

Re-imagining First-Year University Students' Reading Culture: A Collaborative Transformative Leadership Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This paper explored collaborative, transformative leadership to establish what to do and why by the respective institutional stakeholders to reimagine the first-year university students' reading culture. The exploration is critical because it transforms lecturers' perception of teaching and learning and general attitude to duty, improving students' performance throughout their studies and beyond. Previously, from the 1960s to the mid-1980s, the culture of reading played a prominent role in students' academic performance. Nevertheless, from the 1990s till date, many students' interest in reading dwindled. Perhaps this is because of the emergent electronic materials, dynamic economic shifts, and other disruptive global events posed by students' 'political' scrambles for power, the COVID-19 pandemic, and examination malpractices. Therefore, there is a need for a new form of leadership to confront these unconventional disruptions through critical and reflective thoughts born of action that fosters a renewed student culture of reading focused on the first years at Central University of Technology, Free State. The authors adopted a qualitative approach that used a desktop research methodology in the absence of physical research participants. The findings revealed that the first-year students' reading habits changed after a few months of joining the university, and this benefited institutional management, lecturers, and the CUT teaching and learning. Recommendations urge writers and editors to extend research and publish best book guides on scientific transformative leadership practices, particularly in all facets of reading in education. We encourage universities to incorporate the training of transformative leaders in institutional curricula.

KEYWORDS

University first-year students; reading culture; transformative leadership; central university of technology.

INTRODUCTION

The burden of this article is to explore what and why collaborative transformative leadership at the beginning of university education can contribute to restoring first-year students' reading culture. The consideration of reading as essential for the overall development of a human being over the years is no more prevalent; this is because of the advent of modern digital technologies, which have popularised social networking on the web, televisions, smart mobile phones, and other means of entertainment. The innovation has negatively influenced the reading habits of the public, especially the younger generation (Akanda et al., 2013).

Rost (1991, p.127) argues that transformative leadership is "an influence relationship among leaders and followers who intend real changes that reflect their mutual purposes". It is collaborative because a leader's role in a collaborative environment is worthwhile instead of such a role in isolation since a successful leader cannot make decisions but can motivate members to acquire the skill of decision-making and act to achieve progress in the organisation (Mata-Domingo, 2018). Kojo et al. (2018) assert that a good reading culture has been formed if a student regularly develops a reading culture. While many studies have addressed the transition into academia by focusing on academic writing (Dube et al., 2019; Esfandiari et al., 2022; Solikhah et al., 2022; Swales, 2019), they have not so much used transformative leadership to reinstate first-year students' reading culture. At a time like this, when rising above the forces of global distractions and being resolute as leaders have become not just moral imperatives but actions necessary for success and persistence, Shields (2018) offers a critical approach to transformative leadership, provoking leaders across the nations to rise against the odds within their institutions. The higher education sector is not excluded in this regard.

Transformative leadership in the context of reading culture in multicultural Higher Education settings with first-year students is construed as a process that affects change in both lecturers' and students' frame of reference that ultimately defines their life-world, which is supported by Ololube (2013) describing leadership as involving a type of responsibility focused on attaining particular ends by using the available human and material resources to ensure a cohesive and coherent organisation in the process. Thus, lecturers collaborating with other stakeholders play a crucial role in providing practical approaches that help to begin and sustain students' active readership.

Transformative leadership in the university seeks to make long-lasting, meaningful changes that can enrich students' readership prospectus (University of Redlands, 2022). Caldwell et al. (2012) assert that transformative leaders must re-frame their worldviews and their senses of self to re-think assumptions and develop innovative solutions and systems. Such transformative leadership is viewed as a critical and collaborative process in which school-based action research and knowledge creation should play a significant role in decision-making.

Even as Shields (2018) does not proffer any panacea, she proposes a perspective for approaching leadership in education in relation to its nuanced and fluid situations. Reading is not only an essential life skill; it is also regarded as the cornerstone of learning. Acquiring

knowledge through reading is crucial for the learning process and is an important academic task in which students must engage. Much of the research on reading, both in South Africa (Bharuthram, 2012; Dube et al., 2019) and elsewhere globally, such as in Sweden (Pecorari et al., 2012), acknowledge a strong relationship between reading and academic performance. Studies also at national and international levels show that an increasing number of students embark on university study with poor reading literacy. Such students, on entry, often struggle to follow the academic requirements of their disciplines (for example, Amaechi, 2018; Bharuthram & Clarence, 2015; Chanock et al., 2012; Divoll & Browning, 2013). These findings should not be because university students are expected to enhance the education process by reading extensively in their subject areas, preparing for lectures, and adding to their lecture notes where necessary. For this, lecturers prescribe a list of recommended textbooks that students should study alongside their lectures and coursework.

Institutional (Collaborative) Transformative Leadership

Collaborative transformative leadership is vital in any institution. Transformative leaders must have and balance tried and certified abilities. These leaders must supply the skills, vision, knowledge, and agility to respond to the status of a university and society, which Shields (2013) describes as volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous. Transformative leadership practices inspire and motivate people to seek higher levels of collective success. In her book on transformative leadership, Shields (2013, p.9) argues that educational leaders must “truly educate all students for individual intellectual excellence and global citizenship”. If educators are to meet all students' needs, we must facilitate school cultures that support learning for all students (Shields & Warke, 2010). At its core, transformative leadership should support the success of all students by involving all stakeholders, including the community. Transformative leaders should ensure that an institution operates within a productive learning environment requiring constant practices, skills, and strategies that can allow institutional leaders to implement and distribute to their staff outcomes in such an institution (Leithwood et al., 2010). Such action will foster, develop, and improve staff competence and confidence, resulting in quality instruction that enhances student achievement through reading culture (Leithwood et al., 2010).

Multi-faculty collaboration opens access to more significant, higher-impact initiatives with shared resources, time, ability, and diversity. Faculties with different prospects, operations, and student demographics all bring a rich supply of ideas into synergy, a community of students. This kind of macro approach can be experimented successfully across the faculties and departments of CUT. Student unions can even partner with academic developers to co-create a coalition of faculty study groups that coordinate students, academics, and support staff from across the faculties to share their common experiences; this is academic empowerment in action that can be likened to one of Shield's (2018) developed eight tenets used to drive transformative leadership.

It corroborates studies on school leadership and its relationship to student and staff learning (Klar & Brewer, 2013; Leithwood et al., 2010; Shields, 2013). These identified four critical areas for school leadership: setting direction, developing people, redesigning the organisation, and managing the instructional program.

Transformative Leadership as a Catalyst in Enhancing First-Year Students' Reading Culture

First-year university students represent an institution's students' strengths and characteristics for about four to five years running. How and what they are moulded from the beginning, in terms of teaching and learning inputs with discipline, determines the standard of the study outcomes at the end of their course, irrespective of which previous high schools they attended. Embedding a reading habit in them early on admission through collaborative, transformative leadership can make all the distinctive outcomes. Why does an institution employ collaborative transformative leadership in re-imagining first years' reading culture to ensure learning outcomes? It is all about leadership to re-imagine students' studies for positive results, which is supported by studies that reported that successful leaders in educational settings can significantly influence students' performance (Jambo & Hoongde, 2020; Karadag, 2020; Mata-Domingo, 2018; Shatunova et al., 2021; Stronge & Zu, 2021; Tebogo, 2020).

First, collaborative transformative leadership (CTL) respects and acknowledges the existence of different groups in the institution, recognises and values their socio-cultural dissimilarities and encourages and allows for continual involvement within an inclusive cultural setting (Rosado, 2020).

Secondly, CTL is ideal for lecturers' committed practices and institutional stakeholders' roles in leading schools in multicultural and multilingual contexts. Montuori and Donnely (2018) assert that transformative leadership invites individuals to take responsibility in asking what kind of society they would want to foster through their interactions, opinions, and beliefs and link this to the ideal school environment, implying that CTL can comprise a driving force to inspire educational stakeholders to be more creative and interconnected. Therefore, CTL in multicultural and multilingual contexts is confirmed to assist universities in positively contributing to school development.

Furthermore, CTL takes seriously Freire's (1998) contention that "education is not the ultimate lever for social transformation, but without it, transformation cannot occur".

Finally, Shield's sixth tenet (2018), *An Emphasis on Interdependence, Interconnectedness, and Global Awareness*, underscored the importance of understanding our common connectedness. Shields (2018) maintained that focusing on interconnectedness does not mean disregarding the power differentials that characterise people of different identities. It recognises these differences, acknowledges the role of power and privilege in perpetuating them, and welcomes such solidarity that supports others with varying situations from ours as we strive to work with mutual understanding and achieve our shared desires.

The concept of reading

Ngugi and Mberia (2014, p.97) described reading as “one of the oldest habits of human civilisation.” It identifies symbols and associates appropriate meanings with them (Palani, 2012). It signifies an individual’s ability to recognise symbols and connect suitable purposes to them. Reading is a cornerstone for success in schools and throughout a lifetime. But taking it further in the context of university reading, it is the ability to plan and implement the action of the process of reading which presupposes that a student should build a feasible study timetable as a guide through the duration of one’s programme and not ignoring any possible adjustment due to changes (disruptions/events) along the way. University readers should engage in more cognitively demanding processes, reading to study from texts, reading to synthesise information and writing to critique texts (Grabe & Stoller, 2019). The reading problem has generated much debate from different quarters in recent times because of the disregard it is facing, especially among the younger generation. The reasons for the decline (if not demise) in the reading habits of the public, especially students, are in the heat of debate and discussion by academics, intellectuals, writers, librarians, and reading enthusiasts (Akanda et al., 2013). Ralfe and Baxen (2012) report that many students in their first year of higher education, for example, in Sub-Saharan Africa, struggle to read and write at the school exit level and cannot cope academically. The problem is not that the first years do not read; the question is, what kind of stuff do they read and for what reason?

Why we as individuals must read

On the 18th of September 2019, at Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, the African Union Regional Workshop on Promoting a Culture of Reading in Africa was held to emphasise the need to embrace a reading culture in Africa (AU, 2019).

Reading is needful for gaining information about the world. It underpins much of a student’s academic work, just as it should do the same for the lecturers’ academic life. As academics, students should always read to keep abreast of their subject and update their knowledge and understanding. They must maintain their work and ideas and research their peers’ works. Both students and their lecturers need to adopt a scholarly approach to their written assignments and work; this means checking their written work concerning what others have done on the same and related topics.

Cliff and Yeld (2006) argue that student success in higher education studies can only be achieved if students are adequately equipped to separate the point of an argument from its supporting detail, interact vigorously and critically with ideas in the text and elsewhere, produce well-reasoned arguments supported by appropriate evidence; perceive the structure and coherence of a text, as well as the organisation of ideas that contributes to that structure; and understand that learning involves negotiating meaning, applying insights in different contexts, developing a view of one’s own, and “seeing” the world differently because of these.

It is clear from the above that the ability to read academic texts stands central to achieving academic success. Reading is an important activity in which all must engage, and developing

skills is necessary. Palani (2012, p.92) views reading as “a process of thinking, evaluating, judging, imagining, reasoning and problem-solving.” Reading, therefore, is an essential tool for knowledge transfer.

Reading relaxes our minds and improves our command of language and vocabulary. Reading is a good companion that engenders pleasure, expands our horizons, and enriches our lives. Reading builds character, maturity, and free-thinking, enhancing awareness of social, economic, political, and environmental issues. It serves as a mental developer. It is an irreplaceable weapon for all-round growth and fulfilling one’s potential. Reading is the foundation upon which other academic skills are built.

It was asserted by Tella and Akande (2007) that the ability to read is at the heart of self-education and lifelong learning and that it is an art capable of transforming life and society. Reading is the key to unlocking future success (Inderjit, 2014).

Our different educational careers motivate us to read to maintain our competence and stay updated. When one embarks on a new research, reading is important to determine gaps in the extant literature. Research has it that reading fosters creative thinking, builds inquisitive minds, and enhances the lifelong learning abilities of a person (Obiagu, 2019; Wema, 2018).

The regular practice of reading and being able to evaluate reputable evidence is essential, particularly in an age of dis/misinformation. Thus, reading fosters sustainable development as it changes students’ lifestyles through the attainment of better education and employment, bringing in better incomes (Igwe, 2011).

Reading culture

Owusu-Acheaw (2014) defines reading habits as a well-planned and deliberate pattern of study that has attained a form of consistency in students’ understanding of academic subjects and passing examinations. Owusu-Acheaw (2014) argues along similar lines as Palani, stating that reading habits determine students’ academic achievements to a great extent and that both reading and academic achievements are interrelated and dependent on each other. Kojo et al. (2018) postulated that reading culture is formed if one develops a culture of reading regularly. This is because a habit is formed unconsciously when an individual does something often, and it becomes a normal part of their life. However, most youths nowadays, in Nigeria and South Africa, for instance, lack interest in reading. They prefer to spend hours on social media, chatting, browsing the net, and searching for hours on end, as if reading a book or any other written material has become old-fashioned for the youths.

With (collaborative) transformative leadership in re-imagining university students’ reading culture and learning outcomes, lecturers and institutional managers should engage in interrogations regarding first-year students’ reading habits since these are at their transition stage from high to higher education environments. We also chose to use first-year students because most incoming students seem unprepared to be self-directed but begin to develop self-directed learning skills during their first year (Cameron & Rideout, 2022).

Lecturers and university stakeholders should actively integrate reading programmes that entail a culture of reading to assist students to “improve their academic performance and promote their overall development as human beings” (Pourdavood & Yan, 2020). This should be a collaborative effort where all at their corner must play a positive role to change the *status quo*. Transformative leadership leads to a positive change in students' learning outcomes in multicultural school settings. Transformative leadership also requires that action be taken by all stakeholders to redress inequalities and to guarantee exemplary lifelong outcomes. Hence, aspiring school leaders, such as lecturers (key instruction agents) and management personnel, must critically reflect on the trend of events and transformative leadership practices, which should show in how faculty managers, library assistants, heads of departments/ coordinators, lecturers and other academic stakeholders affect reading activities inter-disciplinarily. One of the biggest reasons some students dread doing research is because it is a reading process. Additional reading enhances research because it results in more precise meaning out of the bulk of information gathered.

Reading culture must be developed and nurtured in various ways, requiring effort and determination. Reading should not occur because of pressure from academic tasks or to prepare for employment. Instead, it must always build up a person's mind and enable them to criticise, analyse, create, imagine, determine their well-being, and view the world in its totality (Ogbonna & Eze, 2015).

Increased reading has benefits that extend beyond the acquisition of content knowledge. It can also improve reading ability and the readers' attitudes to reading (Lukhele, 2013). It aids in the transfer of language-related skills (Pecorari et al., 2012). Furthermore, reading different texts may enhance students' skills in text comprehension as they begin to get a technical vocabulary and become familiar with varying types of text and textual elements. However, students must habitually read the prescribed or recommended texts and other academic-related self-selected texts to gain these benefits.

Statement of the Problem

When scholars refer to reading at the university level of study, they mean the strategies and self-discipline students employ to manage the whole facet of their time, class attendance, self and group study, after-school study and assignments and, or examination writing toward lifelong success involving the ability to study relevant texts, critiquing, analysing, synthesising, and evaluating such knowledge required at all levels of study (Bharuthram, 2012). Students' capacity to read critically is needed, especially upon transitioning from high school to tertiary education. Kojo et al. (2018) assert that a good reading culture has been formed if a student regularly develops a reading culture. But many of this generation of students do not identify with the category of those with a good reading culture; instead, they prefer to associate with activities on social media – following junk news and illicit activities endlessly; this is equivalent to spending time (not investing time) acquiring knowledge (whatever knowledge) through “reading”. Students who do not meet the basic admission requirements enter universities

through bridging and extended programmes (Van Wyk & Greyling, 2008). Adopting the practice of going to the library and picking a book or journal to read has become a daunting task since the innovation of the Internet with its social media and networking platforms. The worrisome reality is that many of them who 'qualify' to gain admission into university education are not prepared to meet the academic literacy demands of a university, affecting education so much that despite the myriad of leadership theories and reform strategies, the critiques and complaints about the current state of education continue unabated. Lecturers and other university stakeholders observe this and complain that many first-year students' first semester or year results often indicate low marks, prompting the adoption of a hands-on, collaborative transformative leadership strategy to re-imagine the students' reading culture for the best sustainable academic and positive lifelong outcome.

Research Questions

1. What factors can make (collaborative) transformative leadership re-imagine first-year students' reading culture?
2. Why must the respective education stakeholders contribute meaningfully to re-imagine first-year students' reading culture?

METHODOLOGY

The authors adopted a qualitative approach that used a desktop research methodology whereby various relevant literature sources were sought and used. It reviews existing research for information pertinent to the project's need, identifying specific or useful qualitative or quantitative data relevant to project needs, making it possible to identify gaps in existing data that may require further research. The use of desktop methodology helps understand how the research may contribute to a larger body of knowledge. The summary of insights drawn from source data also clarifies what work has already been done to avoid duplication of effort. These roles of the method provide an awareness of methodologies or approaches that have been tried before (State Government of Victoria, 2020). For example, literature sources such as Akanda et al. (2013), Ameyaw and Anto (2018), Jambo and Hoongde (2020), Shields (2020), and Sukesu et al. (2019) and many more were critiqued and analysed which their results are shown in the findings section.

FINDINGS

The following are the key results of this study that comprise the factors related to reimagining first-year students' reading culture.

Diversity and massification of first-year students

First-year students comprise a mixture of students who graduated from high schools of different categories – public and independent schools with various qualities of teachers and learners. Some of those institutions, especially public schools, produce more slow and average learners compared with the independent schools, which usually graduate more gifted and brilliant

learners, perhaps because of the organisation and delivery of instructional materials in the classrooms.

Again, most of the courses have many enrolled students per class, which can prove challenging for a lecturer to manage, especially as many such students are slow readers or below average. Therefore, there is a need to address the needs of diverse and contemporary first-year university students immediately admitted to their fields of study.

Influence of the Internet, social media, and social networking

Since both reading and academic achievements are interrelated and dependent on each other, students should focus more on academic reading than devouring junk from social media and social networking. This does not mean that the Internet is useless. The issue is that many students misemploy the tools of the supposedly educative Internet.

To worsen the situation, there seems to be a lack of support for reading skills, with most universities providing only support for writing (Ruegg, 2021) but neglecting support for reading skills, which can result in students not internalising the core of their writing problem.

Furthermore, Shahzad et al. (2021), emphasising the value of students' writing skills, stated that writing skills are an important and crucial part of communication for students throughout their academic careers because they allow them to organise their thoughts and feelings while also passing on meaning through well-developed content.

The above is plausible, but then, one wonders how writing can be good without the strategic process of reading.

Key roles of stakeholders to re-imagine students' reading culture

Even as some distant key stakeholders play their roles by way of publishing and supplying /donating study materials to universities, the faculties and departmental managers also play their role in ensuring that teaching and learning are delivered. However, there has not been any synergy regarding how lectures are given. For example, monitoring of lecturers' and students' class attendance is lacking in most departments, while in others, such as the Communication Sciences Department, orderliness is always followed. In other words, the findings revealed that there is no adequate collaborative, transformative leadership in managing the reading culture of first-year students. Ololube (2013) described leadership as a type of responsibility focused on attaining ends by using the available human and material resources to ensure a cohesive and coherent organisation. Thus, institutional managers, including lecturers and students, should collaborate with other stakeholders to play a crucial role in providing practical approaches that help to re-imagine students' active readership.

The findings also indicated that the study is expected to stimulate further in-depth studies that may improve reading habits and interests and add value to the library of the university because the reading culture among first-year students at CUT is low, as they seem to lag in engagement in intensive and extensive reading which is the hallmark of their scholarly and intellectual development (Mulumba, 2016).

Finally, one of the findings is that there is every possibility that first-year students' reading habits can change for the better after a few months of joining the university.

DISCUSSION and IMPLICATIONS

This study explores what and why collaborative transformative leadership at the beginning of university education can restore first-year students' reading culture. We discuss the findings, drawing on the use of collaborative transformative leadership in re-imagining first-year students' reading culture in CUT, Free State. The point is that exercising transformative leadership in a phenomenon such as reading culture can prove problematic since it addresses the failures in other theories head-on. We recognised reading as a process-oriented endeavour that does not result in creating an immediate product to show as an accomplishment of the time spent. We acknowledge that we may not easily measure and value it. But the long-lasting, meaningful change that collaborative, transformative leaders make enriches students' readership prospectus (University of Redlands, 2022).

It is usually evident that universities, especially first-year students, comprise many linguistically and culturally diverse students. At CUT, such students are a mixture of slow, average, and gifted/bright students who are products of different qualities of both local and city high schools. We lecturers, as the most interacting agents of teaching and learning, for the sake of this diverse community of new students, must prioritise shifting reading as a part valued for its academic identity, which is more so because some intelligent students value their lecturers as omniscient instructors. Therefore, universities should not neglect the support for reading skills because this can result in students internalising the core of their writing skills (Ruegg, 2021). The implication is that we should adopt the research finding that reading fosters creative thinking, builds inquisitive minds, and enhances the lifelong learning abilities of a person (Wema, 2018). In essence, it does not matter how much we (lecturers and students) read but what use we make of the reading that we do. As academics, we must read in different ways, within various levels and for multiple purposes. We lecturers must help our first-year students develop into readers who can approach various reading tasks disciplined and be equipped with appropriate and helpful strategies (Fairbairn & Fairbairn, 2001).

These days, the influence of the Internet, social media, and social networking on university students' work has taken centre stage in academic debates (Camilia et al., 2013). Social networking has become part of the daily life experiences of an increasing number of people (Kuppuswamy & Narayan, 2010). Using the Internet is not evil as long as it benefits students' studies. The problem is that most university students seem to be using internet tools indiscriminately for issues that do not pertain to their academic work. For example, they use the platforms to access and watch indecent scenes/images that can lead them to different crimes. The truth is that with cell phones, laptops, and internet platforms such as Facebook, students are currently more of full-time shapers of world events with politicians and businesspeople. Today, most youths and students possess Facebook accounts. Olubiyi (2013) noted that

students are so engrossed in social media that they take their time that should have been invested in academic work. Obi et al. (2012) observed that using these sites also affects students' use of English and grammar. The students use short message services (SMS) in writing words in the classrooms. Their "Love" becomes lv, 4 in place of **For**, U in place of **You**, D in place of **The**, etcetera. And all these destroy their assessments.

As writers of this paper, we implore all stakeholders – lecturers, students, institutional collaborators, and publishers- to rescue this situation by re-imagining first-year students' reading culture through our transformative leadership strategy. We can do it since there is every possibility that first-year students' reading habits can change for the better after a few months of joining the university.

CONCLUSION

The paper highlighted that (collaborative) transformative leadership (CTL) practices inspire and motivate education leaders to seek higher levels of collective success, as in re-imagining first-year students' reading culture. It asserted that CTL could engineer education stakeholders to be more creative and interconnected in managing students' reading culture in multicultural contexts to assist universities in positively contributing to extraordinary school development. Results indicated that applying CTL to re-imagine first-year students' reading culture can shift the students and their lecturers to engage in intensive and extensive reading, which is the hallmark of their scholarly and intellectual development.

Recommendations

With the identified results, the study makes the following recommendations:

- Students should learn to manage their time correctly, and lecturers should use social networking sites (which students cherish) to promote the teaching-learning process.
- Further in-depth research can be conducted on similar aspects of this topic to do more exhaustive findings and recommendations.
- Policymakers, institutional leaders, curriculum developers and classroom managers need to be equipped with insights on transformative leadership perspectives and the potency to secure the potential benefits of transformation for the well-being of the wider society.

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