

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Closing the Loop: Meta-Analysis, Reflections and Perspectives

Kasturi Behari-Leak

Introduction

As we approach the end of this book and the New Academics Transitioning into Higher Education Project (NATHEP) itself, this chapter pays homage to the project, the participants, the process and the “product” through a meta-reflection of each component’s contributions to the aims and goals of the project. This meta-reflective process has been invaluable in promoting self-awareness and refining thinking and reflective practices on the project’s outcome. As explained in Chapter 1, NATHEP set out to prepare academic and professional developers to embark on well-theorised, conceptualised induction programmes that are contextualised and customised to respond to institutional, regional and national challenges. The project sought to first understand how induction practices were conceptualised and implemented across the sector and how these could be strengthened to achieve the transformation goals needed. This chapter is a critical meta-reflection on the project’s espoused and achieved outcomes and discusses how these played out in the different institutional contexts.

As part of the UCDP, the overarching aim of NATHEP was to enhance staff development capacity. We believe we did this well. Professional developers from the participating universities were capacitated to initiate and convene successful induction programmes at their institutions by focusing on pressing challenges of the current context and agency, with the aim of addressing historical and systemic challenges through a collaborative, consultative and inclusive process. This project enabled the enhancement of professional developers through double loop learning where a double morphogenesis (Archer, 2000) is likely to occur: as the professional developer transformed, so too would their beneficiaries transform through informed practice.

The project was designed to address the issue of scholarly practice, through theorisation and application. Both the practical and scholarly domains of the project were concerned with the conditions that enable or constrain the exercise of agency among professional and academic staff developers in higher education, conducive to the social inclusion of new academics and students. In NATHEP, we took these conditions to encompass structural and cultural contexts. The overarching project, as well as the case studies in this book, strongly proposes that institutional and national conditions, which include structural, fiscal, institutional climate, culture

and context, need to be conducive to the successful transition of newcomers and all academics. The project was intent on foregrounding our location in the global South and Africa as an important lever in induction programmes, to address questions of transformation and decolonisation in HE. The NATHEP practical and research components provided evidence of how stagnant things can become if not injected with the relevant epistemic and methodological infusions geared towards positive change.

What has NATHEP achieved?

Through its rationale, contextual underpinnings, theoretical spine and pedagogical and methodological approaches, NATHEP succeeded in developing principles for a range of induction approaches, relative to different contexts, through a collaborative, consultative and inclusive process. It shone the torch on the need for well-theorised, scholarly and critical approaches to academic staff development in the national sector. By engaging professional developers in ways that build their confidence in creating and convening successful induction programmes at their institutions, NATHEP addressed historical and systemic challenges at these universities, and created a new cadre of staff developers who can respond to the pressing challenges of the present but also an unknown future. Through this approach, NATHEP realised its aim of advocating for the emergence of professional developers who are critical agents of change (Postma, 2015).

Given the complexity and contested nature of the current higher education landscape based largely on historical imbalances as well as the current demands on the system, this book, through the case studies, unpacked the numerous challenges staff developers and new academics face as they embed themselves in disciplinary and institutional contexts. With systemic conditions not being conducive to critical agency and social justice, current induction practices for new academics are inadequate to the task of transformation in higher education (Behari-Leak, 2015), making new academics especially vulnerable (Behari-Leak, 2017). NATHEP thus makes a strong case for critical professional development as an imperative.

NATHEP's insights

NATHEP's deep involvement with 10 university partners in creating contextualised induction programmes for different contexts, has led to specific insights about professional development. This rich set of lenses or foci that emerged in the research may be used by professional development practitioners elsewhere, to imbue their contextual work with criticality and creativity. These foci are presented

below through the intentional and deliberate use of #hashtags, used in social media to attract attention and to give importance to content by driving traffic to content to boost views, likes, and shares (O'Brien, 2023). Here, we use these hashtags to signal the importance of paying attention to specific challenges in the HE context that need our urgent attention if we are to effect change. Linking the hashtags to the cascade model of staff development (discussed in Chapter 4), we acknowledge that while the focus of NATHEP has been staff development and staff developers, the foci presented below are equally relevant to university teachers (new and established), students, management, curriculum developers and learning designers.

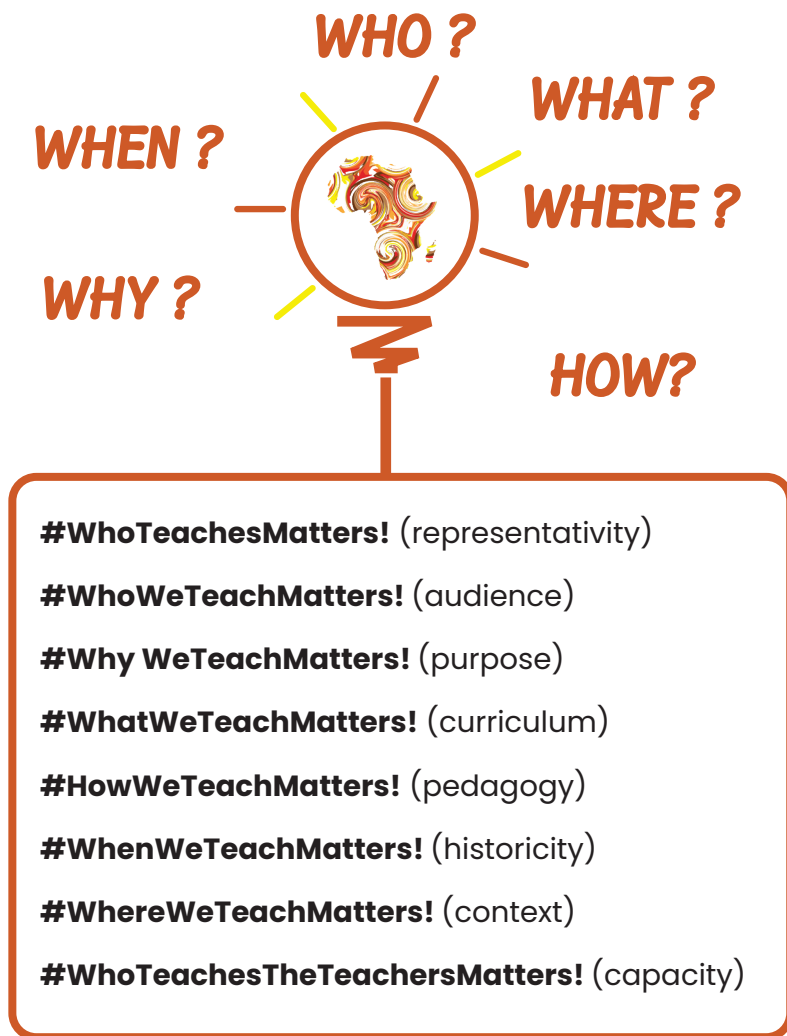


Figure 65 Focal areas for Contextualised Teaching

These hashtags or foci, emergent through each phase of the project, signal what we consider(ed) to be important components if professional development is to be critical and responsive to specific contexts. Through NATHEP as well as this book, we were able to identify and analyse what is needed for moving into a new phase of academic staff development nationally. In relation to the project's aims and goals for induction, we assert that the process must be managed with care, as this is a critical transition for newcomers into HE. By being responsive and not generic in their enactment, we assert that professional development programmes (PDPs) that aim for transformations across systems and not just in individuals, need to recognise that both the parts and the people are implicated and responsible, if real change is to occur.

While all the hashtags above are salient and have been discussed in various ways throughout the book, the focus in this meta-reflection on the espoused and real achievements of the project is two hashtags namely, *#WhereWeTeachMatters!* (context) and *#WhoTeachesTheTeachersMatters!* (capacity). The emphasis on these two key themes in this chapter is to highlight links with the project aims, but in no way reduce or negate the importance and relevance of the full list of hashtags or themes identified above.

#WhereWeTeachMatters! (context)

Throughout the project and the book, we have emphasised the importance of context. In higher education (HE) globally and locally, it is now a well-known refrain that context matters. In the context of decolonisation in Africa, this refocus is acutely important as we need to find a voice that articulates the needs of this context to respond with interventions that are relevant and contextualised. When we delve deeper into the issue of context, we see that it is not merely geographical or physical. Context includes aspects of epistemology, knowledge generation and a sense of being, belonging and inclusion. These textures (nuances, granularity, specificities) are critical to understanding nuance in the context. When we can weave the texture into the context to bring about meaningful change, we are signalling that the combination of context and texture, namely "contexture", is important in bringing different components together, to be viewed holistically (Warren, 2019). By making explicit the act, process, or manner of weaving parts into a whole, contexture allows the invisible to be seen, the silent to be heard and the tacit to become explicit. In NATHEP, contexture mattered not just as time and space capsules or in the geography and locale of universities and their induction programmes, but through the myriad layers and levels of texture that were implicit in the university classrooms that academics and staff developers had to navigate. In NATHEP, contexture surfaced in different ways. As a project located in a specific locale (described in detail in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3), NATHEP views the Global

South as an important locus of enunciation, to imbue professional development practices with ways to be relevant, responsive, current and contextual in their offerings. Context matters in terms of who is doing the “speaking” and the place from which these interlocutors challenge the uncritical reproduction of the Eurocentric canon in curriculum and pedagogy (Dussel, 2011). The term Global South used euphemistically to replace the negative connotations associated with “development” discourse, which in turn is linked to a deficit notion of not matching up to the northern benchmarks set by the USA, UK and other economically powerful nations, is a context we claim as a site of struggle on many levels. Reclaiming a Global South location for NATHEP and PDP in general is not only a matter of geography but a recognition of the biographies of real people who live, work, thrive and struggle in these contexts.

Biography is as important as geography as it foregrounds the positionality and representation of who teaches, which matters almost as much as our consideration of what, how, why and where we teach. These nuances enrich the ways in which teaching and learning agents interact in the university classroom. Historically, we have taught in an alienating and marginalising curriculum context which uses examples and cases that South African students struggle to identify with. Being a university teacher in Africa must mean something, least of all that the content used to teach concepts and frameworks draws richly on what it means to be an African, in relation to the world. Situating Africa as the centre of epistemic diversity is an important positioning that teachers need to understand.

Another element of contexture is that new academics are transitioning into a higher education that is more complex and textured than even 10 years ago. The texture of historical inequality for example, might mean that the progress of African and women staff and students, masked by differentials in their distribution across institutions, qualification levels and academic programmes, is stymied. The intersections between gender, age, class and race are significant in opening up or shutting down opportunities to advance and thrive in HE. In some universities, where the agenda of neoliberalism, through proliferation of research projects, funding, funders, policies, etc., have taken hold, many mechanisms exist that perpetuate the disparity between who is at the centre and who is left at the margins. If induction programmes do not enable new academics to engage with the specificities of their context, so that they can move from the margins to the centre by making informed choices about what and how they teach, newcomers have little control over how they can influence student learning and success, productively.

New academics who have to exercise their agency in meaningful ways to achieve success and to respond to context, must be made aware of how to mediate their contexts. They must be supported to make informed choices based on a solid understanding of what it means to engage in a complex South African tertiary

sector that is trying to balance its social and epistemic role and purpose in relation to students' needs. NATHEP found that when staff developers are capacitated to enable new academics to take on the roles of research, teaching, social responsiveness, leadership, community engagement and knowledge production in ways that are generative and purposeful, this strengthens HE practice and amplifies the Global South voice in the field of pedagogical knowledge and practices. This opens up possibilities to reimagine a decolonial university that can advance epistemic plurality and ontological depth of all people.

Although NATHEP was designed to respond to systemic challenges by focusing on context and textures, it was a relatively small intervention (10 universities/20 staff developers). As such it does not claim to be the answer to all professional development challenges. It provides an exemplar of what is possible if we apply ourselves to critical professional development in the ways NATHEP did. We think that even as a small intervention, NATHEP has surfaced insights that can be extrapolated and generalised for wider use. Being able to theorise, critique and customise induction for different contexts has led our participants to engage in more rigorous and relevant practice. This hopefully has an expansive impact for all.

#WhoTeachesTheTeachersMatters! (capacity)

NATHEP was designed to support those who “teach the teachers”, in other words, academic staff developers. By strengthening the professional development practices of staff developers who in turn professionally support new academics to teach in inclusive, socially just and transformative ways, the whole system is expanded and capacitated. Professional staff developers therefore need to have a thorough understanding of new academics and their challenges to plan effective induction programmes that address their needs. For academics to be effective change agents in teaching and learning, they must have changed themselves, from states of ignorance and disbelief to a space of understanding the challenges of contemporary HE. They need to be exposed to a range of cognitive, affective, epistemological and ontological theories, stances, frameworks and positions that challenge and develop who they are and who they need to be in the current context. The ultimate beneficiary is the student, who is at the receiving end of new academics' teaching approaches and methods.

Academic staff development work however is not always explicitly acknowledged by universities as an important lever for transformation. This significantly influences the way academic/professional developers induct and support new academics into a diverse, complex and contested spaces as they are themselves in need of transformative and critical processes that extend them beyond their traditional “toolkit”. Academic staff and professional developers also need opportunities to enable them to facilitate professional development programmes in ways that

are relevant, contextualised and cognisant of historical legacies. Offering levels of support and enhancement to professional developers means that those who support academics are also supported in ways that expand their own repertoire. This expansion of professional developers aimed at inducting new academics through increased and concerted levels of awareness of what is needed for undergraduate and postgraduate levels, is at the heart of NATHEP and its goals.

Through the creation of a national, collaborative project to theorise an approach and orientation to induction practices for new academics, NATHEP was able to strengthen staff developers' ability to conceptualise, convene, implement and evaluate contextualised, meaningful and relevant (not generic) induction programmes for new academics at their universities. Staff development practitioners were supported to interrogate their historical university contexts and to exercise their agency by engaging, troubling and unsettling their existing knowledge in relevant and generative ways to create inclusive and participatory teaching and learning experiences. In NATHEP, 20 staff developers were required to prepare new induction programmes that responded to their universities' needs, but they needed to do that from a position of knowledge and understanding of how structures and discourses, often taken for granted, still drive and influence outcomes that cause HE to remain in a cycle of homeostasis and not change.

Key to NATHEP was a raised awareness among project participants about the importance of the link between context, approaches to teaching and the ways students learn. This has been the purview and focus of professional developers working with academics to professionalise their roles generally. Effective student learning and success require a scholarly, critical, contextualised and professional approach to teaching (Behari-Leak, 2017) which if not done carefully, could lead new academics to resort to a "common sense" (Quinn & Vorster, 2015) or a "teach-like-I-was-taught" approach (Oleson & Hora, 2014). This compromises the quality of teaching for undergraduate and postgraduate student learning and affects throughput rates. How new university teachers are prepared for teaching, especially those with no prior experience in HE, is critical to their sense of being and belonging in the academy, which is in turn reflected in how they engage with the social inclusion of students and social justice.

DHET recognised the need for a staff capacity-building intervention in the national landscape to strengthen teaching, learning and curriculum in the sector. From the DHET's perspective, this gap needed to be bridged. NATHEP was able to do this through its focus on the professional development of academic staff developers, via an intervention that is responsive to current institutional, regional and national challenges. NATHEP affirms that given high student dropout and low throughput rates, responsive pedagogy is a necessity and not a choice (DHET, 2018).

NATHEP shaping the approach to professional development programmes

At many universities in this project, the induction programmes of new academics initially had a strong HR focus, with the goal of introducing newcomers to the institution's services and offerings and assimilating them into the academic workforce. This was at the expense in some cases of an orientation to responsive teaching and learning strategies, developing relevant scholarship of teaching agendas and engaging with the socio-cultural ethos to find one's place at the university. While the HR induction is important in its own right, it would be remiss if we underestimated the importance of a proper and formal induction programme for new academics as university teachers, to prepare them to respond to the historical challenges of apartheid, transformation and decolonisation, as well as more recent and immediate demands in context such as understanding different students and their needs, among others. New academics who may not have an understanding of this context need to be inducted into the sector in more deliberate ways than before through relevant professional development programmes.

Based on the outcomes of the project, we argue for critical professional development (CPD) (discussed in Chapter 4) to be embraced as a credible approach to professional development practices such as induction. To be critical (in a constructive way) is to explore and disrupt, where necessary, the beliefs, values and attitudes held by university staff – including staff developers – related to how they conceptualise and enact induction programmes in their specific contexts. How teaching and learning are positioned at a university makes a huge difference to the uptake and success of professional development programmes as well as to the quality of teaching and learning across disciplinary domains. To have a substantial effect on student throughput via the relevant and purposeful induction of new academics, each university must counteract the idea that induction is a transactional practice (and not a scholarly one).

NATHEP foregrounds the need for critical professional development programmes to be theorised and conceptualised using research and scholarship in the field of higher education studies. The project's theoretical framing draws on critical realism to enable the understanding that induction practices in universities are influenced by underlying mechanisms outside the control of the academic developers who facilitate these programmes. The focus of CR on ontology was a fitting lens for NATHEP as it provides a support for understanding, identifying and resolving social problems at their root causes by going below the surface to uncover the causal mechanisms that influence induction practices in institutions of higher education. Uncovering these generative mechanisms, and making them explicit, enabled academic staff developers to explore conditions that give rise to certain responses

in their institutions, account for them and effect changes where these were needed. A huge elaboration in the system through NATHEP has been the acknowledgement that professional development programmes, especially for new academics, need to adopt critical perspectives, so that staff development interventions such as induction programmes can be reflexively and responsively designed to address specific concerns in HE. Undertaking the NATHEP project through this theoretical lens enabled academic staff developers to engage with concrete courses of mediation by reflecting on their concerns in relation to higher education, while immersing their sense of self and performative achievement in their teaching contexts to develop contextually relevant inductions at their institutions.

Linked to the advancement of CPD, NATHEP believes in the shaping of critical agency (Francis & Le Roux, 2012; Postma, 2015) which involves individuals' capacity to critically engage with social structures, particularly systems of oppression, and act towards change (see Chapter 2). Data from the NATHEP project and case studies suggest that institutions need to provide critical professional development offerings that challenge the trope that "anyone can teach". Through this approach, capacity can be built and strengthened to support student success across the sector by shaping critical agency and critical agents. Attention to a well-capacitated teaching force is timeous and is linked to other initiatives on throughput rates, attrition, student success and high staff turnover. Critical to this is the issue of how curricula, pedagogy and assessment are conceptualised and actualised at different institutional sites by new academics as well as established ones. If not done well, this gap in professional induction has significant consequences for newcomers regarding their capacity to relate to students' learning needs in their classrooms and how they approach their own academic work, especially if they are first-time employees at a university.

Through NATHEP, we explored the objective structural domains at universities through departments, faculties, policies, and committees, as well as through cultural powers, embedded in the ideational system of teaching discourses prevalent. We noted how these aspects shape agency differently and how these are reflexively mediated by staff developers through their professional development practices with difficulty. The interplay between structure and culture in situational contexts and how these relate to institutional concerns across the case studies show how strongly these influences impact socially inclusive practices nationally.

With the focus on curriculum change at many universities, many academics are now engaged in a deep process of reflecting, reframing and reconstructing the ways they have understood historical and traditional teaching and learning practices, among other concerns. Even though AD started as a way to support mainly black students to succeed at university, AD has relied to a large extent on borrowed frames and theories from the Global North that do not always suit our context or

reality. This sometimes reduces the importance of drawing on context to respond to very complex issues in our context, such as poverty, race, class, inequality. Given the challenges posed by students in the 2015–16 period, the calls for a decolonial curriculum and pedagogy to address the experiences of mainly black students, who still feel alienated, marginalised and invisible at the university, offer additional challenges that NATHEP had to address. For example, the need to understand AD from a Global South nexus became important in shaping contextualised and critical professional development interventions. Given the unequal distribution of material resources and human capacity across the HE sector, many AD centres and teaching and learning units are differentially resourced, with practitioners themselves entering AD from an eclectic range of disciplinary fields (Mathieson, 2011). Many academic developers have been prepared for their roles informally, by learning “on the job”. It is only recently that the uptake of postgraduate diplomas for academic developers has increased. This results in a very wide range of competing and sometimes contradictory conceptualisations of what it means to be an academic or academic developer in HE today.

By sharing knowledge of the different models of induction programmes suited to different socio-academic contexts, we highlighted the importance of reflexivity and how these enabled or constrained different possibilities for PDPs and new academic agency. In NATHEP, we were engaged in reflexive practices through our facilitation, debriefing and research endeavours. We were acutely aware of the need for internal conversations (Archer, 2000) to become explicit for the benefit of all. At all stages participants had to justify their choices and present plausible rationales for their specific interventions.

In generating a unique set of lenses emanating from the insights of NATHEP, we are mindful that these perspectives are not the solution or panacea to current challenges. What they offer is a way to make our current practices more conscious of and awake to the onto-epistemic gaps that we inherited from colonial higher education. To delink from traditional induction practices and colonial pedagogical practices, we need to recognise the relationship between the self and the other and how this relationship, if understood in its full ontological depth, can shape professional development to respond to wounds of alienation, invisibility and marginalisation. A decoupling from past shackles that inhibit progress is necessary for HE advancement in an unknown and uncertain future.

NATHEP’s main challenges

The COVID-19 pandemic proved to be the greatest challenge for the project. The pandemic called for an agile and adaptive approach, warranting a move to online modes of engaging. Even though the NATHEP project was implemented before the pandemic and continued despite the challenges of the pandemic, the move to

online modes and the national protocols attached to different COVID-19 waves, meant that many planned activities could not take place in face-to-face (F2F) mode in 2020 and 2021. University partners had various challenges in terms of data connectivity, time challenges, wellbeing etc. Despite these adversities, the NATHEP administration and SC supported each participant to participate as fully as they could, in online workshops and seminars. Admin support was critical to the smooth operation of an online programme and all logistics involved, such as setting up Zoom meetings, were handled well. Although it was very difficult to work in the online space, strategies were put in place to circumvent this, to provide more focused input outside of the main workshops, and to provide support where needed to all participants. We provided scaffolding and additional sessions where partner universities were struggling. Additional writing support was offered in smaller groups and individual consultations. The use of clusters and mentors ensured that smaller groups were in contact with a SC member to work more closely in between the main workshops. Through these efforts, project partners and participants remained focused on the production and creation of case studies that document their contextualised models in their specific locales and spaces.

In online mode it was difficult to replicate the kinds of energy we enjoyed in the first two years of the project, as the online mode is time-intensive and demanding on attention levels. The F2F mode would have allowed for a more natural engagement and authentic sharing of the substantive content and reflective discussions that were needed. In addition, the pandemic has prevented NATHEP from achieving some of its goals and outputs as planned. Constraints of only having online meetings, data connectivity issues, etc. disrupted the implementation of each university's induction models. Despite this, significant strides were made to ensure that the customised models of induction were guided by the overarching research question and the axiological stance, namely, to focus on our location in the Global South, our context in Africa and the imperative to use a social justice lens.

Despite the COVID-19 constraints, the planned activities were successfully adapted to the challenging circumstances, and we managed to achieve the project outcomes regarding the implementation of new induction programmes for new academics at differentiated institutions. The core work in 2022 focused on converting these models for induction into institutional case studies as per the UCDG plan. The goal is to increase national dialogue and collaboration with stakeholders through issues raised through the case studies. Significant strides have been made to ensure that the customised induction models that have been created are guided by the overarching research question, to focus on our location in Africa using a social-justice lens.

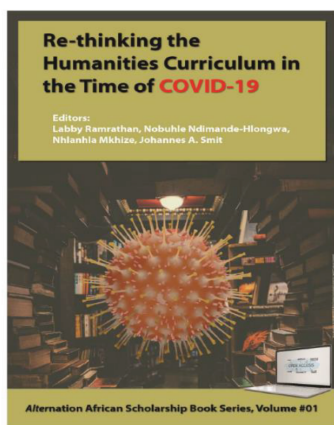
NATHEP's main successes

NATHEP focused on developing a national orientation to induction practices and principles across the sector. Twenty academic staff developers from 10 universities were supported to initiate and convene well-theorised and conceptualised induction programmes in their institutional contexts, to address historical and systemic challenges, and to contribute to the transformation of higher education. Using Roy Bhaskar's critical realism as meta-theoretical framing and Margaret Archer's social realist theory, this book offers a theorised account of how academic staff developers, in devising models of induction practice for new academics at their universities, engaged with enabling and constraining conditions at institutional, faculty, departmental and university classroom levels. Through an analysis of institutional case studies, this project explores a range of agential choices exercised by staff developers to conceptualise and contextualise induction programmes, relative to how they, as well as their new academics, mediate contested spaces. A nuanced social and critical account of the material, ideational and agential conditions in HE shows that the courses of action taken by new academics are driven through their concerns, commitments and projects in higher education. A further aim of this project was to see if academic staff developers would be driven by corresponding but different concerns and commitments.

To this end, the creation of a framework to infuse criticality into professional development practices was a highlight of NATHEP's scholarly work. The CRITicAL Framework is offered as the project's contribution to knowledge generation. Via this heuristic, which was used to embed relevant and contextual practices and values into otherwise generic induction programmes, NATHEP was able to reorientate staff developers and their institutions to their ethical obligation to introduce newcomers to the sector and their institutions in ways that could really help them to belong. Academic developers who participated in NATHEP evaluated the project positively. Comments garnered from sessions included the following:

"What I gained from the presentation was in whatever we do there is need to understand the natural and social world"; "I gained information especially about some obstacles to implementing the new conceptualised induction and possible ways of overcoming them"; and "I find the themes suggested to problematise our induction programme useful and will always use them when we evaluate our programme".

Through a collaborative, consultative and inclusive methodology, and based on a cascading model of staff development, NATHEP prepared staff development practitioners to exercise their agency by engaging with knowledge in relevant and generative ways to create inclusive and participatory teaching and learning experiences that are responsive to institutional, regional and national challenges.



A Deep Dive into Curriculum Complexities in the Time of COVID-19

Kasturi Behari-Leak

ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9744-510X>

Rieta Ganas

ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9633-3675>

Nalini Chitanand

ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3017-6405>

Siya Sabata

ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4775-0450>

Noluthando Toni

ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1328-9363>



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Pedagogies for critical agency:
Portals to alternative futures

Rieta Ganas¹, Kasturi Behari-Leak², Nalini Chitanand³, and Siya Sabata⁴
¹University of the Witwatersrand
²University of Cape Town
³Durban University of Technology
⁴Cape Peninsula University of Technology
^{*}Corresponding Author: rieta.ganas@wits.ac.za

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Abstract

'Pedagogies in context' are explored through a national project working with academic staff developers and new academics' induction and transitioning into higher education. Causal-layered analysis is used to explore the interplay between academic staff, institutional

Figure 66 NATHEP's Scholarly Outputs

As we reach the conclusion of this book and the NATHEP journey, we sincerely hope that the insights shared in this book will serve as a source of inspiration, knowledge and application for all professional developers wanting to shift into being critical agents for change in HE, here and beyond. It is through meaningful reflection that we contribute to collective understanding and transformation of the parts and the people.

The true impact of NATHEP and this book lies in how the concepts and applications resonate with and inspire change in readers and practitioners. If this book challenges perspectives, provokes thoughtful discussions, and fosters growth both personally and collectively, our intention has been realised. By encouraging a deeper understanding of the world, we trust that the journey within these pages will leave a lasting, positive mark on all who engage with it.