The Natural Science Collections Facility: Building community with South African museums and herbaria

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Abstract

The Natural Science Collections Facility (NSCF) is a South African initiative to develop a network of museum and herbarium institutions, to secure the collections under their care, and to ensure collections are used for research that is relevant to local and global priorities. A key component of the NSCF work is community building. In the past, institutions have operated independently and fall under a range of national, provincial, and local governance structures. Many collections are understaffed and resources for collections care are limited. Differing organizational cultures, histories, and sometimes individual personalities, present significant obstacles to transformation, network building and progress.

In 2018, shortly after its inauguration, transformation consultants joined the NSCF to facilitate the community building process. Emphasis shifted away from a purely business-oriented focus to a 'softer', people-centric orientation. The consultants introduced a wide range of social technologies such as meeting check-ins, active listening, rich pictures and a range of tools from the Liberating Structures framework, as well as new leadership paradigms and a new theory of organizational change to catalyze transformation from the bottom up. Importantly, the change paradigm is non-deterministic, and removes any requirements for goals, objectives, and timelines. Instead it prioritizes change that arises organically and spontaneously as a result of greater interpersonal engagement, breaking down barriers imposed by traditional hierarchy, bringing previously unheard voices to the fore, and engaging deeply with difficult, uncomfortable problems.

Given South Africa's socio-political history, race is one such difficult problem and remains a central topic in this transformation journey. Race-related problems are still deeply entrenched within South African institutions and often reflect historical privilege of whites over people of colour despite extensive equity target-based efforts to address them. The NSCF transformation process has highlighted the importance of confronting these issues, which are often opaque to historically privileged groups within organizations. Given the sensitivity of such issues, processes of engaging with them are deep, must be

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appropriately contained, and focus on uncovering new insights and illuminating new information or points of view.

The community building process has in many ways been successful. A sense of community and camaraderie has developed amongst a significant portion of staff members in participating institutions and has been evidenced through the support provided to each other during the COVID19 pandemic, extent of engagement in NSCF social media platforms, and the general tone and atmosphere of meetings and workshops. There are still challenges though and some members and sectors in the community remain disengaged. Key lessons have been the importance of having professional consultants to lead community building and transformation initiatives of this scale; the need for people to open their minds and hearts to a transformation process and to expect to have their assumptions, prejudices and standpoints challenged despite the discomfort they may feel; and new understanding of the time and investment needed to truly improve and integrate existing communities and networks.

A key component of the NSCF process has been engaging on matters relating to specimen data, and particularly data sharing. Perspectives within the community vary widely, from those who believe data should be published openly as a matter of obligation, to those who believe that protecting their data is necessary to maintain their competitive advantage within the wider scientific community. It is apparent that many of the concerns around data sharing relate to the lack of skills in museum staff to clean, prepare, and publish their data. Since open data publication is one of the central goals of the NSCF, these are key topics that we return to repeatedly during the transformation process.

This presentation will showcase some of the methodologies, highlights, and challenges of the NSCF community building journey thus far, focusing on issues around data sharing and building the skills needed within the community to manage and publish specimen data effectively. The NSCF initiative is part of the National Research Infrastructure Roadmap funded by the Department of Science and Innovation.

Keywords

community, transformation, race, complex living system

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Hosting institution

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Author contributions

The authors represent the core team of the Natural Science Collections Facility that has been involved in the community development initiative, led by Prof. Michelle Hamer. Ian Engelbrecht prepared the first draft of the abstract.

Conflicts of interest

We declare no conflicts of interest