of fun.*

It is therefore important in planning such events to recognise the duality of organiser-participant roles and that the roles and expectations are made clear where possible. We recognise that the organiser-participant role requires flexibility and adaptability.

### *Tension 3: Managing the scholarly and the creative (or the traditional and the new)*

Another tension the broader organising team had to navigate was finding a way to shift between the traditional form of a conference (the old) and a different type of unconference, the scholarly festival (the new). The team also had to navigate the uncertainty related to planning for a different type of (un)conference than had been organised in 2021. Budd, et al. (2015) advise that decisions need to be made on how to run an unconference event. The broader team (made up of members of several project teams) needed to make decisions around what to keep and what to do differently from the previous year, aligned to our objectives for the festival. This included drawing on reflections from participants in the 2021 event.

Budd, et al. (2015: 3) suggest that participants come to unconferences to 'interact with many people of shared interests and … to learn useful information or skills related to their activities'. We needed to ensure that the festival supported the needs of the HELTASA members and stakeholders or that we were 'attuned to the culture of the participants likely to attend' (Greenhill & Wiebrands, 2008: 4). This included the opportunity for stakeholders to share their research or scholarship with peers. A broad consideration from the start was how the stakeholders in South African higher education would respond to the idea of a scholarly festival. Lampel, et al. (2020) characterise this as dealing with the tensions of introducing a new form to participants who are accustomed to an existing form. Related to this was a tension of how to communicate to the HELTASA membership about the festival. To communicate what a scholarly festival was for many prospective participants who may not have heard of a scholarly festival before. Underlying this drive, was a sense of promoting the role of HELTASA in engaging in debate and dialogue as continuous professional learning and scholarship of learning and

teaching within our higher education institutions. A key consideration was how to promote the idea of a scholarly festival. Author 1 reflects on the importance of creating buy-in for a different kind of unconference for the intended audience:

> *I think the big challenge was to understand what HELTASA members and prospective festival goers would perceive of the scholarly festival. Many people like the idea of a traditional conference and many university conference funding grants are based on there being a paper to present. So, we needed to clearly explain why we wanted to host a scholarly festival, how it would work and why it would be a valuable experience to participate in.*

Additionally, because there was no typical call for presentations some members or stakeholders may have chosen not to participate in 2022, which perhaps meant that their voices and the contributions of their scholarly work was missing. Rowe (2018) found that academics want to actively contribute and share knowledge at conferences. Part of the reason for missing this scholarly festival could have been due to academics not being used to the idea of unconferencing and that Southern African higher education institutions typically only pay for academics to attend a conference if there is proof that they have had an abstract or presentation accepted. Although situated in the context of the schooling sector, Carpenter and Linton (2018: 65) note that 'the absence of support from policies and administrators could limit educators' involvement' in less formal forms of professional learning. Thus, there was an ongoing challenge for team members to communicate to prospective participants that a scholarly festival could still demonstrate academic quality or academic rigour in the sharing of contributions on the scholarship of learning and teaching. We tried to emphasise this aspect in festival communications and in discussions with our peers. However, the openness of contributions and the encouragement of creative forms of presentation meant that some academics may have felt that the academic rigour of typical conference presentations may have been lacking.

A key planning aspect was to enable the creativity of scholarly contributions in different ways, aligned to the unconference feature of minimal 'lecture-style' presentations. To avoid passive participation, the aim was to value the voice of each participant in the session (Budd, et al., 2015). In this way the festival also became a learning opportunity for some, as participants were able to share their scholarly contributions in a different way. For example, one of us learned how to create a TikTok video with a co-presenter as their contribution to a session. As a way of demonstrating our evolving approach to unconferencing, we wished to have some form of creative representation of the scholarly festival. The poem used as a "call" to join the festival was turned into an acapella song to promote the festival. Additionally, unconferences need to utilise tools to share session conversations (Budd, et al., 2015). The services of a graphic artist were employed to be part of the discussions and record the highlights of each session. This provided creative outputs for the festival. Figure 1 provides the graphic created from the Digital Learning

and Teaching session. A similar graphic was produced from each session and these graphics were used to stimulate reflections on the final day of the festival.




**Figure 1**: Digital Learning and Teaching Session Artwork

The flexible nature of the festival meant that participants could join the sessions that were of interest to them. While we did ask participants to complete an evaluative survey of the festival, we did not include that feedback in this study. Author 1 noted that a personal highlight of the festival was that

> *… it really showed what a scholarly festival could look like. And the scholarly discussions and conversations were of academic rigour.*

Navigating the familiarity of traditional academic conferences and the underexplored creative spaces of unconferencing was somewhat challenging. However, the unconventional scholarly outputs that emerged in the festival demonstrated creative expressions of scholarship can still have academic rigour.

### *Tension 4: Negotiating the contributions and festival 'voices'*

Several positives emerged relating to a decentralised HELTASA (un)conference approach. The build-up of HELTASA events towards the festival (open to members and non-members alike) enabled different stakeholders to recognise how they could contribute towards and participate before and during the scholarly festival. For example, many of the presenters during the Digital Learning and Teaching session were academics or learning designers who had participated in

some of the team's digital dialogue sessions during the year. Thus, we embraced the idea of 'trusting the community' (Budd, et al., 2015) and shifting the power dynamic away from the organisers towards the participants.

Another key consideration was to keep the price of the festival low or affordable so that more members and stakeholders could potentially participate. Online conferences have lower costs and carbon footprints and provide more access for those academics with limited funding or those with family obligations or health issues (Greenhill & Wiebrand, 2008; Holman, et al., 2021). One fee was charged for the festival and participants could choose which sessions they wanted to participate in. Author 1 highlighted the benefit of this flexibility:

> *It was nice that people could participate in sessions that they were interested in, they did not have to come to each session*.

However, we recognise that we were not successful in achieving a wide contribution of voices that we aimed for. As there was no formal call for participation and each session was structured differently, not all voices were heard. Due to the way the festival was structured, with each project team hosting a different session, it almost became a question of managing nine different events, rather than one event. However, this is a common situation in unconferencing where diverse formats are used and represents our ongoing explorations of what unconferencing means in our context. Depending on which sessions participants participated in, they may have had very different experiences. Author 2 reflected that:

> *Although I loved the different sessions that the different scholarly teams came up with, at some point it felt like different events as opposed to one festival for me. However, perhaps this is the nature of a festival, and this is the nature of unconferencing …*

Related to this meant that depending on the type of session organised, the engagement among participants could be limited. In other words, the organisers invited different speakers to their sessions and made use of varied formats, but there may not have been much time for participants to have small group discussions and opportunities for festival goers to get to know each other informally, as there had been in the HELTASA (un)conference in 2021. This perhaps meant that we were not as successful as we planned to promote interactive communication and that all participants had the opportunity to make their contributions heard (Budd, et al., 2015). We did not have multiple opportunities for participants to get to know one another (Holman, et al., 2021). Similarly, Seidenberg et al. (2021) found that virtual conference participants valued formal interaction opportunities and matching topics of interest. Author 3 noted that

> *we didn't know who was in the room and I think that it created some kind of distance.*

Upon reflection, this was a missed opportunity to have additional or separate online spaces for connecting during the festival. Author 3 further reflects on the challenge of the festival having greater opportunities for engagements:

> *I do think that given the space we are in, the platform used could have been a bit different to allow people to interact with one another better. This for me was something that was lacking since we were mostly staring at a screen a lot of the time'.*

These findings indicate that multiple opportunities for engagement in different ways need to be built into the design of the (un)conference.

## Moving Forward: Lessons learned and recommendations

This section discusses the lessons learned and recommendations from the experience of organising the festival (the 'Now what'). For the organisation and facilitation of a scholarly festival, a key reflection in terms of what it took to host the scholarly festival is a shared understanding of the intentions of the festival and the elements of unconferencing. Additionally, as team members, we had to organise the festival outside of our normal institutional responsibilities. Another key success factor was advance planning with careful collaboration across the project teams. It is important to remember the duality of roles required as organisers and participants and to aim to balance these to get the most out of the scholarly festival. Yet, probably the most important success factor was to be flexible, echoing the findings of Hale and Bessette (2016). Budd, et al. (2015) similarly suggest the need to manage the flexibility of unconferencing with appropriate logistical organisation.

Each of us had a unique experience of the festival. It is probably fair to also say that the participants had multiple experiences as well, such is the nature of an unconference. A key takeaway for us in organising this scholarly festival was the creative ideas shown by different participants that can be used in different settings going forward. This supports the notion of creative scholarship more broadly in higher education. For example, we could make use of TikTok videos in some of our teaching sessions, after learning how to use it for the festival. In that way the festival was able to achieve part of its purpose in bringing together higher education practitioners to share their scholarship of learning and teaching contributions in a creative way. The festival provided opportunities to share ideas and ways of engaging in learning, teaching, and research, which is the main aim of such events (Budd, et al., 2015; Rowe, 2018). We are of the opinion that the festival gave us the opportunity to learn new or enhance our skill set as higher education practitioners. For example, Author 3 reflected:

> *I've learnt how to do a new type of activity that I will probably try and use in another workshop somewhere … I've also learnt some nice facilitation skills not just from my own project team but from observing other project teams that were part of the (un)conference.*

Yet, we need to caution this with our experiences of writing up this article where we often felt uncomfortable or unable to "disrupt" the typical structure of a scholarly publication. This is an area we feel more creative forms of creative scholarship need to be explored and shared, adding to our argument we need to cultivate more spaces for participatory, creative, and innovative scholarly activities.

There are several recommendations that we can make to continue our evolving approach to unconferencing. A recommendation is to look to host the annual event earlier than December due to the competing academic responsibilities and end-of-year fatigue affecting many of our participants and organisers at this time. An earlier date could potentially mean attracting more participation, which would contribute to the growth and the vibrancy of the unconference. An additional recommendation is to ensure there are multiple opportunities for participants to network and make personal connections (whether in-person or online or some combination) built into the design of an unconference. This would really promote the value of an (un)conferencing approach.

## Conclusion

This case study critically reflected on the planning and the facilitation of a scholarly learning and teaching festival to evaluate the notion of evolving unconferencing for a specific context. There were four major tensions to manage as an organising team for the festival. The first was to manage timing and format of the festival with the contextual challenges. We had to consider workload commitments of participants and national rolling blackouts that affected connectivity and thus participation. The second tension to navigate was the duality of the role of festival organiser versus festival participant. In some ways this was successfully managed. We contributed to different sessions and enjoyed our overall festival experiences, but it required a great deal of effort. The third tension was to manage the scholarly (or traditional academic rigour expectations) and the more creative (or newer forms of scholarship). As festival organisers we felt that academic rigour was not lost as part of the festival sessions and discussions, but that the creative forms of scholarship demonstrated added a different dimension to the festival. For us at least, this was a memorable event. The fourth tension was to negotiate the contribution of festival participants or to ensure the participation of the different voices. While this was difficult to manage and not successful in all respects, we learned lessons that will inform our approaches to unconferencing going forward, demonstrating a continuously evolving approach that is relevant for our context. We offer the consideration of these tensions to assist in planning and facilitating an unconference approach.

In conclusion, we have shown that a carefully planned scholarly learning and teaching festival, attuned to the nuances of its specific context, can manage the tensions of what is considered scholarly (academic) and what is not considered scholarly (more creative) in Southern African higher education. It further highlights the benefits for cultivating spaces for participatory, creative, and innovative scholarly activities. The approach of unconferencing is something that

we will continue to explore and refine as an association over time to meet the needs of our stakeholders.

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