

*Editorial*

**Pedagogies in Context:  
A selection of papers from the HELTASA 2019 Conference**

The field of academic development in South Africa has produced a wealth of research over the thirty years of its existence. The impact of globalisation, however, has meant that local research in the field of academic development is often regarded as being of lesser value than knowledge from the global North and the so-called 'best practices' that emerge from it. The impact of uncritical acceptance of 'best practice' approaches from the global North is that understandings of teaching and learning tend to be divorced from the context of practice. As a result, the application of such approaches often fails to accommodate the diverse learning needs of students and are not responsive to complex institutional and global South contexts.

Since the 1980s there have been strong voices calling for 'pedagogies in context'. Despite much of the early academic development research being grounded in a student deficit discourse, scholars such as Vilakazi and Tema (1985) strongly argued that it was not the students who needed development, but rather the universities themselves that were deficient or underprepared. Tema (1988) described the reality of students being 'alienated by the very system that has been set up to help [them]' (Boughey, 2005: 25). In the same year, Mehl (1988) argued that if universities themselves did not understand their deficiencies, it would be unlikely that the vision of a non-racial, democratic South Africa could be realised. In essence, these scholars called for movement away from psychological theories of learning that largely treated students as individuals divorced from any socio-cultural context. Instead, they urged an understanding of students as contextualised beings and institutions as social entities that have very specific cultural and structural conditions which are alienating for many students.

Some thirty-five years later, we are still calling for 'pedagogies in context' and for understandings of student learning and teaching approaches that are socio-culturally relevant, responsive, and effective for our African and South African context (see, for example, Behari-Leak and McKenna, 2017; Boughey and McKenna, 2016). Since the 1980s the higher education sector has seen significant shifts with a number of scholars taking up ideas from the global South to understand local challenges and inform their practices (see, for example, Bozalek & Boughey, 2014; Leibowitz, 2012; Lockett, 2016; Soudien, 2012; Walker and Wilson-Strydom, 2017). Despite this positive shift, Vorster and Quinn (2017) argue that many notions of 'best practice', which draw on the knowledge bases from the global North, persist. This was evident in the 2015/2016 student protests, which highlighted the extent to which South African higher education has not yet transformed its 'ways of doing' in relation to creating socially just, contextually responsive pedagogies and curricula. In this sense, the higher education sector has failed to attend to Mehl's



(1988) argument that our work 'is no longer a matter of simply changing the student to fit into the university, but rather a matter of bringing the university more into contact with the stark reality which the colonized student represents' (1988: 18).

Challenging dominant 'best practice' understandings and practices from the global North while simultaneously striving to create contextually responsive practices in a decolonising African context is ongoing work. It is fraught with complexities and challenges, but it also provides opportunities for exciting new scholarship in teaching and learning. Notable work in this regard includes research by Le Grange (2016) and Lockett, et al. (2019).

In this special issue of *Critical Studies in Teaching and Learning (CriSTal)*, we include eight papers that were presented at the 2019 HELTASA conference. The conference was hosted by the Centre for Higher Education Research, Teaching and Learning (CHERTL) at Rhodes University in November 2019. The intention of the conference was to reclaim a voice for Southern African researchers and higher education practitioners by inviting delegates to consider the notion of 'pedagogies in context'. It provided a platform for scholars to consider how experiences and perspectives that have previously been silenced can be inserted into the ways we think about teaching in higher education. Delegates were encouraged to disrupt the notion of 'best', or even 'good', practices influenced by the scholarship produced in the global North by asking themselves critical questions about their practices such as: *Good for whom?* and *Exactly whose interests are being served?*

### **Meta-analyses and critique**

Extending existing debates in the field, the special issue opens with Cecilia Jacob's article, adapted from her keynote address, 'Contextually responsive and knowledge-focused teaching: Disrupting the notion of "best practices"'. In this article, Jacobs explicitly problematises the notion of 'best practices' in higher education, arguing for contextualising and theorising teaching in ways that include not only an understanding of students, teaching academics and institutions, but also the nature of knowledge. In the article, she explains how and why genericism or, drawing on Fataar (2019: 3) 'hyper-genericism' and the structural mechanisms that reinforce its pervasiveness, continue to dominate in South African universities. Problematising this notion, Jacobs argues for a more holistic understanding of teaching and learning: one that is embedded in a social understanding of students and institutions, while at the same time taking into account the nature of disciplinary knowledge. In this regard, she argues that the work of teachers is about 'being contextually responsive, while inducting students into their disciplines of study and making explicit for them the values, organising principles and knowledge structures underpinning the ways in which knowledge is produced in their disciplines of study'. Putting this into practice necessitates a deep understanding of how knowledge is structured differently in the various disciplines, and how this has implications for what constitutes appropriate pedagogy. She argues that effective pedagogy depends on being responsive to context *and* being knowledge-focused. Jacobs concludes the article with a challenge for academic developers to foreground knowledge

in their perspectives on teaching and learning while at the same time striving for social change and transformation.

Extending this conceptual conversation, the second article by Rieta Ganas, Kasturi Behari-Leak, Nalini Chitanand, and Siya Sabata, 'Pedagogies for critical agency: Portals to alternative futures' offers a reflection on the authors' positions as steering committee members on a national collaborative project 'New Academics Transitioning into Higher Education Project (NATHEP)'. They suggest that the role of academic development in South African higher education should be re-imagined in order to achieve its transformative potential. The project entails a group of academic staff developers working collaboratively to theorise and conceptualise induction programmes for new academics appropriate for diverse institutional types, contexts and cohorts. Adopting a focus on pedagogies for critical agency, the authors explore ways in which pedagogies enable or constrain transformation. In particular, they critique a potentially limited interpretation of the call for 'pedagogies in context' as being confined to simply meaning different pedagogies for different South African universities. This, the authors argue, obscures the structural conditioning of institutional contexts and the implications of this conditioning on teaching and learning. They call for a re-imagining of 'AD practices in the post-colonial university'. Building on a similar argument made by Jacobs, the authors problematise uncritical global North notions of 'best practice'. They show how internalised colonial knowledge and ways of being in academic development scholarship in South Africa continue to dominate and impact understandings and practices in the field. In the NATHEP project, the authors have been developing a decolonial response to these issues and offer insights into how others can 'disrupt essentialised and normative understandings of the production and purpose of knowledge including the role of knowledge as part of the social and academic project'.

Following these two papers which offer conceptual and critical responses to the conference theme 'pedagogies in context', the remainder of the special issue focuses on a number of practice-oriented articles which showcase how contextualised pedagogies are being implemented in different contexts.

### **Contextually responsive teaching and learning strategies**

In their paper, 'A translanguaging pedagogy to promote Biotechnology concept engagement and academic literacy in a linguistically-diverse university context', Muhammad Nakhlooda and Moragh Paxton offer a detailed case study of a holistic pedagogy that draws on the creative use of languages to facilitate epistemological access in the sciences. Focusing on one institutional context, the authors describe a pedagogy that encouraged learners to use their dominant language (most often not English) to develop understandings of complex scientific concepts. They explain how once conceptual understanding had been achieved through the students' dominant language, they are then able to translate that understanding into English, using the scientific and academic literacies required by the discipline. In their careful detailing of this pedagogic approach, the authors build an argument for how a translanguaging pedagogy can

enable deep learning and how multilingualism can be embraced as a rich resource for teaching and learning.

Shalini Dukhan's article, 'Students' prior knowledge and threshold concepts in a first-year biology course: The lecturer as middleman', showcases a contextually responsive pedagogy informed by formative tests to assess students' prior knowledge. Dukhan argues that while constructive alignment between curriculum, learning outcomes, teaching and learning activities and assessment is important, insight into students' prior knowledge of a discipline's threshold concepts is essential for achieving effective teaching. Drawing on a case study of a first-year content-heavy biology course, Dukhan demonstrates how formative online assessments enabled her to gain insight into her students' prior knowledge and how this understanding contributed to her developing contextually responsive pedagogies.

Shifting the focus to assessment, Ilse Fouche, Grant Andrews, Laura Dison, and Maria Prozesky discuss the 'Pedagogical and decolonial affordances of group portfolio assessment for learning in South African universities'. In this article, the authors consider how group work portfolio projects can be used effectively as a mechanism for enabling epistemological access. They used this approach to assessment in contexts with large student numbers, diversity in terms of language and literacy practices, and limited resources. Adopting a decolonial stance, the authors show how group work portfolio projects provided students with opportunities to challenge what counts as 'powerful knowledge' in the classroom as students were encouraged to interrogate diverse perspectives and knowledges. In doing so, diversity was reframed as a resource for decolonial work. Considering the use of group work portfolios across two institutional contexts, the authors show how this form of assessment enables different modes of learning to take place, such as peer review, social construction of knowledge and the importance of gaining input from all members of a group. The case studies highlight the value of contextually-responsive and creative assessment practices for learning.

### **Socially responsive approaches through service learning**

Moving beyond a classroom setting to pedagogies that engage broader communities, Clint Abrahams, Hermie Delport, Rudolf Perold, Anna Marijke Weber, and James Benedict Brown explore the 'live project' as a pedagogical tool in architectural education. In their article, 'Being-in-context through live projects in architectural education: Including situated knowledge in community engagement projects', they argue for 'pedagogies-in-context' – an understanding that considers pedagogies in multiple overlapping contexts including 'the physical and social contexts of higher education institutions, the intellectual, pedagogical and political contexts of the curriculum, and the socio-economic contexts of educators, students and communities'. Focusing on one live project and describing it in detail, the authors critically reflect on how live projects can be conceptualised more generally as 'enterprises to reconstitute situated knowledge(s), thereby empowering students and educators to rewrite their own experiences of learning and teaching by making meaningful connections with communities'. Furthermore, they

argue that live projects can help cultivate a sense of 'being-in-context' for students, educators, researchers and community members and can ultimately shape students as responsible citizens.

### **Creating contextually responsive practitioners**

To conclude the special issue attention is once again focused on the field of academic development and the role academic developers play in foregrounding contextually responsive practice. The first of two articles focusing on academic development, written by seven fellows from the Teaching Advancement at University (TAU) Fellowship Programme is entitled: 'Unveiling the professional attributes of university teachers'. In this article, authors Rubby Dhunpath, Lynn Biggs, Hanlie Dippenaar, Hesta Friedrich-Nel, Deidre Joubert, Ian Nell, and Jacqueline Yeats respond to the imperative to develop professional attributes of academics in their role as university teachers. Drawing on Henry Giroux's framework of teachers as transformative intellectuals and using the metaphor of the baobab tree to represent rhizomatic thinking about teaching, the authors critically reflect on vignettes of their own practice in order to explore their own professional attributes. Through this exposition, the authors argue that to develop contextually-responsive curricula that 'promote transformative values, attitudes and actions in higher education', university teachers first have to embody these attributes at an individual level. The final article in the special issue focuses on practical issues related to curriculum design. In the article, 'Engaging knowledge and the knower: Design considerations for emerging modes of academic staff development', authors Daniela Gachago, Barbara Jones, Emmanuel Ekale Esambe, Sonwabo Jongile, and Eunice Ivala argue that curriculum design needs to take into account both epistemological and ontological aspects of the learning process. Despite curriculum design being complex work, little support is available for academics in this regard. In response to this need, the authors reflect on four iterations of an academic staff development intervention. Drawing on a learning design model with eleven design considerations, as well as Legitimation Code Theory, the authors analyse the different iterations of the course design and participants' experiences. Their findings show that curriculum work and learning design are iterative, contextual and messy processes. Furthermore, they suggest that the degree to which context has been foregrounded in the course design impacts on the levels of participant engagement.

In closing, the theme of the 2019 HELTASA conference, 'pedagogies in context', afforded a valuable space for Southern African scholars and higher education practitioners to disrupt global North notions of 'best practice' and to reclaim a voice for developing teaching and learning perspectives from and for the global South. Conceptualising and implementing contextually responsive, transformative pedagogies is an ongoing challenge for all academics. The conceptual understandings and case studies presented in this special issue highlight some of the interesting research and innovative practices in the field. However, the field of academic development and higher education studies require more conceptually robust research that uses powerful theoretical lenses to understand our contextual realities. Working with powerful theory will make it possible for scholars to conceptualise context-appropriate solutions to the vexing challenges they face. The development of decolonial, transformative and contextual pedagogies

is the responsibility of all. Not taking up this challenge risks polarising and fracturing the emerging global South voice.

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