

Guest Editorial

A personal reflection on the SAARDHE International Conference, 2007

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INTRODUCTION

This editorial has a different angle: Instead of an introductory, underpinning article on quality assurance in higher education *per se*, I look at the SAARDHE Conference from a quality assurance point of view. It is ultimately the conference that served as the stage for the presentation of the papers included in this special issue.

As chair of the organising committee of the 2007 International Conference of the South African Association for Research and Development in Higher Education (SAARDHE), 1–4 July 2007 at the University of Pretoria, I take pride in offering this SAJHE issue as evidence of research outcomes reported at the Conference. However, the papers only serve as exemplars and represent the theme of the Conference: *New horizons for quality in higher education and training*. The focus on training was included to mobilise for closing the gap between higher education and training. Despite numerous attempts to involve representatives from the business and training community, only a few participants could be convinced. I, however, believe that all practitioners involved in higher education and training should continuously seek to find ways to bridge the gap between higher education and training as proposed by SAQA.

The focus on quality assurance allowed for a variety of interpretations from a macro and micro level point of view as is evident in the selected papers. Quality assurance *per se* has become very prominent in the context of higher education. Impetus to mobilise for quality assurance stems from policy initiatives, driven by the Council on Higher Education (CHE) and the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC). Apart from these initiatives at macro level, there is a drive for quality assurance at higher education practice level – where lecturers take responsibility for investigating what they do. This drive comes mainly from the different divisions at higher education institutions responsible for academic staff development and I would like to commend the excellent work being done over many years.

In most cases where lecturers take responsibility for researching their own practice for the purpose of quality assurance, an action research approach is

followed. Therefore Prof. Jean McNiff was invited as a keynote speaker to focus on this research paradigm. An adapted version of her keynote address, titled 'The significance of "I" in educational research and the responsibility of intellectuals' is included in this issue under a different title. As first article it sets the scene for the other contributions; I believe that in all the research reported there is an 'I', or at least an 'I' behind every project – an aspect that is sometimes negated and not at all acknowledged by proponents of traditional research. This issue serves to portray the need for a mix of research approaches. Furthermore, the articles are diverse in terms of their focus on the scholarship of teaching, the scholarship of community engagement and managing quality assurance.

THE 'I'-PERSPECTIVE ON ORGANISING AN INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

The SAARDHE conference was my second international conference I had to take responsibility for as chair of the organising committee. In 2003 I hosted the International ALARPM Conference (Action Learning, Action Research and Process Management), an association based in Australia. I report on the conference in detail in an article in the *ALAR Journal* (Du Toit 2004). The report serves as background for this editorial. When reading the detail, one realises that the lessons learnt in terms of what works can be applied to the Conference reported here.

No such conference can ever be a successful event without the unconditional participation of committed members of an organising committee. Apart from the administrative and other support members, who are remunerated for their input, it is the academic staff members that are involved that help organise the event over and above their day-to-day responsibilities – sacrificing precious personal, teaching and research time – to whom I am grateful. I would like to acknowledge the following colleagues who assisted in numerous ways: Prof. Tinus Kühn and Dr. Gerda Bender from the Department of Curriculum Studies, and Dr. Gail Turner from the Department of Education Innovation. I would also like to acknowledge the head of the Department of Curriculum Studies, Prof. Billy Fraser, for his total buy-in and support. In appreciation of what they had done, I dedicate this special issue of *SAJHE* to them. I applaud you!

At the same time no conference can ever be successful without participative delegates. The attendance by more than 250 delegates from all over the globe is evidence that the wish to ensure that quality assurance in higher education is taken seriously is an international concern. The enthusiastic delegates, of whom most were also presenters, were a delight. Seeing content faces and getting continuous positive feedback from delegates throughout the duration of the conference, made all the effort worth the while. However, every event has its downside. The following statement is not at all made with a view to expressing my personal feelings or to be negative, but to protect higher education studies as respected and well established field of specialisation. Higher education, and for that matter any conference in any field of

specialisation, should protect its professionalism. The following illustrates what I experienced in terms of scholars who had indicated that they were willing to attend the Conference and who wanted to present a paper. In some cases (fortunately not a significant number at all) such delegates indicated that they would be participating and therefore were absorbed in the entire organising process, were accommodated on the programme, but never turned up and did not pay the conference fees. In my view such ‘phantom’ presenters should by all means be prevented from adding the intended conference contribution to their CV’s. One even insisted on having his paper (which in the end was not presented) considered for publication in this special *SAJHE* issue. (Sometimes, presenters who do not attend ask colleagues to read the paper on their behalf, although they are not co-authors.) Fortunately such incidences did not occur at the Conference. These practices are counteractive to the standard of a conference. I request every conference organiser to react to these practices in a constructive way. We need to become more rigorous in eradicating this unprofessional behaviour – for the sake of the scientific community. I do not at all negate the fact that there are cases where delegates are prevented from attending by circumstances beyond their control. However, my experience regarding such instances is that they are usually professionally accountable and inform the organisers well in advance or by some other professional means.

Believing in what I do and how I do it forces me to ask the ontological question: Who am I and who are the delegates attending the conference? To enable me to answer this question, I draw on the theoretical framework I use to investigate my own practice. Apart from an array of theories, especially related to adult learning, such as constructivism, I implement learning style flexibility (as adapted from Herrmann’s (1995) work on whole brain learning) in everything I do. To me it has become a living theory in the same way as McNiff and Whitehead (2006) view action research – which is my preferred way of research.

I refer to some of the theories applicable to adult learning for the very reason that a conference is in essence a learning opportunity for adults. As an example: How can one organise a conference that does not accommodate different learning preferences delegates might have? Such preferences may vary from a focus on fact-based learning (accommodating the intellectual self – quadrant A); organised, sequential learning (accommodating the safekeeping self – quadrant B); emotional aspects of learning and interpersonal relationships (accommodating the emotional self – quadrant C); and visual and holistic learning (accommodating the experimental self – quadrant D) (Herrmann 1995). Figure 1 represents the theory as adapted for the context of a conference.

Catering for all the preferences and even challenging some delegates to participate beyond their comfort zones (Du Toit 2008) was what I had in mind as vision for the Conference. A visionary approach to organizing and monitoring such an event is aligned with Zuber-Skerritt’s (2000) action research principles. I also approached the process from an innovative point of view (Du Toit 2008) – continuously asking how to be innovative in planning and offering the Conference. The innovative

<p>The delegate with an A quadrant thinking preference may prefer to focus on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Precise, to the point information - Theory and logical rationales - Proof of validity - Research references - Textbook readings - Numbers, data 	<p>The delegate with a D quadrant thinking preference may prefer to focus on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fun and spontaneity - Playful approaches - Pictures, metaphors, overviews - Discovering and exploration - Quick pace and variety in format - Opportunity to experiment
<p>The delegate with a B quadrant preference may prefer to focus on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Organised, consistent approaches - Staying on track, on time - Complete subject chunks - A beginning, middle and end - Practice and evaluation - Practical application - Examples 	<p>The delegate with a C quadrant thinking preference may prefer to focus on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Discussing issues with colleagues - Sharing, expressing ideas - Feeling-based aspects - Hands on learning - Personal connection - Emotional involvement - Use of all senses

Figure 1: Preferences of delegates according to the four quadrants of the brain

idea I took as framework for the quality assurance of the conference learning style flexible conferencing as described above. The scholarly tool I chose to investigate the Conference was action research. I, however, adapted an asset-based approach to doing the research as proposed by Du Toit (2008), using the innovative idea mentioned above as point of departure. This is in contrast to other action research scholars' view of action research in that a problem is identified (Zuber-Skerritt 2000) or the question: 'What is my concern?' is asked (McNiff and Whitehead 2006) which rather reflects a deficit approach to action research .

Being involved in organising scholarly events such as a conference cannot be seen outside of my professional development as academic. Therefore I added the Conference to my overarching action research project of my entire practice and professional development as a sub-cycle. At the time of organising the Conference I would refer to the 'scholarship of organising conferences' whenever I was asked by colleagues how 'things were going with the conference arrangements' with the tongue in the cheek. Now I am more and more convinced that everyone organising such an event should use appropriate adult learning theories to account for the 'what' and 'how' of a conference. They should indeed have a scholarly approach to organising conferences. This means that action research principles could aid in the planning, implementing, observing, reflecting and evaluating of the conference as a project. The more organisers of conferences publish on the art and scholarship of organizing conferences, the sooner we will get to the point where conferences are experienced as conducive to interaction, participation, enjoyment and flexible learning instead of boring events.

According to my learning style preference (Herrmann 1995), if I had the choice, I would prefer not to be involved in organizing such an event; but rather network and

talk to delegates, and organizing social events. However, having had colleagues with different learning preferences to mine on the team, promoted flexible teamwork and ensured a flexible event. Although I do not have hard evidence in terms of data on each committee member's preferences, except mine and one other colleague, working with them for almost two years on the Conference offered me the opportunity to observe them in action and make a qualitative judgement of their preferences and strengths. I could not wish for a more effective, complementary team!

Of course, the aim of a conference is ultimately engagement on an intellectual (quadrant A) level. (Is it?) Proof of that is evident in this publication. The scholarly work reported is evidence of the numerous opportunities the Conference offered for intellectual engagement. The articles reflect the complexity of the higher education context. I invite you to engage with the pages by critically reading them and responding by means of feedback to the Editor in Chief, or corresponding with the authors or me.

A conference is also an opportunity to celebrate (quadrant C). That is why the conference commenced with a cocktail party during which a drumming session was utilised by all who attended to get energised for the days ahead. This was followed by more drumming and singing African songs at the beginning of each keynote session, lots of nutritious food during lunch hours and a gala dinner where SAARDHE scholars were honoured for their contributions to higher education by means of SAARDHE scholarships. All of these activities accommodated delegates who prefer being interpersonally involved and actively taking part in kinesthetic movement. Of course, some of those who do not prefer this fun-side of a conference were challenged to get out of their comfort zones and try out something new. This to me is related to developing one's full potential. Feedback from delegates indicated that the drumming sessions were enjoyed, that they were satisfied with the catering and that they appreciated the effort that went into establishing the soul of the Conference, which was conducive to engaging and a sense of belonging and making the conference interactive. Much effort was also put into making the environment attractive by means of flower arrangements and exhibitions, which included an African market where products made as part of community engagement projects were sold. The conference bags also added to the look and feel of the conference; they were the products of a community project run by the Central University of Technology, Free State.

My approach to developing future scholars of higher education is to utilise a conference for developing up-and-coming scholars. Therefore postgraduate students in higher education were invited to participate as part of the mainstream activities and not as a separate stream of 'novices'. I also believe in inviting practitioners to conferences – ensuring that a conference is not merely an event organised by academics for academics. My wish for the Conference was to get as many lecturers as possible involved, apart from those involved in academic staff development and those offering formal qualifications in higher education studies. The Conference

attracted numerous higher education practitioners that added value in terms of authentic, real-life exemplars.

For those who prefer a more structured and detailed way of conferencing (quadrant B), a well-planned programme was designed and offered. The programme included three keynote addresses – one on management in higher education by Prof. Lovemore Mbigi from Zimbabwe, another on community engagement by Dr. Ernie Stringer from Australia and the one on action research for professional development by Prof. Jean McNiff from the UK already mentioned. These were alternated and complemented by concurrent sessions within the following streams:

- Action research
- Curricular community engagement
- Education innovation
- Management
- Quality assurance.

All submitted contributions were peer reviewed. All in all twelve papers were selected, representing each stream. How else could the quality of the content of this publication be assured? How else can this final publication be exemplary of the principles of quality assurance as implied by the title of the Conference? The mere fact that some of the papers were not selected might not have to do with the quality of the paper as such, but with a lack of space. The review process served as a developmental approach. Authors whose papers were not selected are urged to react on the recommendations made and to refine the paper with a view to resubmitting to *SAJHE*.

For those who prefer a more flexible programme (quadrant D) different types of presentations were included. It varied from active hands-on workshops, to large group keynote addresses, paper presentations to small groups, panel discussions and poster presentations.

You are invited to enjoy reading this special issue. It might be an interesting reading exercise using the theory represented in Figure 1 as reading lens. You are also invited to reflect on your experience of the Conference and other conferences by applying the ideas represented in Figure 1 and the paper on the ALARPM conference (Du Toit 2004). To what extent are your learning preferences accommodated during conferences? Apart from reflecting on what others had done to make the Conference an authentic event, you might need to ask yourself what you had contributed to making the Conference and other conferences worthwhile experiences. Any learning opportunity implies a reciprocal responsibility of all stakeholders. This brings me to the ultimate question that is aligned with the crux of the Conference theme: How can the quality of a conference on quality assurance be assured?

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