

November – 2023

Book Review: Co-teaching and Co-research in Contexts of Inequality: Using Networked Learning to Connect Africa and the World

Editors: Phindile Zifikile Shangase, Daniela Gachago, and Eunice Ndeto Ivala (Vernon Press, 2023, xxxvi+275 pages).
<https://vernonpress.com/book/1767>

Reviewed by: Tony Carr, Centre for Innovation in Learning and Teaching, Centre for Higher Education Development, University of Cape Town, South Africa

Introduction

This book seeks to address the paucity of literature about networked co-teaching and co-learning in the contexts of inequality, and specifically in the African contexts, including cross-continental collaborations. In doing so, it also considers the challenges of co-researching. The call for chapters was circulated just before the COVID-19 pandemic, and the chapters were written at the height of the pandemic. Three of the chapters explicitly consider the design of responses to the pandemic.

The editors describe co-teaching and co-research as “teaching and research that connects educators and learners across different institutions and different contexts, be it across South Africa, Africa, or the world” (p. 1). One of the key insights shared by the editors and several of the authors is the critical importance of human connection and relationship building to successful co-teaching, co-learning, and co-researching. Another interesting feature of the book is the thread of digital storytelling which runs through many of the chapters.

The authors present a rich selection of “compelling cases for engaging in co-teaching and/or co-researching to advance more socially just, supportive, and mutually favourable practices in HE, among local and international academics and their students as well as practitioners” (p. xxxv). The editors are based in three South African universities with very different histories, cultures, and resourcing, and the international group of over 40 authors comes from Australia, Brazil, Egypt, Kenya, New Zealand, South Africa, Uganda, the United States, and the United Kingdom. I have known of the excellent and pathbreaking work of many of the authors for several years through the e/merge online conferences and the e/merge Africa professional development network. I believe this provides me with useful knowledge of the context of many of the authors (as well as a small bias in their favour). The text will be of particular relevance to colleagues interested in teaching, learning, and research collaborations in contexts of inequality due to the “cornucopia of international, transcontinental, pan-African, inter-institutional, institutional, and university-industry cases” (p. xxxv) and theoretical frameworks used by the authors.

Organization/Structure

After the foreword by Cheryl Hodgkinson-Williams and the introduction by the editors, the book has two sections. I will describe these in turn and spotlight three chapters along the way to give a sense of the range of contexts and theoretical framings.

Section 1, entitled “Connecting Africa through Co-teaching and Co-research,” consists of six chapters focused on co-teaching, co-learning, and co-research in African contexts. Five of these chapters are based in higher education, including one that features university-industry collaboration for innovation and transformation in architecture education. One of these chapters is dedicated to a thorough literature review of the use of technology in co-researching higher education. The sixth chapter features co-research and co-teaching in community-based adult education.

“Enabling Inter-institutional Co-design and Co-facilitation of a Postgraduate Diploma Module in Educational Technology: Uncovering Sites of Struggle, Negotiation, and Accommodation among Course Facilitators” (Chapter 2) is by Sonja Strydom, Simone Titus, Faiq Waghid, and Daniela Gachago from the four universities in the Western Cape in South Africa. Margaret Archer’s analytical framework of structure, culture, and agency was used to analyse the written reflections of facilitators and transcripts of their reflective conversations about negotiating the challenges faced in developing a learning-centred curriculum for students from all four institutions, given inequalities between the institutions and their student bodies. The success of the collaboration by the diverse team required “a reflective process of negotiation” (p. 33) and a conscious effort to provide “support for the less powerful, or previously less included voices, whether those of facilitators or participants” (p. 32).

“Exploiting Technologies in Networked Designing, Training, and Research Engagement in African Universities: A Case of the Partnership for African Social and Governance Research” (Chapter 6) was written by Pauline Ngimwa of the Partnership for African Social and Governance Research (PASGR), Kenya, Proscovia Ssentamu from the Ugandan Management Institute, and Connie Nshemereirwe from Actualise Africa, Uganda. This chapter explores the use of technologies “to link African and international scholars in public policy and research capacity building” (p. 90) and discusses challenges faced in “connecting virtually on various designing, training, and research projects across different contexts, cultures, and technological capacities, and the strategies utilised in mitigating the attendant intricacies” (p. 90). Three key lessons from the analysis which drew on Bower’s affordance analysis methodology and Sharples’ generative framework are the advantages of working with technologies already in use by learners and teachers; the capacity building requirements and processes for effective technology integration; and that “training opportunities, staff exchange, and mobility opportunities are powerful motivators in supporting growth and developing a sense of ownership” (p. 105) in online communities of practice.

The six chapters in Section 2 entitled “Connecting Africa and the World through Co-teaching and Co-research” focus on collaborations between African institutions and partners in other continents, and foreground power dynamics resulting from inequality. While most of these chapters feature collaborations based in African higher education, one chapter zooms in on a case of co-creation of social change in Kenya which used mobile technologies for digital storytelling. Another chapter in Section 2 considers how to optimise online cross-cultural research collaboration.

In “Participatory Action Research in Digital Storytelling: Using Mobile Technology to Co-create Social Change in Kenya” (Chapter 12), Antonia Liguori, Melaneia Warwick, and Michael Wilson from

Loughborough University, United Kingdom, in partnership with Daniel Onyango from Hope Raisers, Kenya, reflect on the process and outcomes of the “partnership between Hope Raisers, a youth-led NGO based in Korogocho slum in Nairobi, Kenya, and the Storytelling Academy at Loughborough University” (p. 221) in the UK to use digital storytelling as “a tool for participatory action research (PAR)” (p. 221) to support the development of community-led solutions to the challenges faced by a community living in a slum next to a large dumpsite. The project required “mutual respect for each other’s expertise and knowledge, whether acquired through a background in university research or gained through a life lived in the Nairobi slums” (p. 234). The conclusions included the potential for transformative and empowering use of accessible technologies and the wealth of local knowledge and expertise that community activists brought to the collaboration.

In the afterword on research collaboration, Maha Bali asks the reader to engage with the “work of peers undergoing similar endeavours and sharing their learning, their challenges, and their triumphs” (p. 265) so that we can ask ourselves what messages resonated for us and how might we approach collaboration in future. The variety of narratives, contexts, and theoretical framings in this book, together with a shared passion and endeavour for teaching, learning, and research in contexts of inequality where quality requires social justice, elicits such empathetic, self-reflective, and creative responses by the reader. This book lives in a universe replete with multiple stories, voices, and analyses. The conclusions are for each reader to draw.

Significance of the Book

African educators, researchers, and institutions are increasingly exercising full agency to claim their place as actors and innovators in our digitally interconnected world. *Co-teaching and Co-research in Contexts of Inequality: Using Networked Learning to Connect Africa and the World* contains fascinating stories and analysis of vibrant teaching, learning, and research networks within and between institutions, across Africa, and between continents. This book makes a valuable contribution to conversations about praxis which integrate research, practices, technology, and the social and institutional contexts of teaching, learning, and research in a networked world. The engagement with innovation in the contexts of inequality and resource constraint is of vital interest to practitioners because application in such contexts is a real test of the robustness and flexible design of an innovation. While several chapters provide excellent cases and analyses of innovation in distance learning, most of the authors step beyond the frame of distance learning when they focus on co-researching practices, cross-cultural collaboration, blended or face-to-face learning contexts, or community-based learning. The book will be of interest to colleagues who are focused on networked teaching, learning, and research collaborations in contexts of inequality and resource constraint, within and beyond developing world contexts (given the stark inequalities in many so-called developed countries). Case studies from the book will also be very useful in the teaching of interdisciplinary courses on networked teaching, learning, and research which are focused on social justice. The rich variety of research designs, theoretical framings, and case studies provided by the authors is also likely to provide a very useful resource for postgraduate students and many more experienced researchers.

Overall Impression

Due to the wonderful diversity of the contributions, the reader will not find a unified text with a systematic argument and a consistent theoretical base. The strengths of the book derive from the excellent work by the editorial team to recruit and collaborate with authors from several overlapping communities of practice; their curation of a rich text with multiple voices, contexts, stories, and theoretical approaches; and the authenticity, integrity, and rigour achieved collaboratively by the authors of each chapter. The book also showcases work from the maturing community of African researchers who are focused on the investigation of teaching, learning, and research supported by a range of technologies.

Co-teaching and Co-research in Contexts of Inequality is published as an open-access resource under a Creative Commons licence. It can be purchased as a physical book or downloaded at no charge from <https://vernonpress.com/open-access-book/1767>.

