

International recognition for Bertha Centre (UCT GSB) researchers

Issued by [UCT Graduate School of Business](#)

29 Sep 2020

The Bertha Centre for Social Innovation and Entrepreneurship is developing a new teaching case method - incorporating multiple perspectives for the complex issues of our time - which they have been invited to present at the North American Case Research Association (NACRA) 2020 Conference.

A new teaching case method in development by the Bertha Centre for Social Innovation and Entrepreneurship based at the University of Cape Town's Graduate School of Business (UCT GSB) has been selected by organisers of the North American Case Research Association to form part of the 2020 conference programme in October. Part of the Social Systems Innovation portfolio, the Bertha Centre members have also been invited to host a panel discussion about teaching case writing and development.

"We were teaching business case studies that were offered from a single perspective and we realised that these weren't conducive to the kinds of discussions we wanted to have around systems change in the classroom," says Ncedisa Nkonyeni, convenor of the Bertha Centre's Systems Change and Social Impact Executive Education course. "Changing systems is not about fixing a problem in isolation but applying different frameworks, tools and theories to transform the system that creates it," adds Senior Researcher Cynthia Rayner who helped to develop the new model of case writing.

Rayner had already started to explore new ways of writing teaching cases with multiple voices and perspectives, allowing for greater empathy and deeper understanding of the complexity of certain situations to emerge in the classroom. It was decided that the Systems Change and Social Impact Executive Education course was best-positioned to incubate the early development of the methodology.

The Bertha Centre, a specialised unit at the UCT GSB, convenes this course as part of its efforts to build transformative capacity of the social innovation and entrepreneurship sectors in Africa and globally.

The Harvard Business School case writing style is used at teaching institutions all over the world and typically features a single protagonist in an organisation having to solve a particular problem. "But what we were teaching in the classroom was that, especially from a systems point of view, single protagonists usually can't change systems on their own. Multiple actors and institutions have to be part of systemic solutions. So we started playing with other ways to show how people can work in systems together - through action and interaction," explains Rayner.

Even though they are still refining their new case writing method, there has already been much interest from fellow researchers at the UCT GSB as well as other business schools, such as the Anderson School of Management at the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA), which has funded the development of two systems cases. Certain aspects of their methodology need tweaking, but Nkonyeni and Rayner know they are onto something. They have already developed three systems cases - one on the #FeesMustFall campaign, one on Social Impact Bonds and another on Child and Youth Finance International.

"As the world battles big systemic changes, we are fully cognisant that no one person has the answer," says Nkonyeni. "So there is the sense that there is not so much a single answer out there but a process informed by many different perspectives." Rayner agrees, "The nature of our current crisis as a result of Covid-19 is that it has made more visible the dynamics of the systems surrounding us, exposing their inadequacies. There is nothing like a highly contagious virus to show how interconnected we are."

One of the challenges of designing a new teaching case method like this, however, is realising that it can be harder to

teach - and understand. "In essence, we are recreating an issue that does not lead to a neat or satisfying conclusion, but fully reveals the complexity of a certain situation. This can be an uncomfortable situation for some students, and even some instructors," Nkonyeni adds.

"Other business schools have done some innovative work regarding case studies, like the Yale so-called 'raw' case approach, which champions a more multidimensional approach through information synthesis," says Claire Barnardo, Case Writing Centre Manager at the UCT GSB. "What makes this new style of case writing so exciting is that it represents a kind of evolution of the case writing study model, a revitalisation of the narrative form, which we know works in a teaching scenario. But with this method, students can arrive at new solutions for the kind of complex problems we see in the world today.

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