

TABSA 2018 Team Reflection

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Dedication

This reflection is dedicated to the *beloved community* throughout the ages: *Cast not away your confidence it has great recompense of reward!*

I thank the beloved community - timeless, global - especially those such as Nelson Mandela, Steve Biko, Maya Angelou, Martin Luther King Jr., and countless others, who have selflessly fought the good fight, gone before and helped to pave our way.

I am thankful for this year's 18 Teachers Across Borders teammates, and our South African colleagues for sharing their love of people and dedication to their learners and to the craft of teaching. We once calculated the collective full time teaching experience of TABSA team to be over 300 years - what I so appreciate is the wisdom and love of life that teammates with so many more years of experience than me - have shared, not only in the area of teaching, but also in the lessons they have taught me about, giving, service and aging well. Thanks also go to my family, friends, sponsors, students and colleagues for their grace and support on our pilgrim's progress. My special thanks go to Paulina Faraj, Molly Carradine, Valerie Henry, Susan Cantey, Lola Fasehun, Azania Brown, Sonia Campbell, Linda Harrison and Grace Sontan, who were key members of my prayerful and ardent support team.

Cast Not Away Your Confidence

When my family, friends and students asked about my upcoming visit to South Africa, I felt a degree of wonder, gratitude and excitement, but also a dusting of incredulity and trepidation. Now, as I share my recollections with them and reflect, in the weeks subsequent to my return, I realize that my life will always be marked by life before and after TABSA.

By far, this was one of the most fulfilling experiences of my life thus far. And, as I have found with the many photos and videos taken, the usual means of communication such as words and images seem such inadequately poor tools to convey the heart prints that had been left. I was reminded of a phrase that had helped me as a student myself- *Cast not away your confidence it has great reward!* This phrase is written on many of the worksheets I give to my students, and it was written on the blackboard of our classroom in South Africa. It is a reminder to me, that we should hold on to the confidence we are blessed with, in faith believing it will have far lasting impact and may even outlive us.

The writer Maya Angelou always said that courage was the most important of the virtues because without courage you cannot practice any of the others with consistency. I have returned to completing this reflection on the eve of a new academic year as a high school math teacher. I realize that pre-TABSA, excuses, worry and fear could stake their claim, post-TABSA, I have learned that to be afraid of new challenges and experiences is natural - but that we can feel the fear and do it anyway. There is an adage that states that the safest place for ships is in the port - the problem is that they were designed to set sail. Indeed, ships untested and untampered by voyage rot.

Long Walk To Freedom

Many years ago, as I read Nelson Mandela's autobiography *Long Walk to Freedom* which chronicles the circumstances of his birth, upbringing, and role in the fight against the country's brutal apartheid regime -

striving, as he and others did for a free and democratic South Africa, I did not want to finish reading his story. To do so at the time, seemed as if it would be so heartbreaking - marking a farewell of sort, that I was not ready for. To this day - my heart intact - I still do not know how the last pages of this love-letter to Madiba's nation ends, because it was impossible for me to finish. Leaving this thread loose meant that his story would stay with me, and, as I found first hand this summer, to this day the journey of that long walk to freedom continues to be written by all engaged in the struggle for freedom.

On a more personal note, yet in similar vein, for the final breakfast, which marked the end of our TABSA team's joint experience - as, by now, a loving family sharing our last meal together - I was perhaps conspicuous by my absence. As Andie rightly said cry baby that I was, I simply could not say goodbye to the TABSA family, who I had not only become so very fond of, but also loved deeply. I was an emotional wreck. Saying so long to Marisol was inevitable of course. My Panamanian roomie Mari, had not only been one of our caring TABSA "moms" on the trip - someone who intuitively looked out for everyone - but, (as my bruises showed)- she was also my designated "pinch me quick" buddie, assigned to let me know that what I thought we were experiencing was in fact actually happening.

There was no sneaking out of our hotel room. At 5:45am, Mari dressed for her morning workout, and I for the trip that would take me away from our cocoon, tearfully hugged it out, and said a heartfelt prayer - entreating God's blessings - until we meet again...

Three Words

Three words sum up the three weeks of workshops and the TABSA experience for me - Grace, Love and Provocative. I first saw boundless grace in the way that my fellow team-mates cared for each other and all with whom they came into contact. For example, I was witness to an interaction between Veronica and Jim, when she thoughtfully and methodically went through some symptoms he was experiencing and gave suggestions for remedies. I saw how Jim Metz would go around a gatherings such as at a hotel restaurant or in a market offering delicacies of Hawaiian confectionary, dates from his layover in UAE or Biltong - and that no meal was complete without Brad Uy offering fellow diners a sample of his dish, often causing a ripple effect of "you have got to try this!" Our team's director Yunus Peer and his wife Laurie Lee, along with Thokozani Metshane (and aided by Owen Martel) tirelessly navigated the logistics, liaison and all accommodations for the team - with unrivaled selflessness.

I was part of the senior mathematics phase team which consisted of wonderful team-mates Jim Metz, Sami Atif, Brad Uy and Aviva Halani. I am so thankful to each of them, they each taught me so much. This was my first year with TABSA and my first visit to the African continent, but I hope it will not be my last.

Here are some of my memorable experiences in the classroom:

Finding the Optimal Solution!

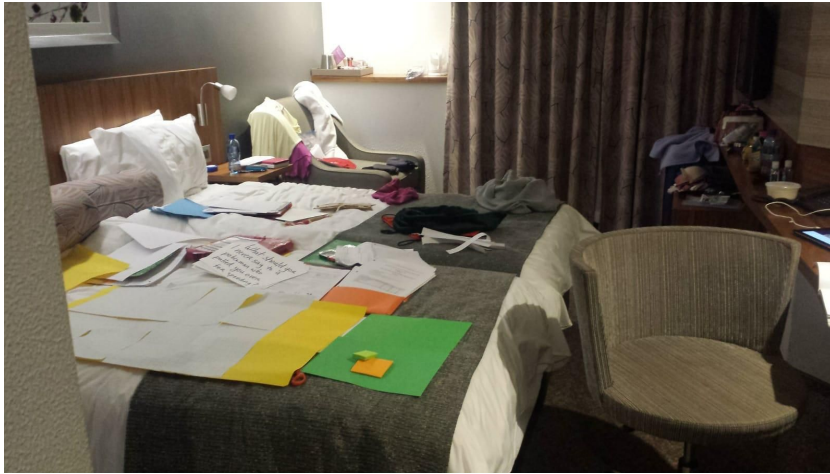


One of the many things that impressed me about our South African colleagues was their unquestionable passion for problem-solving and working together to find solutions. Goodwin (pictured) who is a senior phase maths and science teacher was a classic example of this. At one stage he explained with great conviction and passion his solution to a ratio problem. What impressed me greatly was how gracious he was to hear critiques and how little ego was attached to coming up with the best answer that took into account all learners. In Western culture we can become so invested with our answer, and our way of seeing a problem, that the problem solving process can become unduly tense. This was not the case with our colleagues. With ease and aplomb, they engaged in robust discussions that not only sought to find the optimal solution, but also addressed the pedagogical strategies needed to teach and address the learners. This was a huge take-away for me, which I am sure will have an impact on my own approach to problem-solving with others.

My Beautiful Learners

In the final week of the workshops we were able to work more closely in small groups with our colleagues to help them to present selected topics. As one colleague put it when he called upon Eunice, a member of our group - you are my beautiful learner! It became clear that by each of us putting ourselves in learn mode, we got much more out of the workshops. This reminded me of a conversation with two teammates - I remember Sami Atif saying that it was OK not to have too many expectations or worry going into the TABSA experience and that with all the variables in play, it was best to expect nothing more of ourselves than to be present because this was a very new situation for us and we would all simply try our best. I also recall Robyn Ide sharing some of what she had learned at a math education conference earlier this year and having an Aha! moment as we reflected on ourselves not only as educators but as learners. Thinking of oneself as not merely a workshop facilitator but as a keen learner was an excellent philosophical stance which brought immense joy, peace and encouragement as the weeks unfolded and we learned so much from our South African counterparts and all who we came into contact with.

Preparation and Reflections Were a Refreshing On-Going Aspect of the Workshops



Preparing resources in the hotel room.

Reflection helped to continue our learning as well as our teaching

As teachers we are innately dedicated to learning, especially to learning more of the content we love and in every field there is so much of that to be learned. We each defacto, know how to study and learn from the work of others as well as our own. I imagine though that many of us are less skilled at being reflective about learning from experience. At the end of each work-day Yunus would gather us as a team and

have us share our daily debriefs. It was wonderful to listen to one another, and I think that this helped us to experience more richly and authentically some of the engagement through the eyes of others.

Lessons Learned

Certitude - I learned that certainty it is over-rated and to be more adaptable - which fostered more creative approaches to thinking outside the box

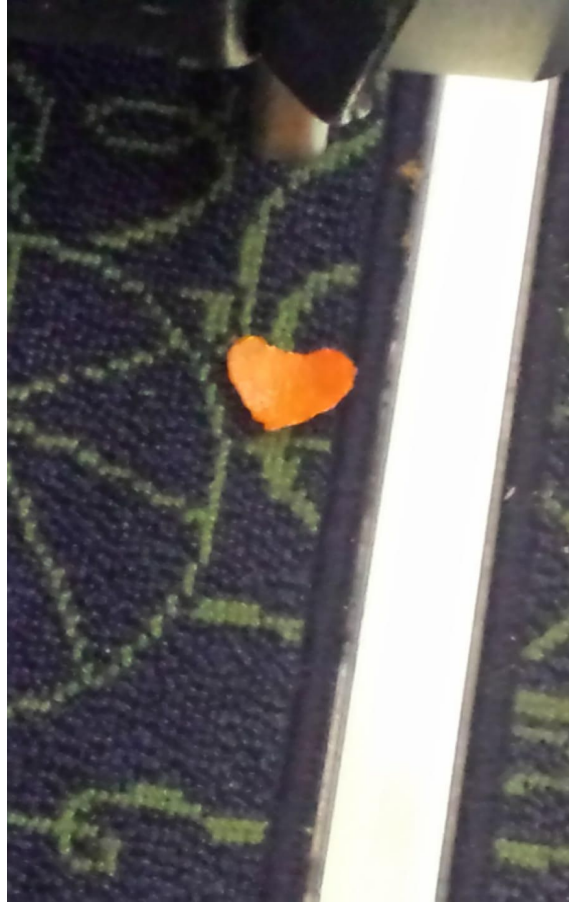
Resourcing the curriculum - learned that trash can be turned into treasure and to do backwards design - start with the end mind - try to figure out what you want learners to get out of a lesson and work backwards - do we really need PowerPoints and worksheets?

Optimal solutions - learned to answer the person, not the problem - our colleagues taught me the importance of rigorous discussions in collaborative learning and letting go of ego to continually seek ways to reach learners

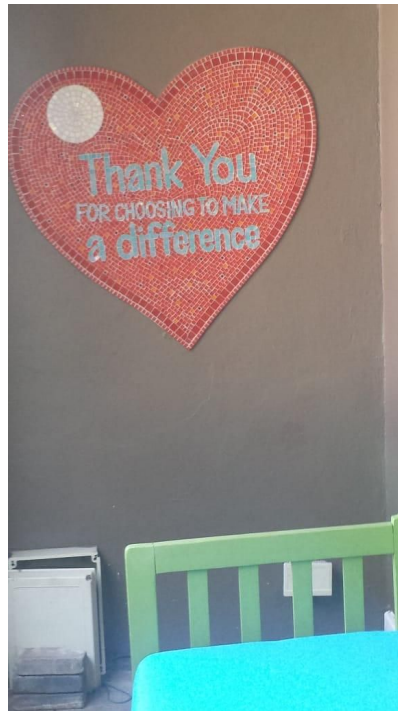
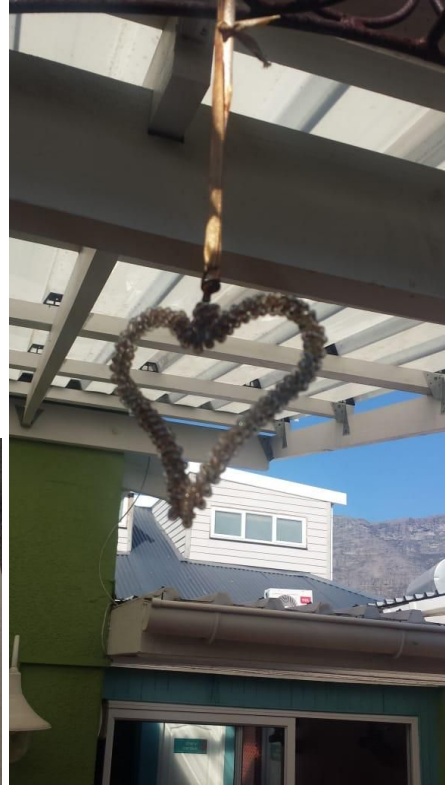
Leaving Hearts Prints!

One of the central messages for me on this trip was just the willingness to have an open heart, as well as open hands and mind. It seemed that everywhere I looked during our trip and subsequent to it all, I saw hearts, from heart shaped leaves in nature, to even a heart-shaped piece of orange peel on the floor of a plane, which confirmed this message:





A heart-shaped orange peel seen on the floor of a plane ride at the end of TABSA 2018.



**Thank-you my dear TABSA family! You are amazing people!
I am forever grateful and hope that I can return with you all to South Africa!**