

Leading article

Framing higher education as a means to address the expectations of society using different frames (of mind)

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Abstract

The focus of this article is on higher education seen as being framed differently and its response to the expectations of society at large. The article does not argue for a specific frame to be used. It rather serves as an editorial outer-frame for the individual inner-frames published in this special issue – each article being a different frame designed or made; simple or ornate; and so on, by an individual (author) or group (co-authors) of craftsmen and/or craftswomen. As higher education is multidimensional in all aspects, it is complex and each article can only offer a small ‘abstracted visual’ representation of the ‘bigger picture’ (what is currently known) of the higher education world and the world of society in which it exists. Some articles are framed as still lives, some as landscapes, others as portraits – readers may decide. The aim of the article, as the outer-frame, is the initiating of scholarly discourse on the views that readers are offered to see through the different frames with a view to inviting them to engage in the discourse – appreciating what is offered as a painting, other fine art, digital image, quilt, and so on. The author draws on the work of several authors whom he considers scholars of mainly learning and teaching in its widest sense, and scholars of leadership in and of higher education within a societal perspective to underpin the current discourse. The line of thought is guided by the keywords provided for each article.

Keywords: Scholarly discourse, frames of mind, scholarship of learning and teaching, scholarship of leadership, transformation, communities of practice

INTRODUCTORY CANVAS

The Higher Education Learning and Teaching Association of Southern Africa (HELTASA) Conference that was held from 28–30 November 2012 in Stellenbosch offered national and international scholars the opportunity to showcase their views on higher education, framed by them in different ways.

All prospective authors were offered three vehicles to make their scholarly ideas public, namely: presenting at the conference; publishing in the conference proceedings; or publishing in this special section of the *South African Journal of*

Higher Education (SAJHE). The longstanding relationship between HELTASA and the *SAJHE* is of note. What I have learned from this ‘making public’ in the current edition is that two main areas of scholarship, among others, surfaced, namely: scholarship of learning and teaching; and scholarship of leadership. I use scholarship of learning and teaching as is suggested by HELTASA’s name. However, in the articles dealing with this scholarship type, the construct Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) is used. Although I consider all the articles included as of equal importance, I do not visit them all in terms of my meaning making. However, all the articles or authors are mentioned as they appear sequentially in the current section.

THEORETICAL FRAMES (OF MIND)

The purpose of this sub-section is not to give an account of my theoretical framework for the analysis of the articles published. My frame (of mind) is blended with those reported in a multi-layer of colour. The golden thread regarding scholarship that I was looking for in the articles was ‘transformation’. One article with this specific focus is the one by Nichols.

Continuous transforming educational practice and promoting transformational leadership (Wolvaardt and Du Toit 2012) require accountability in terms of professional and personal transformation. The articles selected reflect transformation in different ways, but mainly revolve around the notion that accountability can be realised through enacting the principles of sound research – scholarly inquiry. The collection of articles brings about, among others, communities of practice, whether teaching or leadership practice. In my view one of the aims these communities should strive for is becoming ‘agents of transformation’ – opposed to the usual, somewhat outdated, construct used, namely ‘agents of change’. An example of transformational thinking is to be found in the ideas shared by Soudien in his keynote address. The constructs ‘innovation’ and ‘excellence’ he uses in the title of his contribution informs my conceptualising transformation. Furthermore, by including the construct ‘inclusion’ in the title he confirms that higher education and any scholarly work on higher education cannot be realised without society. It is about what society offers and expects from higher education and what higher education offers society. One example of this ‘reciprocal agreement’ is secondary education’s influences on higher education, as addressed by Sommerville in his article. Society is interested in performance. Enhancing performance lies, *inter alia*, in contexts, such as secondary schooling and the competencies with which first-year students arrive at university and the challenges in terms of additional higher level competencies to be mastered they need to face. Therefore, it is of value to link the different literacies alluded to in the articles by Frith and Lloyd and the one by Gachago and others to the notion of the interdependence of higher education and society. The authors refer to literacies that are not often included in work on literacies, but that forms part of the outcry of society in terms of its needs, for example ‘quantitative literacies’ specifically in the context of ‘proportional reasoning’, and ‘digital literacies’ in the

context of storytelling. The interdependence between society and higher education is further spelled out in the contribution by Winberg. He highlights the importance of involving collaborators from local industry in higher education teaching and learning activities such as curriculum development. Such curriculum development activities should, as suggested by Wood (2011), aim at transforming curricula within higher education. Part of transforming curricula is to engage in constructive debate on curriculum – suggested in the article by Clarence-Fincham and Naidoo who use ‘reconceptualising’ as their frame.

It is my wish as editor that each reader will find his or her golden thread or a group of readers will find theirs with a view to producing fertile ground for collaborative inquiry or ‘negotiated learning’ as proposed by Boud (2006, 24), which will lead to transformation. Therefore, at the beginning of the current issue some questions arising are: What is the golden thread that intrigues you and informs your scholarly inquiry? In what way will this thread inform your practice – be it an educational practice or practice in terms of leadership? As constructs differ from one scholar to the next as we all have a different understanding of the realities we face, how do you construct meaning? For me it is insufficient to construct (what) but also to be aware of the process of constructing (how). In the end it is about academic staff’s professional learning in terms of, for example, teaching and learning as is suggested in the contribution of Schlicht and Klauser. Analogous to Slabbert, De Kock and Hattingh’s work (2009) that focuses on student learning, academic staff have to face the real-life challenges they confront in their respective higher education settings. One such a real-life challenge to lecturers is assessing of learning which is addressed by Leach in her article on computer-based formative assessment.

An accountable way of addressing such challenges is by using a scholarly lens for a community of practice with a view to collective meaning making. From a constructivist epistemology such meaning making creates further opportunities for constructing one’s own practice theory, also referred to as ‘living theory’ (McNiff and Whitehead 2006), whether constructing new meaning of one’s teaching practice or one’s leadership practice. Again, what comes to the fore is scholarly meaning making, for instance regarding transforming of practice. Meaning making is a continuous process that includes reflective practice referred to as reflexivity by Burton and Bartlett (2005). Such reflexivity is essential for promoting high levels of intellectual quality that is of essence in scholarship of all sorts. I consider scholarship of learning and teaching and scholarship of leadership as being intertwined as all higher education practitioners are leaders in their own right.

When giving an outline of the array of contributions, the extent of the voluminous voice of meaning making becomes clear.

Archer offers an account of the link between academic literacy and access to university to the background of previous educational contexts and resources as core of her meaning making. A creative view is taken, as the visuals included explain, which represents her engaging different kinds of knowledge and the different ways

in which she organised her thinking that helps her, and the reader, to make sense of their experiences (McNiff and Whitehead 2006, 29).

Another frame by Bitzer and Van den Bergh paints the landscape of a journey towards doctoral identity. The aim of the journey is research autonomy – an attribute that is essential for scholarship and ‘growing our own timber’, that is, developing research projects and initiatives for young and emerging researchers. An article that complements the notion of attributes is the one by Bozalek and Watters that focuses on graduate attributes – indicative of the doctoral journey that starts at undergraduate level. They highlight the fact that critical thinking is to be promoted and learning should be linked to real-life situations. When the identities of doctoral students and undergraduate students are compared, it is this very attribute of competence in the context of problem-solving in the real world that helps scholars realise that any research should be executed in terms of real-life contexts. Wolvaardt and Du Toit (2011) use the construct ‘authentic learning’ when referring to real-life contexts. In this sense I would like to think that ‘real-life scholarship’ will be advanced. Another attribute that should form the core of doctoral identity, and graduate identity in general, is what Lecanides-Arnott in her article calls ‘generative self-criticism’.

As many of the articles were written by female scholars, Obers’s article, *Career success for women academics in higher education*, represents a canvas on which each female scholar can add colour to relevant new meaning making. Of course male scholars are invited to do the same. My own metaphoric meaning making as editor in this regard is well aligned with the ideas of De Boer, Du Toit, Scheepers and Bothma (2013) who refer to mixing the colours on the palette and applying them to the canvas with the finest brushes depending on the extent to which they should take prominence in the landscape of higher education.

I acknowledge that all of the above can only be executed, realised or interrogated in a scholarly fashion if the highest quality is sought. One way of doing this is to adopt the notion of transformational leadership as Rooke and Torbert (2005) put it. To ensure the highest quality of curriculum development, SoTL, literacies, work-based learning, as examples of constructs to be found in the different articles alluded to above, all scholars involved in higher education cannot ignore the responsibility they have in terms of transforming their practices, scholarly foci and research methodology.

CONCLUSION

Collectively the articles published in this special section are once again proof of the ‘framed minds’ of the scholarly community of practice of mainly South African scholars. The construct ‘frame’, however, does not suggest that their scholarship is boxed in. The array of topics addressed shows that each individual scholar or group of scholars contributes in a special way to people’s understanding of the world they live in and the world to which they have to account for in terms of their daily scholarly interaction.

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