

Mentoring teaching skills within the context of open distance learning

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ABSTRACT. A college at the University of South Africa embarked on a formal mentoring programme to mentor newcomer academics in appropriate teaching skills relevant to a contextualised open distance learning environment. The mentors who took part in the in-house mentoring initiative were experienced academics who will be retiring from the system over the next decade. The aim of the research reported in this paper was to determine which open distance learning-related teaching skills are considered most important to be conveyed through in-house mentoring. Based on an interpretive paradigm a mixed-methods research approach with document study and individual e-interviewing was used. Main findings included that a student corps with diverse characteristics and needs still necessitates an emphasis on tuition via print media, but with an increased incorporation of technology to arrange for constructive learning through interactive communication so as to respond to viable imperatives for technology application. Major teaching skills pertained to the developing of study material in the proper register for reader understanding and to employ myUnisa (a web-based learning system) to facilitate learning. The research contributes to a refining of the discourse on constructive open distance learning teaching within an environment that is increasingly exposed to using digital technologies to adhere to global imperatives for knowledge-based relevancy.

KEYWORDS: *Constructive feedback, Digital technology, Diverse student characteristics, Interactive communication, Mentoring of teaching skills, Open distance learning*

Introduction

Distance education philosophy with its underpinning idea of educational democracy and equity embraces the approach of flexible and open learning and of lifelong learning pursued for more than just

obtaining a qualification. Inner circle authors on distance education such as Wedemeyer, Holmberg, Moore and Peters support the notion of egalitarianism through flexible provisioning and interactive communication. By including the principle of open learning, and embracing lifelong learning, distance education manifested in open distance learning (ODL) with openness embodied in an ideological position affecting access, availability, knowledge production and facilitation. The potential of ODL in terms of access, equity, lifelong learning and community development is well documented (King, 2001; Park, Moser, 2008; Tait, 2002; Wei, 2010). This potential demands that constant efforts be made to ensure that students' needs and circumstances and other stakeholder expectations are correctly defined and appropriately met within context-specific environments. This potential also demands that ODL institutions sustain an appropriate balance between access, cost and quality. An important strategy to ensure quality of provisioning is to incorporate digital technology as indispensable to arrange for dynamic study content and for constructive interaction between students and lecturers and amongst students all hours of every day. The purpose of my research was to determine the scope of mentoring newcomer academics as ODL practitioners within a context-specific ODL environment that is increasingly exposed to technology implementation. This included determining what newcomers with their mentors understand as ODL provisioning and what the most important ODL-related teaching skills are that mentees need to be equipped with in an environment that is increasingly exposed to using digital technology to adhere to world market competitiveness.

Theoretical framework

I conducted the inquiry with Wenger's (2000) community of practice as the theoretical framework underlying my investigation. In terms of Wenger's theory of communities of practice, newcomers are equipped with a learning process of legitimate peripheral participation from which they gradually move on to central participation as the mastering of techniques for operating successfully within the specific community of practice. For young academics this implies, among other things, the acquiring of tuition skills which, within an

ODL environment, pertains to the enhancing of learning content at any point in the duration of a course of study, and effective synchronous and asynchronous communication with students. In its purest form, ODL represents flexibility and a student-centred approach of student choice with regard to the content, time, place, pace of learning, method of instruction and nature of assessment which is viably arranged through incorporating digital technology (Tait, 2002; Wei, 2010).

ODL learning materials represent the lecturer and are therefore carefully designed to encourage and support self-study (Lentell, 2007). Developed around learning goals and learning outcomes, students interact with learning content through contextualised activities built into the text that replicate reality and prompt students to relate the content to their own situations so as to construct their own meanings and to think critically about their own actions (Louw, 2010). Psycho-social engagement with the content is enhanced by professional two-way communication characterised by a more personal and conversational style.

Constant interaction via print media tutorials and online tools represents the arrangement at many ODL institutions to assist students in developing self-efficacy for lifelong learning (King, 2001; Yorke, 2004). This holds that constructive learning is facilitated through blended teaching using learning technology together with traditional forms of teaching to accommodate learners' diverse needs (O'Rourke, 2009). In this regard ODL institutions accept as default their students' access to a personal computer and sufficient levels of computer literacy, but with consideration of learner differences in terms of educational backgrounds, instrumental motivation and lecturer-dependent learning behaviour (Park, Moser, 2008; Wei, 2010).

In 2005 an integrated learning management platform called myUnisa was launched by the University of South Africa (Unisa) to function as Unisa's online campus. In 2008, an ODL policy was approved and accepted as the seminal document shaping Unisa's character as an ODL institution that increasingly implements an online tuition approach. In 2009 a revised ODL implementation plan was approved and the implementation process started in 2010. Continuously adapting and improving on its programme delivery, Unisa introduced its first so-called signature courses in 2013. Signature courses comprise fully online modules and are

designed to engage students in an interactive and enriching learning experience.

Research methodology

As I wanted to understand what the main teaching skills are for mentoring academia in ODL practice increasingly exposed to technology-related tuition endeavours, an interpretive paradigm employing a mixed-methods research approach was used. This approach was selected to arrange for increased insight in that the results of the quantitative inquiry were supplemented with the findings of the qualitative investigation (Creswell, 2003, p. 16). A total of 63 mentor-mentee partnership reports were considered. These documents, which included data on the tuition-related objectives with mentoring, were submitted during the first cycle of an in-house mentoring programme implemented in 2010 at a college of Unisa. Individual interviews were conducted with 13 mentors whose work experience as academics varied between 16 and 23 years. All 13 interviews were guided by the same theme, namely what the main teaching skills are in ODL practice to be conveyed via in-house mentoring.

Findings

Findings from the document study

Fifteen mentoring objectives were determined from the quarterly reports of the 63 mentor-mentee partnerships. In order of priority, the objectives with tuition in an ODL context at a college of Unisa, for the 2010 academic year, were the following:

- Write tutorial letters
- Set assignments by aligning outcomes with assessment
- Set and mark examination papers
- Mark assignments and provide detailed feedback. Develop academic writing skills relevant to ODL study material
- Attend to students' email and mail enquiries
- Address student enquiries on the course website's discussion forum

- Present discussion classes via video-conferencing
- Present group discussion classes
- Master supervision skills
- Moderate examination papers that are externally marked. Send SMS messages as reminders or as motivation
- Update supplementary information on the course website
- Master on-screen marking
- Schedule reminders of important dates on the course website

Considered from the perspective of increased exposure to digital technology and the global demand for technology-based tuition, the mentoring objectives of attending appropriately to students' e-mail communication and to address students' enquiries online via course website discussion forums are notable.

The fact that the technology - related objectives of updating supplementary information on the course website, the on-screen marking of assignments and the scheduling of important reminders online were still rated as of the least importance of determined tuition objectives with mentoring in 2010, can be attributed to the nature and composition of the Unisa student corps.

With reference to computer literacy, the students of Unisa represent two distinct categories of students. On the one hand there is a large component of students who are school leavers who enter distance education as an affordable option for further study. Many of these school leavers are underprepared by the school system. One of the critical challenges they face relates to a lack of proper exposure to technology use regarding computer literacy. With reference to the employed adult group of students there are also two distinct groups of students in terms of enabling environments for proper computer literacy. Comprehensively considered, a large group of Unisa students – 65% of the total student population (DISA, 2013) – live in remote rural areas where, for many, electricity is not sufficiently available. These students often find it difficult to gain access to Unisa regional offices due to transport challenges, amongst other things. Furthermore, the computer facilities at these regional offices are not always adequate. The dilemma within the reality of the Unisa context is obvious: how to balance the opportunities that online learning offer – but which are still available to only a minority of Unisa students – with the quest of egalitarianism in terms of increased higher education

access to disadvantaged students. For that reason much effort still needs to be put into the tuition mode of print material with related print assessment activities. Unisa academics are familiar with the technological constraints of many of their students and for that reason they remain hesitant to engage fully in web-related interaction with students as they know that everything that is communicated online via myUnisa must also be communicated via tutorial letters in print form.

To cater for the diverse needs of Unisa students while simultaneously adhering to the imperative of technological tuition for world market competitiveness, online tuition via myUnisa, which was introduced in 2005, is increasingly utilised. This online tuition was initially presented mainly at postgraduate level, but increasingly also in the form of a blended technological approach in all courses, at all levels. In this regard myUnisa functions as the online campus of Unisa, representing a web-based management system which enables communication with lecturers and other students as well as with the administrative departments of Unisa. Increasingly more students are becoming proficient in their use of myUnisa by being actively involved in online discussions with lecturers and fellow students. These students constantly post content-related queries that are responded to by academics, and they access their official study material online under the link official study material. They also submit their assignments online and their lecturers then assess the assignments online by making use of on-screen marking software. Students are guided in online studying and the use of myUnisa through a document called my Studies@Unisa.

The technology-related aim with tuition at Unisa is a gradual, but concerted movement to online engagement with the anticipation of eventual exclusive online tuition. For that reason the so-called signature courses as fully online modules are being introduced in the 2013 academic year. Although sensitive to the circumstances of many of their students with regard to technology constraints, Unisa is adamant in its pursuit of online teaching. This pursuit is motivated by the fact that eventual exclusive online teaching is inevitable due to the demand for global competitiveness in terms of productive time- and cost-efficiency. Sole online teaching is further motivated by the pursuit for 'going green' so as to contribute to a global smaller carbon footprint.

The importance of one of the tuition-related mentoring objectives at

Unisa, namely the mentoring of academic writing skills, is emphasised to capacitate mentees to develop study material appropriate to the Unisa context. Whether the traditional ODL teaching approach via print medium is followed, or whether a complete change is made to full online teaching, lecturers need to write material in an accessible and engaging manner. This is a challenging task. For the vast majority of Unisa students – 80% in total (DISA, 2013) – English is not their first language. Tutorial material therefore has to be written in such a way that students are able to follow the most complex of arguments. But lecturers need to be cautioned that writing in an accessible way is not to be construed as watering down the depth of the discussion. Unisa also has students, several of them being international students, who expect quality English. When students who are native English speakers are confronted with poorly written material, the quality of the tuition and the ability of the lecturer are questioned, not necessarily legitimately, but nevertheless instinctively doubted.

Findings from the interviews

In addition to the importance of acquiring appropriate academic writing skills for diverse learning needs, the provision of constructive feedback on assignments is rated as an important tuition-related objective with mentoring at Unisa. Assessment within an ODL context fulfills the dual role of tuition and assessment. The tuition role of assessment relates to providing constructive feedback on assignments. As mentioned earlier, many ODL South African students, particularly those in rural areas, are often not able to communicate online. They are exposed to conditions where “there is often no interaction with peers and virtually none with their lecturers” (mentor participant). The scenario is that students study in a vacuum and many have difficulty in benchmarking their own efforts and level of engagement with their tuition material. Some students are therefore uncertain of the standards expected with their studies, and their studying is often accompanied by a significant degree of apprehensiveness. For that reason “all feedback on assignments, even if the student’s effort is poor” (mentor participant), should be supportive in order to guide and motivate the student to improvement and a deeper understanding of the

content.

Due to Unisa's vast student numbers – a total of 330 000 students for the 2013 academic year (DISA, 2013) – the outsourcing of assignment marking to external markers is inevitable. However, the outsourcing of marking is not beneficial to constructive feedback on assignments. In general, in assessing students' assignments, external markers tend merely to distinguish between right and wrong answers, because, as a mentor participant pointed out, "our students well-being in terms of gained learning is not their [external markers'] concern ... not their students". The ideal of lecturers doing their own marking which is, considered from an ODL context, often regarded as the only one-on-one contact with students, is not possible due to the magnitude of student numbers. As part of constructive feedback, and a strategy to counteract the constraints of outsourced marking, compiling a tutorial letter with feedback on each completed assignment is very important. The competency to identify the common mistakes students made when answering the assignment questions, and the meaningful consolidation of these mistakes in a tutorial to be sent to all students registered for the course, is an important competency that all ODL lecturers must be equipped with. This competency relates to the tutorial role with ODL assessment, namely that of ensuring that dynamic content is conveyed constructively and interactively, whether it be online, or via print.

The evaluation role with ODL assessment – formative or summative – carried out online or via print, demands competencies in setting meaningful questions to assess students' knowledge and skills at the different levels of cognition. With regard to formative assessment, effective ODL evaluation demands skill in developing the activities that students have to complete in such a probing and intriguing way that students feel "curious to engage with the solving of the problems sketched in the activity" (mentor participant). It further demands competency in using different types of questioning such as multiple-choice questions, essay-type questions, and questions on coherently compiled case studies. Within the Unisa ODL environment, summative assessment carried out online still poses challenges with regard to ensuring sufficient infrastructure to cater for vast numbers of students writing examinations at the same time. For the sake of qualitative provisioning, contact with students in an ODL environment is increasingly becoming inevitable. Competencies

in using blended teaching of applicable technologies, such as contact with students through discussion forums and via email responses, together with face-to-face tuition in the form of satellite broadcasts and video conferencing, were rated by mentor participants as very important. With regard to email and discussion forum responses, the promptness and depth of lecturer reply was emphasised as an important tuition approach in the Unisa ODL context. Since most of the Unisa students are part-time students, “the time they put aside for studies is often en bloc” (mentor participant). Students therefore need to be assisted promptly with their enquiries because the period they put aside for studies is limited “and could soon run out” (mentor participant) with the result that the moment for real and meaningful tuition in the form of quality responses from lecturers is lost, or unnecessarily postponed.

Mentor participants agreed that maintaining expert and dynamic module content in an online teaching environment is a non-negotiable tuition-related competency of an ODL lecturer. The skill of “staying abreast with new developments in the field of study” (mentor participant), “getting access to source material” (mentor participant) and “integrating recently discovered material with existing instructional material” (mentor participant) improves teaching abilities with dividends for both the student and the institution in terms of improved performance.

Conclusion

The in-house mentoring of newcomer academics to ODL practice within the Unisa context relates to pursuing the distance education principles of egalitarianism and flexibility. This is achieved by facilitating learning through quality learning material via print media or online and through constructive interactive communication employing blended teaching of learning technologies and traditional communication. Teaching skills relate to facilitating learning to be constructive and meaningful for the diverse range of Unisa students. Skills in developing quality study material, writing constructive tutorial letters, setting appropriate assignment and examination questions and providing encouraging feedback on assignments are developed within context. These skills are fostered together with competencies in appropriate interactive communication via email, online discussion forums and video conferencing. The findings

reveal information regarding contextualised mentoring initiatives which contribute to a refining of the discourse on mentoring for constructive ODL teaching within an academic environment that is becoming increasingly dependent on digital technology.

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Sintesi

L'università del Sudafrica ha recentemente lanciato un progetto di mentoring rivolto ai nuovi docenti dell'Ateneo, allo scopo di garantire una preparazione adeguata del personale docente nell'utilizzo di strumenti di educazione a distanza e di elearning. L'iniziativa si basa sul peer mentoring, in cui membri del personale già impiegato in attività di formazione a distanza assistono i nuovi professori e ricercatori, nella fase di primo inserimento nell'Ateneo. L'attività pratica è stata affiancata da una ricerca sugli obiettivi dell'attività di mentoring, in modo da perfezionare il servizio e avviare una proficua riflessione sugli strumenti educativi, disponibili grazie alle nuove tecnologie, per lo sviluppo costruttivista della conoscenza.

Ai fini della ricerca sono stati elaborati strumenti di tipo sia quantitativo sia qualitativo, con interviste e analisi di documentazione, selezionati dall'equipe di ricerca interna. Un primo passo della ricerca teorica riguarda la definizione delle abilità ritenute indispensabili per operare nella didattica online. I primi risultati hanno chiaramente evidenziato che la platea, piuttosto differenziata, degli studenti, richiede ancora l'utilizzo di materiali didattici cartacei, con la prospettiva di incorporare progressivamente nuovi elementi di tecnologia, in particolare gli strumenti di comunicazione sincrona e asincrona. In questa ottica, i requisiti richiesti al docente online riguardano in primo luogo la capacità di realizzare materiali didattici di agevole comprensione per lo studente nonché la familiarità con il sistema myUnisa, la piattaforma telematica di elearning dell'ateneo.