

My role in TABSA 2018 was peculiar, so my perspective on the project is probably a little peculiar as well. I was one of the small background support crew, not one of the frontline teachers in the workshops. My own educational background was much heavier in the humanities than in the math and science fields TABSA deals with. It was my first time participating in TABSA, and my first time in Africa at all, in a group that included some formidable veterans. As best I could tell, I was the only participant who wasn't a career academic, as well as the youngest team member.

I wound up seeing the workshops as being concerned with leadership as much as they were with math and science, and with charismatic leadership in particular. I'm used to math and science having an air of impersonality, abstraction, and order. Everything with TABSA was contrastingly personal, immediate, and chaotic. Even the most bureaucratic elements of the situation were shot with self-conscious high drama, and passing quickly among the classrooms made for a kaleidoscopic tour of different teaching styles. This really came through to me when I had the chance to watch a South African teacher running a class at the winter school. Her approach was fundamentally different to anything I'd seen before - an unbroken torrent of shouting with the word "what" used for emphasis. Then I went back to the workshop, where our team was recommending long, deliberate pauses after open-ended questions. The curricular concepts were the same, but the transmissions could hardly have been more different, and the basis for choosing one instead of the other wasn't externally obvious.

I've learned traveling that unfamiliarity is inefficient. It creates drag and incoherence. It's also exciting, and carnivalesque, and escapist in various senses of the word. TABSA involves hundreds of professional experts getting together and trying to behave in unfamiliar, uncharacteristic ways about the things they're professional experts in. The drag, incoherence, and general mess are considerable, and exciting, and from beginning to end the main thing that appears to make it work is charismatic leadership. There's a person at the front of the room, or at the corner of the table, or behind the wheel of the van, making things happen and hustling. It might not be the same person from one moment to the next, but without someone stepping up, going out on that limb over and over, nothing happens at all. It feels desperate and heroic and worrisome, and accessible. At one point I thought I might actually be teetering on the brink of a heart attack from the combined absurd stresses of the project and the situation at home: and wouldn't that be letting people down.

I suppose education works when people are loyal both to each other and to common ideals, and have roles to play that are worth playing seriously, with a certain attending self-conscious drama. It's a theme I should have seen more sharply from a distance, working on the TABSA website and past years' participant reflections, before arriving on location this year, but there's no teacher like experience, and TABSA packs a lot of that into a short time for everyone involved.

I'm grateful for the chance to participate, and I hope we did all right.