Learning accumulation from unfamiliar environments: informal focus groups

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INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Surprising how progressive it came out many-a-time when travelling in a small group and close proximity for employees of the same organization but different departments, the authors decided to embark on a formal exploration. Such travel is a rare occasion because often, in the case of South Africa, mainly in black setting when attending festivities or sorrow events, large vehicles are often used as an indication of solidarity or support. These can include attending funerals of colleagues or their relatives, where the organisations extend their support to such occasions. That is, when activities require staff masses to travel out of the workplace to events out of employer site, a large vehicle may be used for all of them. In cases where a few representatives may be adequate to represent the organization, a smaller car may be used.

The case of buses being used could resemble work situations where employees working in the same divisions sit next to each other and dine together, even when stations for refreshing are visited. Rarely, some members may approach one another to introduce themselves. However, there are many who still remain in comfort zones of engaging with daily or common colleagues. In this instance there is no opportunity to find new perspectives.

Furthermore, the case of a smaller vehicle, on the other hand, compel fellow travellers to sit next to one another. Naturally, such instances coerce communication, even with a new acquaintance. This situation brings new and diverse experiences where people who usually never talk to one another, find themselves in circumstances that persuade dialogues. Short distances may deny these colleagues an opportunity to engage more, because of limited time even if they can start dialogues. These include workshops held outside campus, but in the vicinity of the workplace. Long distances, on the other hand, offer extended opportunities for engaging.

A full-day trip in a small car with two to five passengers working in the same place could coerce the colleagues to open up about general issues, and work issues that may be of common interest.

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Organisations that have extremities such as fulfilment or frustrations, can encourage colleagues from different divisions to talk about work issues. It is common in frustrating work environment to ask how others manage to navigate certain challenges. It may be due to policies that are being introduced, or even removed. It can be about unsupportive management, and so on. There can be learning from the new encounters, new networks, information sharing, knowing each other’s strengths, mutual appreciation, and so on.

Informal and unplanned focus groups came into existence, and they were comprised of academic professionals from the same higher education institutions (HEIs) who travelled together in tiny vehicles. These focus groups sparked the motivation to begin this writing project.

As a result of their close closeness to one another, the individuals who are travelling together are required to engage in conversation with one another, even if they did not know each other before.

South Africa was the location of these possibilities, which took place in a variety of contexts, including years and locations. The writers came to the realisation that conversations that take place on these journeys, particularly when they are excessively lengthy, can frequently include valuable lessons about life. In the past, they made the decision to “collect” data by means of observations, and in certain instances, they would take field notes, similar to how anthropological research methods are conducted.

Despite the fact that the conclusions from a very small number of focus groups created a wide range of lessons for the authors, it was even more satisfying to discover that the lessons learned by the members of the focus groups in those platforms were substantial. According to the findings of the study, the proximity and isolation of various departments both represent missed possibilities. After that, it suggests the establishment of encounters of a casual type for specialists from other professions, even those who are not even acquainted with one another.

**Literature Review**

**Learning from the new encounters**

Experience has shown that people who stay for far too long in the same environments do not seem to show to be improving (Hayes, 2013). Same environment, same people, same stories, and so on, there is no new experience to learn from. Marvell and Simm (2021) counsel that the happenstances with new people can be prized learning experiences, contributing to personal growth and emotional intelligence. It can be in areas of business or in personal life, interactions with unfamiliar persons can provide unexpected wisdom and perspectives. Embracing the opportunity to learn from every single one we encounter, being open to new meetings, and intentionally pursuing to attain insights from others can lead to a more inspiring and diverse social environment. These new encounters can also nurture a continuous learning attitude of frame of mind. It enables individuals to adapt to changing environments and stay current in rapidly evolving fields (Mahindru, Bapat, Bhoyar et al., 2024). This means that new encounters can become platforms for development.

One would usually not have realised how much they could gain by engaging with the people they meet for the first time in close proximity, as it occurred at work from afar. Rajaram (2023) concurs that learning from new encounters is a valuable approach to personal growth and gaining new perspectives. Engaging with colleagues who had been strangers while at the workplace can offer meaningful experiences and learning opportunities. Talking to various colleagues from diverse working divisions can enable expanding one’s circle, overcome preconceptions, and learn new skills (Sheninger & Murray, 2017). Adults often learn life lessons from people they encounter. Embracing the wisdom entrenched in each encounter can unearth the wealth of knowledge within superficially ordinary moments. Johnstone and Andrus (2024) concur that instigating a discussion with an unfamiliar person can provide remarkable life lessons. Everybody can learn from anyone, and these new encounters can afford opportunities to pursue dreams and advance new viewpoints. Applying the lessons learned from new encounters in daily life involves reflecting on previous experiences, being mindful of one’s surroundings, identifying the lessons to be learned, employing and integrating the lessons learned, and converting lessons learned into instantaneous action.

**New networks**

Networks in more formal terms can include consulting firms, social media platforms, and television networks, among others. New networks provide newer insights. However, in this paper, new networks refer to consulting a colleague regarding issues of importance to life or work, and securing the new colleagues as acquaintances for future dealings. According to Hastuti, Maulana, Tompo et al. (2023), the mission is creating new networks is to help colleagues to improve their partnerships and achieve better value from them. A network can be established to reduce risk. It can help procure partners who can offer desirable results. Some networks can help to manage. In the case of higher education (HE), academics can establish research partners for improved research publications by developing possible synergies between them.

**Information sharing**

From the home o and play, people share information formally and informally, and that is where learning starts. In this paper, information sharing refers to the voluntary act of making information possessed by one entity available to another entity, which involves exchanging relevant information between team members, departments, or even organizations clearly, concise, and easy to understand (Islam, Zahra, Rehman et al., 2024; McLeod, Vaughan, Edwards et al., 2024). The act of sharing information can be done.
through various communication methods such as face-to-face conversations, instant messaging, email, video conferencing, or company wikis. Information sharing is essential to furthering problem solving. Sequestering complex problems and preventing them in the future requires the coordination of many groups, or crowdsourcing. By rapidly sharing critical information about challenges, problems and vulnerabilities, the scope and magnitude of problematic events can be greatly decreased.

Knowing each other’s strengths

Being distant can be a solemn barrier to appreciating each other and learning from one another. Even in work situations, colleagues who are out of reach of each other tend to be unable to know more about one another. People can miss put because of lacking mutual contact (Brown & Kuss, 2020). However, when they are close to each other, revelations about them often get to become easily known to others. Knowing each other's strengths is essential for building a strong and high-performing team. In instances where understanding and acknowledging each team member's strengths is a culture, Carlson (2016) points out that there are usually higher engagement, better performance, and improved collaboration. It enables team members to benefit from individual strengths, curtail conflicts, and enhance overall team performance. Leaders and managers can even list employees’ strengths when assigning projects in order to base deployment on strengths and including strengths into performance dialogues and reviews. Smart leaders create working environments where colleagues are invited to regularly acknowledge each other’s strengths (Soria & Stubblefield, 2015). Moreover, implementing a culture that values appraisal of strengths can also be beneficial. When managers recognize colleague's strengths and weaknesses, they can delegate tasks effectively, and then design development and improvement programmes to improve employees where they show deficiencies. This approach can be used to nurture a work environment that makes best use of the potential of employees.

Mutual appreciation

Mutual appreciation is a term or phrase that is used to describe a positive situation, feeling, or action that two or more people experience, feel, or do with respect to one another (Manley, Hackenburg, Marquina et al., 2023). It is rare for mutual appreciation occurrence to transpire when people do not know each other, or only experience one another at a long distance. In the home of family situation, and in friendship matters, this attribute is very important for family love and relationships. In the work situation, mutual appreciation helps colleagues to open up in information searching and sharing.

This paper explores development and learning opportunities that may arise when colleagues of the same organization but from different departments/divisions come to close proximity with one another in small vehicle to a mission that compels them to be in an unfamiliar close proximity.

Some worthy theoretical frameworks

Fortifying this discussion can occur by promoting adaptability, leadership, teamwork, diversity, learning, and responsiveness to workforce needs, organizational behaviour equips organizations and their employees to navigate and learn from unfamiliar situations more effectively. That is, integrating these robust theoretical frameworks, from organisational behaviour (OB), psychology, and sociology are vital. These are:

i. Organisational behaviour: On the ways that OB could be used to enhance learning from unfamiliar environments, this may be done by promoting an open and adaptable organizational culture, encouraging leadership and creative problem-solving, fostering teamwork and collaboration, recognizing the value of workforce diversity, emphasizing organizational learning and knowledge management, and adapting to changing workforce expectation (Natarajan, 2023; Sehgal, 2023). Brief details are:

ii. Promoting an open and adaptable organizational culture: Luthans et al. (2021) theorise that as organizations grow and enter new markets, OB can support maintenance of a clear identity while fostering flexibility and adaptability to new situations.

iii. Encouraging leadership and creative problem-solving: OB can assist in developing leaders who are proactive and able to turn conflicts into opportunities for learning in unfamiliar contexts (Pearlson et al., 2024).

iv. Fostering teamwork and collaboration: Leybourne (2024) explains that OB offers ideas and instruments to help managers in developing teams that work well together and are motivated to learn and achieve in new environments.

v. Recognizing the value of workforce diversity: Vorwerk Marren et al, (2024) insinuates that studying OB can empower managers to appreciate differences in employees' backgrounds, cultures, and perspectives, which can enhance learning when entering unfamiliar markets or situations.

vi. Emphasizing organizational learning and knowledge management: OB highlights the importance of acquiring, sharing, and utilizing knowledge in ways that improve an organization's survival and success, especially when facing new challenges (Sahoo & Chaubey, 2024).
Adapting to changing workforce expectations: Sehgal (2023) explains that OB assists managers to understand and respond to the evolving needs and inclinations of a diverse workforce, which can enable better learning and performance in unfamiliar environments.

Psychology: Juhaili and Asiri (2024) explain that when learning facilitation through educators and designers considers, acknowledges, and addresses factors such as environmental psychology, contextual effects, search strategies, as well as emotional and cognitive processing, it can create learning environments that support learners in unfamiliar settings, ultimately enhancing their learning outcomes. These are how this can happen.

i. Environmental psychology: Insights into the way physical characteristics of the environment, such as light, temperature, and noise, affect learners’ emotional and cognitive states is fundamental (Engineer et al., 2024; Srivastava et al., 2024). For example, a well-designed classroom with comfortable seating and adequate lighting can promote a positive emotional response, leading to enhanced learning.

ii. Contextual effects: Familiarity with the context can significantly impact learning. When learners are familiar with the environment, they can allocate fewer attentional resources, allowing for more efficient learning. Conversely, unfamiliar environments can lead to increased arousal and distraction, hindering learning (Alizadeh Asfestani et al., 2023).

iii. Search strategies: In unfamiliar environments, people often employ various search strategies to locate targets (Dempster et al., 2016). These strategies can be influenced by local environmental characteristics and the presence of other people. Understanding these dynamics can help to optimize learning in complex settings.

iv. Emotional and cognitive processing: Unfamiliar environments can stimulate heightened emotional states, such as fear or arousal, which can affect information processing (Shadiev et al., 2024). This highlights the importance of considering the emotional and cognitive responses learners exhibit in new environments and designing learning spaces that minimize distractions and promote comfort.

Sociology: Various sociological perspectives are useful for educators to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the complex social and cultural factors that shape learning in unfamiliar environments (Dessaigne, 2024; Majastre, 2024; Spracklen, 2024). This knowledge can then inform more inclusive and effective teaching practices to support the success of all students. Some of these ways are understanding, symbolic interaction, phenomenological sociology, critical sociology, and power dynamics, as well as intersectional approaches. They appear as follows:

i. Sociology’s contribution to understanding learning in unfamiliar environments: Sociology can enhance our understanding of learning in unfamiliar environments in several important ways. When applied, sociological perspectives can enable educators to develop a more holistic grasp of the complex social and cultural factors that shape the learning experiences of students in unfamiliar contexts (Farazouli et al., 2024). This knowledge can then inform more inclusive teaching practices and support structures to help all students succeed, regardless of their background.

ii. Symbolic interaction: One key sociological perspective is symbolic interactionism, which examines how meaning is created through language and social interactions (Udoudom et al., 2024). This approach can help us understand the unique “expected roles” and social norms that exist within an unfamiliar classroom setting. By unpacking these dynamics, educators can better navigate the social landscape and support students as they adapt.

iii. Phenomenological sociology: Additionally, phenomenological sociology focuses on understanding the lived experiences and “life-worlds” of individuals (Blackwell et al., 2024). Applying this lens could provide nuanced insights into the specific challenges faced by students in unfamiliar educational contexts, allowing for more tailored interventions.

iv. Critical sociology and power dynamics: Critical sociology, influenced by Marxism, also emphasizes the way power dynamics and structural inequalities can shape educational experiences (Clemens, 2024). This perspective could reveal barriers or biases that students from marginalized backgrounds may encounter in unfamiliar learning environments.

v. Intersectional approaches: Feminist theory and critical race theory, other sociological frameworks, further underscore the way gender, race, and other social identities intersect to influence educational outcomes. Incorporating these intersectional approaches can deepen our understanding of the diverse experiences and needs of students in unfamiliar settings.

Method

The study design was qualitative, where qualitative research is a method that explores and provides deeper insights into real-world phenomena, entailing collection and analysis of non-numerical data to understand concepts, opinions, or experiences of the participants (Hennink et al., 2020). Qualitative research is suitable for generating new ideas and gathering in-depth insights into a problem. The data collection process can occur in natural settings, and the analysis is often flexible and adaptive to emerging ideas or patterns. The study population in a study which uses observation for data collection using is the group of subjects that are the target to be observed (Matthews et al., 2021). This is the specific group that the researcher is interested in observing to draw conclusions about a particular phenomenon.
The sample size for a qualitative study is a matter of ongoing debate and is influenced by various factors. According to Vasileiou et al. (2018), it is essential to consider the specific features of the study, such as the research method, purposeful sampling strategy, and the nature of the phenomenon under investigation to determine the sample size. Sovacool et al (2018) states that the goal is to have a sample size large enough to reveal several perspectives, but not too large to obstruct in-depth analysis or leads to repetitive data.

In this study, four trip occasions appearing to create informal and accidental focus groups, presented study population settings that were exploited for the purpose of this paper. Two were in the Eastern Cape Province, both during a spell as an employee of a higher education institution (HEI). One trip of about 724 km for about 9 hours 51 minutes involved three people, from Alice town to Durban in KwaZulu-Natal Province. The second trip of 1 020 km for about 10 hours 58 minutes involving five people from Grahamstown to Springs in the Gauteng Province. They took place in July and October 2012, respectively. The third one from Pretoria to Francistown, Botswana, of 754 km for 8 hours 48 minutes, involving four people, took place in March 2019. The fourth one from Pretoria to Tzaneen in Limpopo Province involving four people of 357 km for 3 hours 58 minutes took place in January 2024. The sample size of n=16 subjects appeared as four focus groups, since the trips consisted of settings that could be considered to be focus groups. Field notes were taken in all the cases, but not all that were said could be captured. These field notes were taken during and just after each trip.

The data collection for this study was observational. Observational studies take place to answer research questions based only on what the researcher observes, without interfering or manipulating the research subjects. Lofland, Snow, Anderson et al. (2022) describes observation as a data collection technique entailing to watch and record the behaviours, actions, or events of people, objects, or phenomena in their natural settings. According to Dignath and Veenman (2021), the two main types of observation are direct and indirect. Direct observation involves watching the behaviour or event of interest as it occurs, without any intervention or manipulation from the researcher. Oppositely, indirect observation may involve the use of tools or techniques for observing and recording data with the research subjects being unaware that they are being observed. In this study, the indirect method of observation was used. Field notes were used in data collection.

The ethical considerations for indirect observation data collection in this paper include ensuring the responsible and respectful conduct of research, such as confidentiality and privacy as was the case in this study.

Findings

The findings are limited to the extracts that could still be recalled, as notes were taken and some had been damaged. No direct quotes are presented, as they could not be recalled in direct form, but the meanings intimated were recalled. The report includes only what was within recall and interpreted to be beneficial.

Trip 1

Three colleagues of the same HEI but different departments were on a tour from Alice to Durban to attend the wedding celebration of a ‘boastful’ colleague, but took one transport, a small car. They had seen and met one another before but had never had close contact. They started being quiet for the early part of the trip. They came from the departments of economics, physics, and statistics. Their respective pseudonyms are EC, PH and ST. When they took the first break after a shop break, while returning to the car asked, PH initiated discussions.

He asked fellow passengers how they select a head of department in their separate departments. He wanted to know the university practices on the issue, as he thought that there was no policy. He shared that in his department, they had a problem. Other members had selected someone while their line manager (LM) wanted his own and was insisting.

EC responded,

PH was informed that there was a policy, and EC had a copy. EC suggested that PH’s LM probably had a copy but hid it so that he could bulldoze his way. EC then questioned PH’s LM’s nationality, as his experiences was that many foreigners did not use the national guideline, as they would rather float South African laws. EC stated that the practice that PH was highlighting did not seem patriotic.

ST added that,

The HR of their institution was apparently captured, as they kept some important policies to themselves, only for reporting that they have the policies, but they do not distribute them to employees. ST claimed that in many instances, HR sends rules and policies only to the executive deans (EXs) and some HoDs because they viewed other HoDs as being disruptive.

EC suggested that,

PH’s LM was a foreigner, that his LM’s choice was a foreigner on contract and his LM wanted to give him permanent.

PH responded that,

He and his other colleagues had figured that out. He stated that his LM said that there were no guidelines on appointing internal HoD and that in that case, the line manager’s discretion was required. He claimed that the LM had said that the university was in
the process of developing the policies and so he could not wait for a process whose end he did not know. PH also claimed his LM had said that his chosen colleague was ready and capable despite an earlier strike for him when the students had pointed out his deficiencies. He stated that they all knew that the students were going to strike again, but that his LM did not care. PH informed that his LM’s choice was the colleague that students wanted to remove, so he was deliberately provoking the students because his chosen guy would get a big payout if dismissed while on a permanent employment status.

EC shouted that,

This is the South African money they play with (showed emotion). He also accused his LM for wanting to take most of South Africa’s money as they already destroy assets in the country. He also accused them that they have that kind of attitude, that they can be corrupt just like many of the corrupt government officials. He then suggested that people should unite to protect the country.

ST followed.

He viewed the issue as a serious matter that should not be left to PH’s department alone. He warned and emphasized that if left to that department, other LMs were likely going to follow suit by also engaging in such rots of corruption. He suggested an intervention, and stated that PH’s line manager showed gross dishonesty.

Trip 2

Five colleagues originally from Gauteng but working in the same HEI in the Eastern Cape, but different departments, were travelling from Grahamstown to Springs for the funeral of a former university classmate. Their home departments were Commercial Law, Industrial Psychology, Education, Physics, and Statistics. Their pseudonyms are CL, IP, ED, PC and SC.

ED started,

She pointed out at the shame that ‘(. . . the deceased)’ died from suicide that was due to parents-caused depression, and her death confirmed. She then asked what could be done about deadly parents who do not allow their children freedom of career choice. ED lamented that a law is necessary where someone so coerced to take their own lives by being pressured for a career that the parents want for them. That is domestic abuse, and worse is that those that communities consider as role models are the ones perpetuating the violation. ED called this a ‘parenthood of dictatorship’.

CL added,

There is merit to such a law, especially for these kinds of parents. He pointed at the priests who do not insist on their children to become priests, and even allowing them to choose a church of their choice. He stated that children need information about careers and career choice, and guidance towards attaining the careers that they choose. CL states that children do not need bully parents, who deny them pocket money when they choose drama when parents want their children to take pharmacy or medicine. CL commented also that parents are sometimes still under pressure when children choose not to go for tertiary education, and choose, for example, to be a taxi driver, or TV actor. He pointed at possible predicaments on allowing free unguided and ungarded career choice, with examples of boxing due to having done well as a pastime. He pointed out at the game of soccer, without a backup. He supported career choice on careers that are not short term, and that are decent, but pointed out possibilities whereas a supportive parents, we can be shocked by our children’s choices.

IP added,

In cases of children rushing to quick money careers, IP indicated how it can be a problem convincing a child not to do it. He indicated that sometimes the child makes it and parents are happy, but in boxing, the day the career ends with a hard punch, the parents can have a ‘brain damaged’ in the house. IP argued that to be told not to take teaching because it does not pay is an insult to a child who want to contribute to community building and youth development.

SC remarked,

SC commented that parents naturally have interests in their children. These can be preference to have a boy, or a girl. He points out that parents are content with any gender at the end, regardless of the outcome when the child comes. He then said that career choices are controllable, unlike child’s gender. He suggested that parents should just be against extremes, not stopping children from decent choices and not insisting on parents’ choices. He also accepts that ‘decent’ may be tough to express as parent and child may disagree.

PC stated,

PC pointed out that he was a victim of career choice, and that he ran away from the house. He indicated how his three other siblings were destroyed by their parents who were forcing them to choose certain careers. He had apparently lost a sister some four/five years ago, due to an enforced career. He stated that she completed the degree, gave them ‘their degree certificate’, which is what they wanted. The following day she was dead and left a long letter. PC stated that the letter insisted that the graduation party should go ahead as planned, and they should tell people that they killed her with a career. Though the party was held, PC stated that they did not explicitly say they killed her, but they indicated their mistake by showing her what they ‘loved for her’. PC claimed that their
family had never seen fun since that time. He says that his parents aged faster since then. For his two brothers, he says they went to university, grooved and failed, apparently deliberately. EL said that he pities for the parents, as they were ‘dictatorial snobs’.

**Trip 3**

Four colleagues went to Botswana for a mini conference on interdisciplinary research in the region where HEIs in some countries of the Southern African Development Countries (SADC) were invited. Their home departments were African Languages, Chemistry, Psychology, and Statistics. They are called AL, CE, PS and SI. Their discussions went as follows:

PS complained that,

She struggled to get approval as the LM, was in favor of sending a colleague in another department, who was not even aware of the conference. PS was invited by the host, was already having slot in the conference programme, and she was using her own research funds for daily subsistence. She was forced to make a presentation of what she had prepared, but then protested that even the colleague the LM had chosen must present. The pre-presentation was the first in her department. PS stated that suggested in that presentation that all other future conferences should also be subjected to pre-presentations, as a policy. She stated that the LM did not support and was supported by the same person he had chosen to travel to Botswana that there should be no policy. According to PS, other colleagues did not speak in fear of the LM.

CE indicated that,

He could guess that the LM to PS is a foreigner, or unsupportive and a biased kind who has preferences among staff. He said that if he is a foreigner, the choice he had made could more likely be a foreigner, or a South African who want favors from undeserving LMs who foreigners are. Like the apartheid whites, they weaken us by dividing as, bribe the weaker ones, and condition them to destroy the locals. He questioned why some foreigners are like this when it is a privilege to be embraced when allowed freedom in this country.

PS responded that,

PS confirmed that indeed her LM is a foreigner, and that his preferred choice is a foreigner. She also confirmed that the LM is biased against the locals, except those that he can manipulate. She vowed that they have given their LM full support, but that he is focused on sidelining South Africans and the country’s laws and policies.

SI lamented that,

SI indicated that foreigners were given freedom by the apartheid regime when it was phased out, and the current regime by not paying attention to detail. In the case of the apartheid case, SI indicated his observations as that when affirmative action was applied, the whites who were in charge would appoint foreign blacks because they were being used to increase black head counts while being used to spy on, and sabotage South African blacks who were developing. SI suggested that some of these foreigners are playing the role they were taught, which is perpetuating oppression of the local black people. PI qualified this by pointing out that there are good foreigners who work well with South Africans, and who help to develop the country.

AL also lamented,

AL also informed about her story. She indicated that they brought a foreigner in their department for support in issues that involved his language. This person, according to AL, developed a proposal and convinced some higher powers, who are believed to be corrupt, to introduce a few languages that are foreign to South Africa. According to AL, this colleague plans to open a new department and to head it, as no other person can head it because they do not know those foreign languages. AL said that what was shocking and annoying was that he lied to say that members of the department knew about his proposal and supported it. It stalled because they all denied knowing and did not see its value. She claimed that it was like some powerful people had already set aside some huge fund to sponsor the establishment of the department, despite all along claiming that there was no money. She pointed out that there is no local market for such languages, and it was an indication that they want to own space and channel money into their own pockets.

**Trip 4**

Four participants in the fourth trip came from a science faculty of a Gauteng HEI. The crew was attending the funeral of a student who had committed suicide because of squabbles with parents for graduating in a course of study that they did not send her to pursue. Apparently during this period, she was being forced to deviate from the postgraduate course that she had applied to and do was already admitted. The four colleagues travelling were free to talk, demonstrated humour, and some blather and plenty of complaints. Two were from the Physics department, one from Mathematics and another from Statistics. Their pseudonyms are PH, PY, MT and ST. PY started the talks by indicating that,

The EX is never at work, but work goes on, and when he comes, there will be meeting after meeting. He pointed out that the faculty does more in the EX’s absence, and at no pressure. According to PY, the presence and availability of the EX of faculty comes with tension.

ST lamented,
It is rumored that this EX failed in two previous executive roles before he came to take up his current position. He is not even in the field of faculty expertise. This is the reason he fights to introduce study programmes that are related to his own so that he can fit. He has prioritized these where he can be absorbed into, should he not be reappointed as EX. He has shown himself to lack leadership qualities, and he has his own favorites. He is also a dictator. He used to rotate acting EXs when he was absent, but contrary to what he started with, rotating the HoDs in acting EXs, we know now he has stopped nominating some, and we know who he has banished.

PH lamented,

Of course, the EX is never at work, but work goes on very well, particular best when he is not around. When he comes back, there will be a meeting after meeting because he can talk. Faculty does more in his absence, and colleagues work with no pressure. But he will return, and his presence comes with tension.

MT also lamented,

There seems to be government’s lack of interest in appointing senior people from South Africa, as there are many more of uncommitted foreigners being employed in the university. Some of the foreigners break South African rules, and they show no student interest. There is money on everything, but none to assist students. Everything the foreign managers pursue is on top-down fashion, no input from the ground. For example, MT posed questions such as “how can the techno project be piloted or experimented on us but paid by us?”; “Who benefits?”; “So where is ICT on this?” and “And what is happening to Blackboard?” Money exchange hands but could be more in the direction of some pockets.

Discussion

The first case exposed important lessons of life. One is that colleagues can still be supportive of someone they find to be arrogant, as it came out that “…to attend the wedding celebration of a boastful colleague”. Paulo and Möck (2024 counsel to remain oneself and do what is right to others despite what they do ‘to you’. The colleagues travelling had never been close to one another, it was their first because it came out that they “had never had close contact”. The new partnership was an opportunity for a new network, and possible collaboration for multidisciplinary research (Bahdanava et al., 2024; Lissillour et al., 2024). The diversity of their fields/departments was not a barrier, but an opportunity to view things from different perspectives. However, the colleagues could still find a common ground.

The colleagues pointed at the dictatorial approach of a senior manager in appointing a manager, as their EX wanted his choice of head of department against the staff preferred candidate. The claim was “other members had selected someone while their LM wanted his own and was insisting”. Another claim was “discretion was required” by EC. This ‘insisting’ and ‘discretion’ sound dictatorial (Lok, 2024). The same setting enabled one member from another department to make them aware of existing policies on campus, which they were not aware of. It showed that information sharing that could not happen on campus, could happen while colleagues from different department ‘socialize’. Socialization provides opportunities for sharing, with no pressure to release information (Magni & Maruping, 2024). During this travelling event, some university rules and policies were learnt. The discussions should dishonesty of some managers, as shown that the EX “hid it so that he could bulldoze his way”, referring to a policy he was violating basic conditions of employment laws (claiming ‘there are no guidelines’) by prioritising a foreigner against locals (Freeman et al., 2022). The case of wanting to drain money from South Africa also emerged from “would get a big payout if dismissed” by EC. EC also suggested a corrupt conduct was on the loop with a claim “destroy assets in our country” and “corrupt just like… corrupt government officials” while ST remarked “engaging in rots of corruption”. A call for unity to fight corruption came from in ST’s claims of “a serious matter” and “an intervention”. ST also sensed deceitfulness from EC’s line manager, saying that the line manager “showed some dishonesty”. Therefore, some foreign managers who violated South African laws were viewed as corrupt, and deceitful, but causing institution capture.

The second case grumbled over a death that was parents’-created, by having causing stress on a child who had planned her future, and parents forcing her to follow their own interest. ED viewed is as shameful that a child could be depressed by her own parents to a point she committed suicide. He suggested that parents wanted a profession and failed, and then later failed their children who were on track to achieve careers of their own interest. This shows a case where parents did not support children to achieve their dreams. ED viewed this attitude as an offense that should be legislated, and parents be charged when offending the child this way. This was implied by ED saying, “a law is necessary”. He viewed such parents as lethal, saying “deadly parents who do not allow their children freedom of career choice”. He also classified the conduct as a form of child violence, saying “… is domestic abuse”. Child abuse is a harm or mistreatment caused to a child (Dehling, 2023). ED regards this parents’ conduct as dictatorship as well, and more disgraceful as it was caused by those who should have been role models.

CL added concurred on the importance of such a law that as oppressive parents are not needed, saying “children do not need bully parents”. He concurs that it is child abuse being denied pocket money due to choosing a preferred career or following another field
of study that parents did not prescribe. CL commended parents who support children with their career choices, but warned against cases where children take careers with short duration or that can end with injuries without possibilities of a backup.

IP added that children can pursue careers that sound to be quick cash cows, saying “children rushing to quick money careers”. Hou (2024) and Lowe (2024) express a cash cow as a generator of a lot of money. IP emphasized guidance on careers, apart from supporting the child. IP also criticized parents who even refuse their children to pursue teaching which is viewed as contribution “to community building and youth development”. Lastly, IP cautions about careers that may be deadly, such as boxing that may cause brain damage.

SC mentioned parents may have preference of a specific sex for their children, but get satisfied when the child arrives, regardless of the gender. Though he cautions about some careers, SC supports supporting children with their career choices. He used a term ‘extreme’ for careers that may be not classifiable as decent, but also conceded that it may be difficult to define what ‘decent’ or ‘extreme’ may imply for careers.

PC shared his own experienced as a victim, saying he was “a victim of career choice”, which caused him to leave his household. He pointed out that his parents destroyed his siblings the same way. It causing death of his sister who had graduated with the parents’ chosen qualification. His brothers went to enroll for their parents’ choices but deliberately refused to study and failed, as payback to the parents for refusing them to take their own choices.

The third case involves four colleagues attending a forum in Botswana. PS nagged that she was nearly refused to attend, despite having prepared a presentation. This was to allow a manager-favoured unprepared colleague to attend, despite not even knowing about the conference. She had to first pass a test by presenting, which was not required from the favoured one. Also, she was using her research funds while the other was requiring funds from the faculty. PS eventually presented prior to the main one. She stated in the meeting, other colleagues did not talk, as they are apparently scared of their manager. The highlight that PS made was that the manager stated that there was no policy, which was not true. PS criticized that she was the first to be subjected to compulsory pre-presentations, and that her managers did not support that future conference attendances be subjected to pre-presentations.

CE guessed that the PS’s mangers was a foreigner, based on his attitude to a South African trying to develop. He also suggested that the favoured PS’s colleague could also be a foreigner. He likened the whole tangle as an attempt to weaken locals by some foreigners.

AL also lamented that a foreigner was brought to their department for a specific role, and she wants to bring in more foreign languages. The foreigner has already submitted a proposal and some corrupt authorities in her campus have already accepted it in principle. She claimed that this foreigner also lied that departmental colleagues also agreed to support new languages, and they found it outrageous and frustrating, with the phrase, “that what was shocking and annoying”. More shocking was that funds had already been allocated, as AL said, “already set aside some huge fund to sponsor the establishment of the department”.

The fourth case involved four Gauteng HEI staff travelling to a student’s funeral who had committed suicide. She had squabbles with parents who wanted her to study a course she did not want. However, PY started a talk that the faculty manager is always absent. Also, his presence brings tension.

In gossip, ST lamented that rumoured that he failed in previous roles elsewhere before joining the HEI. Apparently, LM has no expertise where he is deployed, and therefore is desperately fighting to introduce new study programmes in order to include his own field. ST stated that the EX showed no leadership qualities.

PH echoed PY that LM is an absent manager, who will return to find great progress and disrupts work with numerous meetings. More seems to happen when EX is away, and there is no pressure then, but he returns with tension.

MT blamed the government for bringing foreigners, most of who bring no value to the country because of their lack of commitment and no interest in students. Some are even said to break national rules. The top-down approach of HEI top management was also criticized as decisions taken would not have been executed if they were coming from practitioners in the lecture halls. MT indicates that personal benefits is the drive for top-down methods.

**Comparative Analysis**

This section compares the case of this paper against cases where familiar settings are the platforms for dialogues. First, the situation provided a relaxed and freer conditions that lacked intimidations and sensitivity. Hence, a fundamental difference highlighted already, is that the unfamiliar setting of this paper provided the potential for richer, more dynamic, and more engaging discussions in unfamiliar settings compared to familiar ones. Other general differences are contextual, behavioural, expectations/reality,
cultural/historical, new perspectives, emotional, and exploration (Anderson & Stillman, 2013; Botella et al., 2018; Thomson et al., 2018) as follows:

i. **Contextual Impact:** Unfamiliar settings can significantly impact the context of discussions. Participants may feel more anxious, uncertain, or even excited, which can influence their communication styles and the content of their discussions.

ii. **Behavioural Differences:** People behave differently in new settings. Some individuals may feel more bold, curious, or adventurous, while others might become more timid or cautious. This can lead to diverse interactions and discussions in unfamiliar settings compared to similar ones.

iii. **Expectations vs. Reality:** When encountering an unfamiliar setting, people's expectations often differ from the reality of the setting. This disparity can lead to interesting discussions and insights as individuals adjust to the new environment.

iv. **Cultural and Historical Context:** Unfamiliar settings can provide a fresh cultural and historical context for discussions. This can enrich the topics being discussed and foster a deeper understanding of the setting and its significance.

v. **New Perspectives:** Unfamiliar settings can offer new perspectives and insights, as individuals are forced to adapt and navigate unfamiliar environments. This can lead to more dynamic and engaging discussions compared to those in familiar settings.

vi. **Emotional Reactions:** Unfamiliar settings can evoke stronger emotional reactions, such as excitement, fear, or wonder. These emotions can influence the tone and content of discussions, making them more engaging and memorable.

vii. **Learning and Exploration:** Unfamiliar settings often encourage exploration and learning. Participants may be more open to new experiences and ideas, leading to more in-depth and meaningful discussions.

**Broader Implications**

i. **First case:** This case shows the experiences of boarders can have broader implications for leadership and organizational settings, emphasizing the importance of collaboration, effective communication, ethical leadership, and personal growth. The discussion explains the applicability of these concepts to various types of organizations or settings beyond academic institutions. Here are some key points that can be generalized:

ii. **Leadership styles:** The experiences of boarders can shape their leadership styles, which can impact their ability to lead effectively in different contexts. For instance, the emphasis on self-reliance and independence in boarding schools can lead to a dictatorial approach, as seen in the case where a senior manager insisted on his own choice for head of department over the staff's preferred candidate (Manner-Baldeon et al., 2024).

iii. **Support and Guidance:** Zhang et al. (2024) advocate that the lack of support and guidance for new leaders can be a significant challenge for leaders in various organizations. This lack of support can lead to feelings of isolation and uncertainty, making it difficult for leaders to navigate complex organizational dynamics.

iv. **Collaboration and Communication:** The importance of collaboration and effective communication is evident in the case where colleagues from different departments were able to share information and learn from each other during a social event. This highlights the value of socialization in fostering a sense of community and facilitating knowledge sharing (Harris et al., 2024).

v. **Diversity and Multidisciplinary Research:** According to Ahsan (2024), the diversity of fields and departments in the case study provided opportunities for multidisciplinary research and collaboration. This emphasizes the potential benefits of diverse perspectives and expertise in addressing complex problems.

vi. **Ethical Leadership:** The case also exposed instances of dishonesty, corruption, and institution capture, which are critical issues that leaders must address in any organization. The need for ethical leadership and transparency is essential in maintaining trust and credibility within an organization (Hu et al., 2024).

vii. **Personal Growth and Self-Awareness:** The experiences of boarders can influence their personal growth and self-awareness, which are essential for effective leadership (Hägg & Jones, 2021). The case study highlights the importance of self-reflection and recognizing one's own biases and limitations to lead effectively.

**Second case:** The discussion on the implications of unfamiliar setting experiences can be applicable to other types of organizations or settings beyond academic institutions. Points that highlight the broader implications of unfamiliar settings’ experiences and how they can be applicable to various settings beyond academic institutions, explaining how some key points that can be generalized, are:

i. **Impact on Emotional Development:** These experiences can have a significant impact on emotional development, particularly in terms of attachment and emotional support (Zhong et al., 2024). This can be relevant in any setting where people are separated from their primary relatives.
ii. **Resilience and Adaptation:** The experiences can also foster resilience and adaptability in children, which can be beneficial in various settings, such as competitive sports teams, military training, or even corporate environments (Mohamud & Maddela, 2024).

iii. **Emerging Relationships:** The dynamics of relationships can be affected by unfamiliar experiences (Tan et al., 2024). This can be relevant in any setting where people are separated from daily acquaintances, such as working far from home.

iv. **Psychological Well-being:** Unfamiliar experiences can have both positive and negative effects on psychological well-being, which can be applicable to other settings where people are exposed to stress, trauma, or isolation (Isik Akin et al., 2024).

v. **Support systems:** The importance of support systems, such as peer and other relationships, can be generalized to other settings where people are away from their usual conditions, such as summer camps or youth organizations.

vi. **Long-Term Effects:** The long-term effects of experiences in unfamiliar environments, including potential trauma and attachment issues, can be relevant in any setting where people are exposed to significant stress or separation from their loved ones (Song et al., 2024).

**Third case:** The case point at broader concerns that occur in their HEI, which the discussants in unfamiliar setting condemn. These include observable incidents of favouritism, discrimination, abuse of power, silencing of local voices, undermining local talent, and corruption can manifest in any organizational setting where there is a lack of diversity, inclusion, and accountability. Strong policies, oversight, and a culture of transparency are needed to prevent such practices.

**Fourth case:** The case points at the broader themes around leadership, management, organizational culture, and aligning individual and institutional goals that are relevant considerations for any workplace setting, including higher education institutions. The key is fostering an environment conducive to productivity, morale and achieving the core mission.

**Conclusion**

Colleagues travelling in small vehicles formed informal focus groups, accidentally. The opportunities presented provided information sharing that could probably have exceeded the induction of new staff. Information that is necessary, which the HEIs fail to share optimally, could easily be conveyed in the platforms of this paper. Colleagues showed appreciation of one another, and some colleagues started to know the number of resources that ‘lie low’ due to separations in the different departments. Evidence of team building was demonstrated. Mutual appreciation emerged, as some colleagues were initially not able to reach members in different departments. Issues that emerged included life skills, and survival skills in the departments and on campus. Hidden information for one could easily flow from one colleague to the next, including sensitive information that could not have been easily released in formal academic settings. The colleagues were able to console and comfort one another, especially when knowing that challenges that were experienced covered all and should be managed. The study found that without being aware, many academics and colleagues operate within lost opportunities by being separate and working formally at deployment stations. It also concluded that there is plentiful learning available, which cannot be leveraged on in the formal settings and confinements of restricted deployment of departmentalization and specialisation designed by formal work settings.

The paper recommends;

i. use of small venues and colleagues from diverse departments of the same or even different HEI should be encouraged, as new networks can be formed;

ii. establishment of a formal academic forum to address the issues of career choice and parents-forced careers on their children, and

iii. introduction of joint team building platforms of members from different departments on informal settings, to enable members to engage limitless.

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