

**RHODES UNIVERSITY**  
*Where leaders learn*

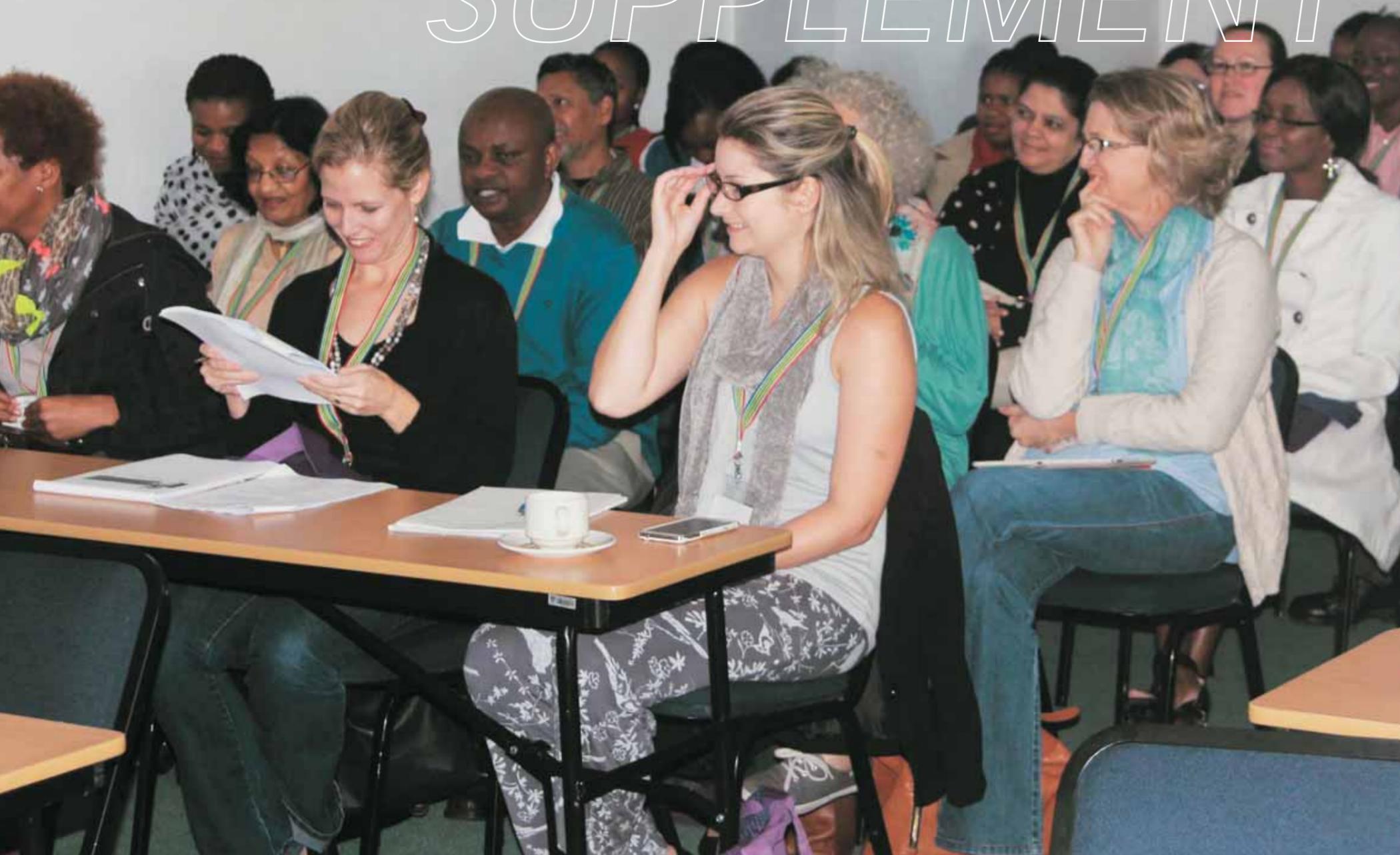
The Rhodes University Community Newsletter

# Rhodos

*Staff Edition*

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# COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT SUPPLEMENT



# RU's first Community Engagement Symposium

Rhodes University hosted its first Community Engagement Learning Symposium that was held over three days in the secluded setting of the Gavin Relly, Postgraduate Village. The symposium was made up of prominent community engagement practitioners, community members and students who were encouraged to share their experiences in Community Engagement (CE) work.

The symposium was also utilized as a platform for guests and speakers to generate and exchange ideas to alleviate the social and economic challenges present in underdeveloped communities in Grahamstown and South Africa at large.

Rhodes University alumni and principle lecturer in Community Psychology at York St John University, Jacqui Akhurst, based her talk on the importance of Community Based Learning (CBL) in tertiary institutions. Akhurst also highlighted the differences in the practice of psychology between South African and London based tertiary institutions.

"What I love about the study of psychology in South Africa is that there is a need to practice the knowledge in our society, and Community Based Learning enriches and allows this ability," Akhurst said.

Akhurst moved on to explain the limitless benefits that productive engagement between universities and communities can have on each other. "Community service is about knowledge exchange, not only that, but I see community engagement as being very intrinsic to our work as psychologists," she said.

The importance of self-reflection after engaging in community work was a sentiment shared by all of the delegates. "Students have the opportunity to think about their experience in community work so that experiential learning is not lost on them," Akhurst said.

"These experiences have a deep emotional impact on students; they need to be able to reflect on their experiences emotionally," she said.

Lecturer at Walter Sisulu University (WSU), Gladys M. Ashu, echoed Akhurst's sentiments about the importance of self-reflection after engaging in community work. "Community engagement is a lifelong experience that students cannot forget when they are gone, it's something that will remain

with them for the rest of their lives and skills that they can use in their communities," Ashu said.

Though the talks were predominantly based on the positive aspects of CE, the exploitation done by tertiary institutions to such agencies was also discussed. "Is the university engaging in Community Engagement because it makes them look good or because it is important and crucial? I've heard that the second part is true for Rhodes University," Akhurst said.

The exploitation of CE agencies done by students was also brought into the discussion by the delegates. Third year Rhodes University student and CE volunteer at Grahamstown based Amasango Career School, Mondolozzi Gift Sandi, spoke of his own experience of exploiting CE agencies.

"At the beginning I became a volunteer for the wrong reasons: to polish my CV and to be a hero for those who are in need of my services. My perceptions changed when a boy that I mentored and who was older than me shared his life story with me," Sandi said.

"From that moment on I realized that my perceptions were completely wrong. We as volunteers should motivate and inspire our mentees to unleash their potential; through this boy, whose name is Ayanda, I have learned the true meaning of Ubuntu," he said.

The symposium was concluded with a reflection done by both delegates and guests on how tertiary institutions have given back to the community. Not only that, but a question was raised as to how communities have put in to use the services made available to them. At the end guests were left to answer the most important question raised by Akhurst. "Does the world need psychologists more than it needs effective community workers?"



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## The new classroom

The time for a national curriculum that dumbs down learners and teachers is over.

These were some of the sentiments shared by Professors Esther Ramani and Michael Joseph during their presentation on the first day of Rhodes University's Community Engaged Learning Symposium.

Their presentation entitled: "What university staff and schoolteachers can learn from each other: a community engagement project in biliteracy for epistemic access in a township school" delved into the challenges faced in the classroom and proposed solutions to them.

Prof Ramani posed the question: does the teacher-training model work or do we need to look at something else?

Their proposal is a model which allows academics and teachers to collaborate with the goal of bettering the education system, as they have done in collaboration with local schoolteacher, Nompumelelo Frans.

Prof Ramani condemned the current CAPS curriculum for dumbing down both learners and teachers by not giving the teacher room to teach as they see fit: "everything the teacher has to do is written down", she stated.

Prof Ramani provided an example of an exercise wherein pupils had to interpret a graph and answer questions testing their comprehension. Instead of doing this, Frans divided her pupils into groups wherein they could gather their own data and construct their own graphs in order to help them understand that process.

Prof Joseph noted that one of their project's aims is to be able to see problems in the classrooms through the eyes of teachers. One such problem was a lack of motivation amongst learners. This was however dispelled when they saw pupils not playing during break, but rather voluntarily remaining in the classroom to do schoolwork.



"If we have such classrooms we'll have learners that are able to ask questions," said Bulelwa Mangali.

In this 'self-initiated' work, the pupils would go up to the black board and write as the teacher had previously done. "The black board", Prof Joseph stated, "should be a site for teaching and learning for both teachers and learners".

Their project also aims to promote biliteracy. "We want to dispel the colonial myth that African languages are not suitable to use for academic purposes," commented Prof Joseph.

The trio of two academics and a teacher spoke at length about their promotion of biliteracy in a class of Grade 3 learners at a local school. One such example was Frans' use of an isiXhosa book to tell a story to her pupils in order to develop their narrative learning. The foundation phase teacher shared the challenges she encountered when teaching this. In particular, how the pupils tried to remember every sentence in the story in order to retell it. Prof Ramani worked with her to teach the pupils that they don't have to tell the story as it is written but that they can tell it as they remember it.

The trio played a video showing Prof Ramani retell the isiXhosa story to the Grade 3 pupils. One pupil stood up to recite the story in isiXhosa after hearing both Prof Ramani's English version and the isiXhosa version told by Frans.

"We are essentially teaching IsiXhosa as a third language," remarked Frans after the video. The learners tell the story entitled "uWide no Jack" in non-standard isiXhosa because that is the

language they speak at home, whilst they are taught in standard isiXhosa as well as English.

This encourages language comprehension - a problem Frans observed in students in their senior phase of school and what she believes is the cause of many school failures.

Encouraging self-initiated learning has been criticised as a possible cause of unruly classrooms. But as IkamvaYouth branch co-ordinator, Bulelwa Mangali commented at the end of the presentation: "If we have such classrooms we'll have learners that are able to ask questions".



# The *Amanzi for Food* Research Lecture

As the 2015 Community Engagement Learning Symposium got underway, students and academics from all around the country gathered at the Gavin Relly Postgraduate Village for the Water Research Commission's (WRC) *Amanzi for Food* lecture on the 4 May 2015.

The *Amanzi for Food* research project titled *Generative Research and Expansive Learning in an Agricultural Learning Network in Nkokobe Municipal Area* was presented by Master's student, Kim Weaver and PhD student Tichaona Pesanayi, the researchers for the project along with their project supervisor Prof Heila Lotz-Sisitka.

*Amanzi for Food* which translates to water for food seeks to address this problem of 'knowledge flow' within the agricultural context. "We worked with lecturers from the agricultural department, students from Fort Hare, governmental extension officers and farmers trying to get rain water harvest into their practise," said Weaver. "We ran a course with the people of the community of Nkokobe from August 2014 to April 2015 to try and implement rain water harvesting into their curriculum and training into the farmers practices."

The research project was inspired by the challenges of water scarcity and food security that South Africa now faces. In an abstract presented at the lecture the research group explained how historical farming practices in the rural Eastern Cape, and more recent research produced by water sector researchers, has shown that rainwater harvesting and conservation practices can help improve the efficiency in water use for agricultural practices.

The research paper focuses on the development of two related generative research processes for expanding learning. "Along with the course we have demonstration sites in Nkokobe that have come out of this project," said Weaver, "we have been helping to facilitate these and support them financially through the *Amanzi for Food* project."

Murray & Roberts Chair of Environmental Education and Sustainability, Prof Heila Lotz-Sisitka, recipient of the 2014 Vice-Chancellor's Community Engagement Award as a member of the Jonga Pambili Sinethemba Project group, then presented a section in the lecture about generative research for transformation.



The lecture was well received with participants from the different universities contributing rich commentary and questions.

"Somebody from Venda University asked us about social capital and whether we have incorporated that into our research," said Weaver, in an interview after the lecture. "Both my colleague and I have since

read up on it and we will be incorporating it into our future research." Weaver went on to add that the lecture was successful in that people became interested in the work they do.

The lecture and symposium served as a platform for this team and many others to engage with the academics of Rhodes University as well as the other visiting universities on the successes they had experienced through engaging with the community in an uplifting way.