

## Centering a Centre for Teaching and Learning

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### Research Domains

Learning, teaching and assessment (LTA)

### Abstract

The Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL) at Stellenbosch University (SU), South Africa, facilitates the professional learning of academics and supports management's strategic objectives. The CTL occupies a 'third space' between academics and management (Whitchurch, 2008), interacting across constituency boundaries to increase the teaching, learning and assessment (TLA) capacity of the institution (Taylor, 2005). The CTL advisors' role as thought leaders and change agents are compromised by the marginal position of the CTL at SU, however. This study investigates how the support rendered by the CTL is perceived by academics and management. A secondary outcome of the study would be recommendations how the CTL could further enhance TLA at SU. The findings would inform amendments to the CTL's facilitation of professional learning and strategic institutional support. The resultant enhanced leadership role of the CTL will also increase its stature and credibility.

### Full paper

The vision of the Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL) at Stellenbosch University (SU), South Africa, is to be a knowledge partner that advances the teaching, learning and assessment (TLA) culture at SU in a way that promotes a just society in South Africa. Its related mission is to create professional learning opportunities for academic staff in faculties and to be thought leaders in responsive, innovative and scholarly TLA.

The CTL occupies an emerging 'third space' between academics and management (Whitchurch, 2008), interacting across constituency boundaries to increase the TLA capacity of the institution (Taylor, 2005). As with CTLs generally, the CTL at SU is not only expected to facilitate the professional learning of academics but is also increasingly tasked by university management to support strategic initiatives and effect change (Lieberman, 2018; Czerniewicz, 2021). The position of the CTL professional learning advisors in this space is precarious, however.

Liaising between the strategic plans of institutional leaders and their own academic peers from an “in-between” space, the CTL professional learning advisors are compelled to act strategically to protect their autonomy, integrity, and authenticity (Sugrue et al., 2018:2343-2344). This leads to the advisors experiencing “hybrid identities” which, “coupled with a struggle to be considered as legitimate role players within higher education have resulted in academic developers occupying [a] chameleon like existence” (Behari-Leak et al., 2018:416). The advisors’ role as thought leaders and TLA change agents are compromised by the liminal position of the CTL at SU as a research-intensive university where research takes precedence over TLA. Academic staff generally have limited time available to develop their teaching, and research takes priority in terms of recognition and reward. In addition, the CTL, like CTLs in general, usually, is financed by top-sliced funding from the faculties. This puts the CTL in a vulnerable position in which it needs to protect itself and retain staff and resources.

Within this context the experience of CTL advisors is that the CTL seems to function on the margins of the university. When shifts in TLA occur, institutionally or in faculties, decisions are often taken without requesting input from the CTL advisors. They therefore frequently perceive their responses to decisions for change as mechanistic and reactive, believing that they should instead be leading the way to change with interventions and ‘solutions’ underpinned by theory. The advisors correspondingly question not only their legitimacy as change agents, but also the stature of the CTL at SU.

This study aims at investigating how the support rendered by the CTL at SU in terms of its vision and mission and the realising of institutional TLA objectives is perceived by academic staff and management. A secondary outcome of the study would be indications how the CTL advisors could contribute more to enhancing the status of TLA at SU. Should the CTL be able to merge the responsibilities and services of professional learning with an institutional leadership role as organisational developer, its role as change agent would be consolidated. This could enable the CTL to affirm its role as a key agent in the complex network of the university and enhance the stature of TLA at the institution.

The conceptual structure of the study is based on an interpretivist research paradigm. The methodology employed will be phenomenology and interviews will serve as the data collection instrument. As a first step, the CTL advisors will be asked in a focus group interview to unpack the six strategic priorities of SU in terms of how these priorities are realized in the professional learning opportunities and thought leadership offered by the CTL. The advisors will subsequently conduct individual interviews with the Vice-Deans (Learning and Teaching) of the ten SU faculties. Individual interviews with representatives from the other SU constituencies with whom the CTL interacts – professional and academic support services, and senior management – will follow.

The findings of the study should inform the CTL regarding necessary amendments to its approach to the professional learning of academics and its strategic support to management to ensure targeted contributions to TLA at SU. These changes will not only strengthen the leadership role of the CTL advisors but also enhance the stature and credibility of the CTL. The study’s findings could furthermore inform decisions by management regarding ways to improve the institution’s pursuit of its strategic priorities and enhance the status of TLA at SU.

## References

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