

Creating networks of productivity and the third innovation space in education



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My contribution has been influenced by previous research on complexities of organisations¹ where I examined change management within an educational setting. That research showed unequivocally that the transformation of education in South Africa was a complex exercise. But more importantly it showed that unless the public service, especially the education sector, could embrace networks of productivity, many education departments will continue to be overwhelmed by the challenges of transformation. Networks of productivity are networks that are driven by knowledge and expertise whose purpose is to advance certain solutions at a given point in time. They are fluid and they shift constantly, depending on the challenges and needs at stake. The members are drawn across fields and areas of expertise and they are not bound to limited group interests but have a broader desire to advance society. They are thus externally focused and think more in terms of societal transformation, advancement and sustainability.

Again one is influenced by thoughts borrowed from organisational life cycles and change, which inform us that organisations progress in their development through different stages. For instance, in the birth stage they require creativity as they are driven by extensive growth. However, as they mature they tend to replace creativity with maintenance and stability. Depending on how they are led and managed from that point on, they could either inject new forms of creativity or they could easily die. While very few bureaucracies die, they do tend to take a different shape and form post-maturity, often becoming spaces of power struggles that make them toxic spaces to work in. In the process they become synonymous with poor productivity, inertia and poor performance. Strong leadership is required to continuously reignite new patterns of learning and growth that will see more being done effectively and efficiently. Here I will examine briefly the lessons learnt in the past fifteen years. My reflections are dominated by my previous work at the Graduate School of Public and Development Management (P&DM) and are thus biased towards public sector reforms in general rather than any specificity in education. Equally I want to explore possibilities for a new wave of transformation and change.

Reflecting on the past

The education context, like its public sector counterparts, has seen waves of reform that can be categorised into three significant eras. The first is the 1994-1997 period of negotiated settlement which emphasised the broader values of access, equity and redress. This era had a connecting theme of reconciliation and thus emphasised inclusivity and democratisation of work places. This in turn saw the public office embrace both racial and gender diversity. Encompassing this was the emergence of new paradigms and new ways of doing things, and as such, the context allowed the entrepreneurial spirit to emerge and visionaries dominated the intellectual spaces with their grand ideas that swung between idealism and anticipated reality. In this process, many policies came to life through robust debates that saw new ideas coexist with defended interests. At that point there was little concern about the likely consequences and challenges that could emerge as a result of newly adopted ideas. The energy was to create, craft and shape.

Undoubtedly, this has had advantages for South Africa's modernisation process as it could easily access the best technologies and the best ideas in the shortest time possible. What could have taken decades to shape was now fast-tracked by the dotcom revolution, and the resulting internationally and locally mobile intellectual capacity.

Of course such changes happened in the context of globalisation was also gaining momentum. While it was difficult to determine what it might entail, it was nonetheless a force to reckon with. The point is that as South Africa was defining its new democratic chapter, the rest of the world was shifting its definitions of world politics, co-operation and parameters. Accompanied by the explosion of information technology, the world of knowledge and access to information debates and discussions was reduced to the click of a button. Undoubtedly, this has had advantages for South Africa's modernisation process as it could easily access the best technologies and the best ideas in the shortest time possible. What could have taken

decades to shape was now fast-tracked by the dotcom revolution, and the resulting internationally and locally mobile intellectual capacity. Of course, the early 1990s passed as quickly as they had ushered us into a new world of democratisation.

The second phase which emerged in the late 1990s had a different emphasis, namely implementation. Coincidentally, the pressures for implementation came with the changes in the political office. Pretoria as the centre of administrative power was to usher in a new era where visionaries were to give space to technocrats. The implementation process required new sets of skills and competencies. Equally, the global debates on public sector reform were bound to the 3 Es – building efficient, effective and economical states. The subsequent years thus became more challenging than the earlier dream years, as design became more complex. The South African state at this stage was influenced by various philosophies but one can argue that the design template favoured technical rationality and efficiency.

Unlike the earlier transformation that focused on reconciliation and integration, the economy became the centre of reform. Without dwelling on the nature and shape of such reforms, as these are well-known, what is noticeable about this period is that the technical efficiency approach dominated the planning and implementation in many organisations. It became almost uncontested that the understanding and knowledge of financial disciplines was central to the management of organisational productivity and performance. While this saw the rise of accountants as the new centres of power in organisations, the broader senior management remained largely in the hands of politicized bureaucrats whose interests were diverse and not necessarily entrenched in the efficiency paradigms. Within such organisational contestations, management became a subject of internal struggles between multi-interests that were both dispersed within and external to the organisation.

In spite of such internal struggles, all public organisations, including education, were expected to manage in compliance with the Public Management Financial Management Act (PMFA) (1999) and the Auditor General regulations stipulated in the same Act. Fundamentally the PMFA called for financial control and accountability. While this improved reporting, it is questionable if it made any qualitative improvements in the way organisations performed in terms of service

delivery. What did become clear, however, was that it introduced a new obsession with 'clean audits'. Clean audits as such were now the new indicator for managerial competency and success, even though such audits indicated little about how organisations were led or their management culture. But more importantly, this financial approach, one argues, was highly influential around who would be employed and where, especially at the executive levels. The emerging pattern was that managerial competence took precedence over sectoral expertise and knowledge. This was to be a huge shock to known employment traditions as managerial experience then determined professional opportunities and mobility.

Furthermore, the drive for modernisation showed that public entities were at various and diverse stages of development; and while some could fit well into the dot.com age, others needed basic infrastructure to support the daily administration of rural schools.

Education was no exception, and was challenged to conform to the broad public sector reforms of financial accountability and performance management. Such conformity had to work in conjunction with sectoral expectations of advancing the educational goals. For some education departments to manage such a dichotomy became a call for confusion, as officials had to learn quickly to respond to multi-faceted constituencies of power, authority and needs. As a result the translation of the 3Es became even more complex for some systems due to the extended rural challenges that were characterised by poverty and lack of human and financial resources.

Overall, the era brought high levels of modernisation of state institutions, especially in relation to new managerial and financial technologies. But with scrutiny it became clear that South African organisations were more complex than had previously been realised and such complexities varied with the context. The more rural the environment, the less likely it was to respond to generic managerial and financial principles. Furthermore, the drive for modernisation showed that public entities were at various and diverse stages of

development; and while some could fit well into the dot.com age, others needed basic infrastructure to support the daily administration of rural schools.

The third phase, following the 2007 Polokwane conference, is still a new phase. It comes at a very challenging period globally due to the economic crisis, where the prosperity of the past decades has been replaced with a global recession and financial downturns. The collapse of the global economy has put a strain on all state administration worldwide. Expenditure has been drastically curtailed, and the focus has been on financial bailouts to help stimulate economic growth. Despite such a gloomy picture, the positive message in South Africa is that the new government has committed to improve the social sector, of which education is identified as one of the priorities.

Theoretically, the new government has adopted the notion of a developmental state. While the broad picture of what this means in reality is still being crafted the observations are that there will be very little to change administratively, as there is still a call for technical, financial and managerial solutions to service delivery problems. The question is: what is the alternative, if any? While answers are not easy to come by, it may be helpful to focus on two areas, namely (a) the creation of networks of productivity and collaborative practices mentioned earlier; and (b) the development of a creative and innovative third space for better transformation and change.

Creating networks of productivity and collaborative practices

One of the limiting factors in educational transformation to date is the way human capital is arranged in many organisations. For reasons embedded in our historical change, human capital tends to behave in various fragmented ways in South Africa. Fundamentally, the politics of change are well understood, but working in relational and productive ways is still a point in the transition that presents challenges, and resembles a puzzle to be solved. As a result, leadership in public and private entities tends to focus on technology, new managerial practices and resources as answers to service delivery and performance. These elements undoubtedly also add value, but unless we begin to explore the nature of human capital in our organisations there is very little that technology and resources will do. The point is that organisations function beyond technical rationality. They are a product of various

political, social and cultural networks of relations that exist and which are defined by various interests and ideologies that reside internal and external to the organisation.

For instance, it is important that people in organisations begin to function outside their limited and possibly saturated familiar network zones which endorse known cultural, social, political and economic patterns.

Besides, the peculiar nature of South Africa's transition has seen new organisational designs that are fundamentally informed by bonded political, ethnic, racial and genderised networks that tend to be survivalist, exclusive and interest-oriented. Such interests tend to be individualistic and turf-based with very little focus on the organisation itself. There are, of course, many reasons that can account for this, including management and political discourses that have championed the value of the individual beyond the big picture. Interestingly, such values seem detrimental in spaces of rapid change and transitions, as they tend to gravitate into pockets of self-interest and survival. In turn they become counterproductive to the change discourses that count on the energy of extended coalitions of co-operation and collaboration. To create a different culture and approach to productivity and performance, it is important therefore to examine these counter-productive tendencies that are short-sighted and survivalist in nature and explore seeds of growth that will enhance a new paradigm shift. For instance, it is important that people in organisations begin to function outside their limited and possibly saturated familiar network zones which endorse known cultural, social, political and economic patterns.

Of course, productive networks of practice will require open networked organisations that are able to trust the unknown and the unfamiliar. They require what Putnam (2007) calls the 'bridging'social capital which is the ability to link beyond the known groups. Bonded networks today identify the characteristic of many organisations. While so, Antcliff, Saundry and Stuart (2007) argue that while bonding capital is good for getting by, it is the bridging capital that

is necessary for getting ahead. The question is: To what extent is the education sector, its schools and its bureaucracies ready to extend their bridging capital to enhance the quality of work they do? The key issue here is that global changes necessitate new ways of thinking and bonded capital will contribute very little to South Africa's development. It is likely that the bridging of capital based on extended networks of knowledge and expertise may add more value to change. This is not new, and has been seen in the NEPI era and in the early vibrant educational policy think tanks that were a phenomenon of the early 1990s. To revive these productive spaces calls for new paradigms in education that will use the lessons of the past to create new knowledge that will promote genuine transformation.

The development of an innovative third space

The experiences of the past decade show that the state and the private sector have played a significant role in shaping the agenda for development in South Africa even though there were different areas of emphasis. For instance, the state played a lead role in designing new policies, rules and regulations. Equally the private sector and its conglomerate of industries saw the development of new business initiatives and sectors like the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) sector. The new democracy as such provided opportunities for growth and creativity across sectors. Since the mid 2000s, there has been a stronger focus on improving efficiency, on stabilisation and maintenance than on creativity.

While maintenance has played an important role, the nature of challenges that are presently experienced in education require constant creativity. Education to date still struggles to improve the quality of instruction in the classroom, let alone creating access for many marginalized communities. If education has to see any significant change, it is important that new players come to the fore not to join the two sectors but to create a new and third space of engagement and development. This is a space for new visions and innovations to educational challenges. It is a space for creative solutions, which will advance new ways of thinking and implementation of policies. Ideally, for this third space to find ground it has to be solutions-based and advance the development of society in various ways. Part of this may mean advancing entrepreneurial thinking in education at different levels. To date there is little evidence of this. Instead there

is a high reliance on the state to provide solutions, something that has proved to be beyond its current capacity. While one cannot dictate the shape of the third space, it is necessary that it is developed and nurtured as it has the capability to unleash new talent that may respond rapidly to both the local and global needs in education.

The point is that to date education has advanced way beyond the classroom and the curriculum, as we know it. Many children, especially in South Africa's modernised cities hardly depend on the teacher for new knowledge and information. Rather the world of information technology has advanced to another space of learning where information is now accessible with the click of the mouse. The new world of dot.coms, Google, Facebook and Twitter has broadened learning beyond the traditional spaces of the classroom. Interestingly these new ventures in technology are dominated by generation Y, which is the young people aged thirty and under. The question then is: to what extent is education leveraging on such platforms to extend coverage and access in education. Of course one knows that the technological advancements mentioned here signify a quality of life that remains but a dream in rural and farm schools and hence the third space needs to think creatively and make such dreams a reality.

For instance, it maybe useful to ask questions like these:

- (a) what is the nature of available technologies that can be adapted to advance learning in rural and farm schools?
- (b) what other modes of curriculum delivery are scalable and cost-effective, and can extend access and quality of learning in the context of limited resources and capacity?

- (c) what other forms of schools need to be created to advance other areas of educational development and progress in South Africa?

Again it is about thinking outside the box and looking for new ideas that challenge known and familiar patterns.

To date the complexity of the South African education system with its diverse and challenging topography requires innovation that will address its unique terrains. To rely on a centrally designed single model approach is limiting and runs counter to change and transformation.

To date progressive societies and industries have widened their doors to include other players. Civil society is becoming more active in finding solutions for different and complex challenges that are in place. For instance, currently in management and business studies social entrepreneurship has become the new value concept aimed to advance value-driven solutions to societal and business challenges. Without reducing this to corporate social investment (CSI) as it goes way beyond that, it is refreshing to see a global movement in business studies that advances a different set of values grounded in sustainability and inclusivity. As a result it is no surprise that health and education have become part of business interests.

The key is to develop breakthrough thinking and ideas that will propel new growth and transformation of society. South Africa has had similar traditions of breakthrough thinking especially pre-and post-1994 elections. In the context of the global need for fresh solutions it is an important time to reawaken such talent, if not for South Africa then for the wider world.

NOTES:

- 1 Ngoma, W (2007) Complexities of Organisational Change: The case of the Eastern Cape Department of Education. Unpublished PhD. Johannesburg: University of the Witwatersrand.

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