Book Review

"Contextualised critical reflections on academic development practices: Towards professional learning" (edited by Teboho Pitso)

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ABSTRACT

This interdisciplinary book review delves into "Contextualised Critical Reflections on Academic Development Practices: Towards Professional Learning" (edited by Teboho Pitso), offering unique perspectives from a clinical psychologist and a PhD candidate in higher education studies. The review critically engages with the three central themes: Teaching and Technology Support, Student Support, and Prospects and Possible Future Trajectories in Academic Development. Drawing on personal experiences in academia, the review intertwines reflections on these themes with a closing examination of Pitso's thought-provoking exploration of identity and alienation. This review offers a nuanced understanding of professional learning, bridging the gap between psychological and educational perspectives on academic development.

Introduction

In a rapidly evolving educational landscape, dialogue on academic development is ever-pertinent. This book review ventures into the realms explored in the anthology, "Contextualised Critical Reflections on Academic Development Practices: Towards Professional Learning", edited by Teboho Pitso. As a clinical psychologist (CM) and a PhD candidate in higher education studies (AM), we bring our distinctive yet complementary lenses to dissect the central themes in this comprehensive book. The book thoughtfully stitches together narratives and reflections on academic development practices, providing a rich tapestry of experiences that underscore the importance of innovation, support, and foresight in professional learning. Assembled around three main themes—Teaching and Technology Support, Student Support, and Academic Development: Prospects and Possible Future Trajectories—the book imparts a wealth of insights into the challenges and opportunities within the field of academic development.

Our review aims to delve into these central themes from our distinct disciplinary perspectives. Each theme will be scrutinised independently through the lens of our personal experiences, reflecting our individual expertise, and offering a broadened understanding of the content and its implications. This complementary approach, we believe, aligns well with the diverse dimensions of academic development explored in the anthology, and allows us to analyse these issues in depth.

Theme 1: Teaching and Technology Support (AM)

This theme underscores the essential need to humanise pedagogy for both teachers and students. As a PhD scholar and emerging academic, I find this theme particularly relevant as it speaks to my journey towards becoming the kind of academic that students need for transformation and radical social justice. There has been a noticeable shift in the power dynamics within higher education, towards transformation on behalf of historically marginalised students and staff members (including us, the authors of this review). We find ourselves in spaces that were not originally designed with our needs in mind, and which have traditionally been exclusionary. The question then arises: What teaching approaches can we embody to humanise and transform pedagogy in higher education? As I delved into the chapters on the first theme, Teaching and Technology Support, I found myself reflecting on the crucial role of teaching and learning. Drawing from Masebala Tjabane's insights (see Chapter 2), it became apparent that effective teaching approaches need to consider students' socio-economic backgrounds. These strategies should also advocate for radical social justice in

educational ideals to achieve teaching excellence. Chapter 2 evoked memories of my own journey as a student from a modest background entering university. The rigid focus on achieving academic excellence further alienated me as it overlooked critical aspects like equity, collaboration, and resource accessibility. This narrow approach deepened power imbalances and marginalisation, driving me to attain a degree to improve my circumstances, but falling short in providing the skills to create meaningful change. It underscored the necessity of placing social justice at the core of critical pedagogy, given the diverse personal histories and ongoing experiences of students.

The system's neo-liberal focus results in additional demands, like the Student Evaluation of Teaching (SET), examined by Bruce Matee (see Chapter 3). I view this approach as flawed, as it fails to consider the complex realities of teaching, power disparities, and students' understanding of quality education. Particularly during COVID-19, as a black woman in academia, I've found that many students require a nurturing presence, which is often unpaid emotional labour typically overlooked in performance evaluations. Student attitudes fluctuate based on how much this emotional support is provided. Bruce Matee identifies a crucial shortcoming of SET, namely its inability to account for potential biases towards lecturers, which could be influenced by factors like race, gender, and disposition.

The reflections on blended learning dynamics by Paulina Machika (see Chapter 4) and Moegamat Dolley (see Chapter 5) were intriguing. They brought back memories of the rapid transition to online learning during COVID-19, a change which unfortunately left behind students from remote areas or those without tech access. The situation also placed great pressure on academics, who had to quickly adapt to the technological demands and fast pace of delivering the curriculum online. Post-COVID-19, we now face another transition – to hybrid learning. Reflecting on our recent past, I often question whether we've learned from our previous experiences, especially for institutions that implemented online learning for the first time.

Theme one closes with an eloquent chapter on the importance of entrepreneurship education as a tool to equip students with problem-solving skills. The impact of inequality and social class are further seen during these difficult times for the South African economy, where unemployment rises while businesses fail. A dilemma calling for greater focus on entrepreneurship education, as Teboho Pitso reflects (see Chapter 6), that is not only designed to progress the selected few (business schools) in the economic chain of South Africa, and which is historically embedded. As reflected in Teboho Pitso's chapter and in Mapaling, Webb, and du Plooy (2023), entrepreneurship education

should unleash students' creativity and equip them with tools for problem-solving beyond the dire need to commercialise their ideas. By incorporating entrepreneurship education into mainstream academic pedagogy, we can cultivate a generation of graduates who are not only prepared to navigate the evolving economic landscape, but also equip them with the critical thinking skills necessary to enact meaningful change. This underscores the inherent potential in reshaping our approach to teaching and technology support, with a keen focus on fostering resilience, addressing social justice, and empowering students to be transformative forces in their own right.

Theme 2: Student Support (CM)

Though my experiences and training as a Supplemental Instruction (SI) and orientation facilitator found resonance in several chapters of Theme 2 (see Chapters 7 and 9, respectively), it was Chapter 8, penned by Jeremiah Madzimure and titled, "Fostering undergraduate mathematical proficiency: My liminal space" that truly struck a personal chord. This chapter articulates the concepts of the pre-liminal space, the liminal space, and the post-liminal space, providing a framework that, upon reflection, mirrors my own journey in academia. As a student academic advisor and counsellor for two years, I inhabited the pre-liminal space, on the threshold of entering the world of academia from a supportive and developmental role.

Transitioning into the role of an academic over the past two years, I found myself navigating the liminal space. In this transformative stage, I grappled with the shift from being on the periphery of academia to stepping into its core. This period, much like Madzimure's exploration in the chapter, was characterised by constant learning, adaptation, and the honing of my professional identity. As I gradually shift towards my post-liminal space, I find myself attempting to reconcile my personal philosophy of placing students at the "heart of the matter" with the objective realities and demands of the best practices for teaching and learning. This evolving space is where I seek to integrate my passion for student-centric learning with the rigour and structure required by academic curricula. Indeed, one of the most profound struggles I encounter is the endeavour to embody a humanising pedagogy and maintain student-centredness without compromising the curriculum's integrity. How do we balance compassion and understanding with the stringent requirements of academic learning? This question, much like the issues broached in Madzimure's insightful chapter, is one that I continually strive to address as I move further into my post-liminal space and continue evolving as an early career academic.

Theme 3: Academic Development: Prospects and Possible Future Trajectories

In the final theme of this collection, we find two chapters penned by the editor himself. Rather than focusing on a specific chapter, we've chosen to reflect on a thought-provoking question Pitso asked during the book launch (available for viewing on YouTube). He asked, "I always talk about identity and alienation...that we are trying to search for what we are as academic developers, and in doing so, which discourses do we alienate, and which ones do we signify?" This introspective query not only encapsulates the book's underlying themes but also invites us to contemplate the broader implications of academic development practices on identity formation and feelings of alienation as we reflect on ways to humanise pedagogy in higher education. This contemplation provides the overarching framework for our final analysis of this impactful anthology.

Drawing on my background in psychology, I (CM) find Pitso's focus on identity and alienation particularly poignant. The interplay between identity formation and feelings of alienation in the context of academic development raises provocative questions about the psychological impacts of these processes. As we further our understanding of best practices in academic development, we must remain cognisant of the emotional and psychological journeys entwined with these professional trajectories.

References

Mapaling, C., Webb, P. & du Plooy, B. 2023. "I would help the lecturer with marking": Entrepreneurial education insights on academic resilience from the perspectives of engineering students in South Africa. In Halberstadt, J., Alcorta de Bronstein, A., Greyling, J. & Bissett, S. (eds.) *Transforming Entrepreneurship Education*. Cham: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-11578-3_10