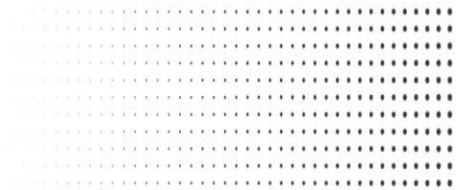


TEACHING ADVANCEMENT AT
UNIVERSITIES
COHORT 4 INDIVIDUAL PROJECT
REPORT
June 2021 – June 2023



EACH ONE OF US
CAN MAKE A
DIFFERENCE.
TOGETHER WE MAKE
CHANGE

Barbara Mikulski



PROJECT TITLE

**Dynamics of multifaceted socio-community challenges on students'
learning in a comprehensive university**

TAU 4 PARTICIPANT

BILLEY BRIGHT ADDAM

Introduction and Background

The three principal focal pillars of many South African higher education are teaching and learning; research and innovation; and community engagement. In the institution under study, many students have peculiar community-oriented challenges that hinder their smooth learning for maximum performance. It appears that students' socio-community contexts have a significant impact on how they respond to academic interactions and other educational environments as well as the experiences they gather during their academic journey. It is therefore imperative to develop a landscape through curriculum revitalization, transformation or re-alignment that draws on their environmental challenges and present opportunities at tertiary level of learning and teaching. According to social constructivist Akpan et al., (2020) learning and knowledge construction is more meaningful if context oriented and socially integrated.

MacDonald et al. (2020), Mendy (2018) and West (2017) contends that curriculum transformation allows for educational balancing of pedagogy and content though receives limited attention over the years. In addition, curriculum transformation encourages localized higher education settings to address issues and problems such integrating students' community obstacles to renew learning and teaching content. According to Wijngaards-de Meij and Merx (2018), aligning curriculum to students needs may result in achieving learning outcomes to resonate with students' extrinsic and intrinsic motivation for success in the academic journey (Bovill & Woolmer, 2019; and Lockett, 2016).

According to Chikoko (2016) and Msila & Gumbo (2016), curriculum transformation has mostly concentrated on decolonization and Africanization while ignoring students' social identities. Despite the necessity of incorporating indigenous and decolonized epistemologies into the curriculum to boost the status of education, it is still crucial to tailor the scholarship within the context of students' difficulties with the understanding that "no student should be left behind in the learning environment" in the South African higher education sector.

The university of study is in a rural area and was created as the result of a merger. Thus, the difficulties that students encounter are a result of the poor quality of the services they receive in all areas of life. Projects like this will contribute to the success of the pillars and improve the reputation of both students, lecturers, and the university. The pillars are a solid academic core, high quality education, recognized institutional identity, and service to the community. This project therefore seeks to collaborate with lecturers to identify, design and implement strategic curriculum and facilitation approaches that promote suitable learning space for students with peculiar socio-community challenges.

Aim

The project's goal is encapsulated within two frames. Firstly, to assess the lecturers' familiarity with many socio-community difficulties (sociocultural, environmental, and economic obstacles) that students encounter while in the learning environment. Secondly, to explore strategic integration (intervention) methods for appropriate and equitable learning settings (social justice) that address these issues thus place students on an academic success path.

Theoretical Framing

The study capitalized on Erikson (1963) psychosocial theory cited in Mendy and Madiope (2020) as the principal lens. According to this theory, the curriculum and for that matter,

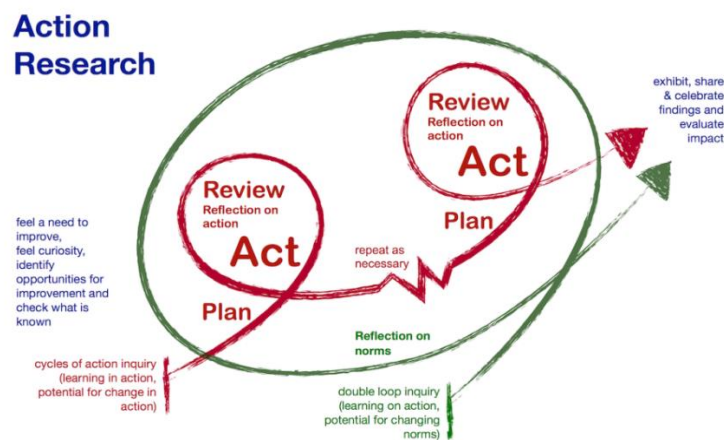
academics should develop personal growth linked to social identity with broader community values, challenges, culture, and way of life. Research established that students from disadvantaged communities face unique challenges that may be difficult to address through universal instructional design and subsequently, social mobility. Thus, raise a red flag that such students may exhibit lower competency relative to their counterparts.

Social identity (SI) theory promulgated by Hogg (2016) recognizes it as a frame through which people perceive their wider social identities via constructs such as gender, culture, ethnicity, class, and community problems. The theory conceives the effect of people’s perceptions within their wider socio-cultural, environmental, and economic contexts to influence individuals lived experiences thus, shape social identities. These theories drive the study process aimed at achieving the desired outcomes.

Adopting humanising pedagogies (Zembylas, 2018) allows for the implementation of appropriate and flexible strategies within the context of social transformation and a socially just academic environment. Also, to reduce the complexity, tensions, and paradoxes that students bring to the classroom, to provide the platform for lecturers to promote academic indulgence in critical scholarly teaching and the scholarship of teaching and learning.

Project Design and Methods

The project is aligned to the fundamentals of an interpretivist, qualitative case study action research methodological design (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Chih-Pei & Chang, 2017). The action research design was operationalised within Powell (2018) action research loop.



Stephen Powell loop of Action Research

Data collection techniques included qualitative open-ended questionnaire, observation, and focus group discussions. These techniques contributed to determining and expounding the challenges, development of strategies, monitoring and evaluation during implementation and reviewing process. I should mention that this is the first phase of the action research process and piloted on the smallest delivery campuses.

Project Processes

Collaborative Engagement

All engagement programs have an internal focus. I started by sharing the project with institutional management. The project was recognized and understood by the DVC-AAR, Senior Director of Learning and Teaching, and other team members. The initiative was then presented to the entire institution, with a focus on getting buy-in from the pilot campus. To track development and achievement, the campus' rector adopted the project in the rectorate. Support staff members and lecturers have agreed to take part in the program.



Recruitment of Change Agents

There were sixty-eight lecturers in the three faculties as such the Deans were approached to facilitate the nomination or volunteers to participate in the initiative. The three faculties

recommended twelve participants of which six were purposively selected (Aspers, 2019) to spearhead the project as 'change agents' in their respective faculties (Education, Business Sciences and Engineering, Computer Science & Technology). The lecturers demonstrated enthusiasm and readiness to participate in the project probably due to institutional buy-in at both management and campus level. Housing the project in the rectorate provided the necessary platform that implores lecturers to engage in the project and improve on their practice.

Recruitment of Students

The lecturers identified eight at risk students at the second level who claimed to have profound socio-community challenges and are from the rural setting. The selection was easy due to the lecturer's familiarity with the students and their context. Responses were collated and the common themes that emerged were identified. These themes fall within the categories of student-headed home, violence misogyny and domestic responsibilities amongst others. It is worth noting that the questionnaire was jointly designed by the participating lecturers and the project leader (me).

The Generative Module-Centered Curriculum Design

Firstly, a critical review of the institutional-designed Student Module Guide (SMG) revealed gaps including non-consideration of resources, learning and teaching environment and most of all students' socio-community challenges. The lecturers had difficulty in facilitating the curriculum in its current state as such the proposition of a tailored Generative Module-centered Curriculum (GMC) was well-received. Secondly, the integration of the overwhelming socio-community challenges flagged in questionnaire response thus developed a (GMC) which is friendly to students and easy to facilitate. Thirdly, the implementation of the GMC which was well received by the students as appropriate towards improving their success.

Though the implementation is in its infant stage, comments from the lecturers and students were constructive.

Preliminary Findings

The preliminary findings of the first phase of the project revealed two things. In the first place, the lectures confirm that, despite their knowledge of the socio-community challenges faced by students, they have little knowledge about the scope and severity of these issues and how they affect learning. The students asserted that the co-construction of the GMC is acceptable and receptive, which might provide a framework for effective comprehension of subject matter and, consequently, enhanced performance. These preliminary findings suggest that reducing the gaps related to socio-community status of what students bring to the classroom or learning environment with the GMC could boost upward educational achievements, student throughput, and most probably their social mobility entrenched with responsiveness to societal needs.

Analysis of Achievements

Stakeholder Collaborations

The management, unions, faculty Deans, the Students Rep Council, and lecturers all endorsed the initiative. The representative groups acknowledge the project's value-added nature and appreciate its innovative paradigm. In addition, demonstrated an awareness of the situation and how programs like these could help students from historically disadvantaged communities. It offered an opportunity for stakeholders to participate and communicate progress. The study team's viewpoints, trust, empowerment, confidence, stakeholder buy-in, rectorate adoption, and the reasonably consistent academic calendar all contributed to the success of the first phase process.

Lecturers' perspectives of the implementation of GMC

Understanding the necessity of equality in a university setting where all students are given equal access to academic opportunities regardless their socio-community challenges is fundamental for social justice. The variations in outcomes, such as academic achievement, social and emotional well-being, and success beyond the university, should not be compared to a student's socio-community difficulties, even though all students may not achieve equal educational outcomes. The lecturers acknowledge that students encounter socio-community difficulties and the important role of GMC as such contributed immensely towards the design and development. For the first two sessions of implementation, the lecturers were impressed with my presence and guidance on the implementation process. After capacitation, they took up the responsibility of doing it by themselves. Positive perspectives were developed which contributed to a successful implementation so far.

Students' response to the GMC

The swift response to the GMC implementation was a sign of students' willingness to embrace whatever will make them achieve their full potential worth despite their socio-community difficulties. Secondly, social mobility with the understanding that they can emerge from socio-community difficulties and climb the social ladder, thus occupy positions of trust with

competency, proficiency, and capabilities. A clearly defined pedagogical mechanism with sustainable solutions placing learning at the center could provide the platform for students with such challenges to engage and achieve beyond expectation in the social mobility space.

Personal Successes

The project has opened the door to the VC and DCV offices, notwithstanding their willingness to provide funds outside of the UCDG allocation if necessary.

I was allowed access to both institutional and campus management for support (human and infrastructural) at any point during the project.

I enhanced the SoTL agenda by expanding good practices beyond the bounds of the office space to the larger institutional community. I presented the project to a larger WSU audience at a university webinar, emphasizing the value of TAU as a change agent program for social justice awareness in higher education.

The commitment and preparedness of lecturers and students to collaborate through collective involvement was a demonstration of ownership of the project and the anticipated benefits that would accompany its implementation.

The successful design, development and implementation of the GMC which had an impact on teaching and students learning thereof served as the highlight of my achievements. This constructive development provides an impetus for a roll-out of the project to the entire university community.

Analysis of Challenges

Due to numerous unanticipated and ad hoc institutional events such as institutional audits, module guide development workshops, and curriculum transformation workshops, among others, consultation with various stakeholders took time.

Meeting the students outside of typical class periods to respond to the questionnaire was difficult because of the student's expected compensation for their time. As a result, the instructors resorted to using a few minutes of their sessions over a few days to facilitate the responses.

The requirement for an expanded curriculum that prioritizes students with socio-community difficulties was first difficult for the lecturers to embrace. Despite being willing to use the GMC, there was still the worry that they wouldn't finish the SMG in time. This is a sign of pedagogical deviation, which restricts the explicit nature of the curriculum and is structured in accordance with the requirements of ideal learning settings based on the assumption that "one size fits all." Furthermore, students' protest which reflects the SA Higher Education climate had its fair share thus, impeded the timely implementation of the intervention process.

Conclusion

The most deserving recipients of academic support are the students, who need all the support to succeed without interference from disappointments and challenges in the community. The project emphasized the significance of taking these aspects into account and applying them while facilitating curricula. Thus, promote diversity in curriculum facilitation and a push for change through the collaborations with key stakeholders.

Feedback from students and academics revealed that students have myriad socio-community challenges which, provided perspectives on the relevance of the project. Furthermore, reflection report from the lectures expressed a need for pedagogical transformation and continual implementation of newly developed skills. In the long-term, the transformed (generative) curriculum and consideration given to students' community challenges could see an improved throughput and graduation numbers. Also, some educational policies and practices (learning & teaching, assessment, digitalization), Institutional and faculty strategic plans, practices that promote equity and social justice revised and lecturer recruitment reviewed.

The project has set the tone for a socially fair learning environment where equal learning opportunities for all students are recognized through the integration of community situations in the curriculum.

REFERENCES

- Akpan, V. I., Igwe, U. A., Mpamah, I. B. I., & Okoro, C. O. (2020). Social constructivism: implications on teaching and learning. *British Journal of Education*, 8(8), 49-56.
- Bovill, C. & Woolmer, C. (2019). How conceptualisations of curriculum in higher education influence student-staff co-creation in and of the curriculum. *Higher Education*, 78(3), 407-422
- Chikoko, V. (2016). Issues in Africanising higher education curricula. *Africanising the curriculum: Indigenous perspectives and theories*, 71-82.
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2017). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. Sage publications.
- Hogg, M. A. (2016). Social identity theory. In *Understanding peace and conflict through social identity theory* (pp. 3-17). Springer, Cham.
- Lockett, K. (2016). Curriculum contestation in a post-colonial context: a view from the South. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 21(4), 415-428.
<https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2016.1155547U>
- MacDonald, S. A., Srikanthan, S., Ferrer, I., Lee, E. O. J., Lorenzetti, L., & Parent, A. A. (2020). The potential of field education as transformative learning. *Intersectionalities: A Global Journal of Social Work Analysis, Research, Polity, and Practice*, 8(1), 1-18.
- Mendy, J. & Madiope, M. (2020). Curriculum transformation: a case in South Africa. *Perspectives in Education*, 38(2), 1-19. <https://dx.doi.org/10.18820/2519593X/pie.v.38.i2.01>
- Msila, V., & Gumbo, M. T. (Eds.). (2016). *Africanising the curriculum: Indigenous perspectives and theories*. African Sun Media.
- Powell, S. (2017). Pedagogical Patterns. Accessed from: stephenp.net/2017/01/18/pedagogical-patterns-associate-fellow-of-the-hea/action-research/ on 28 of June 2023.

West, L. (2014). Transformative learning and the form that transforms: Towards a psychosocial theory of recognition using auto/biographical narrative research. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 12(2), 164-179.

Wijngaards-de Meij, L. & Merx, S. (2018). Improving curriculum alignment and achieving learning goals by making the curriculum visible. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 23(3), 219-231.

Zembylas, M. (2018). Decolonial possibilities in South African higher education: Reconfiguring humanising pedagogies as/with decolonising pedagogies. *South African Journal of Education*, 38(4), 1-11.