

# Mentoring teaching skills to newcomer academics

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## Abstract

To sustain and develop teaching skills relevant to a contextualised Open Distance Learning environment, a college at the University of South Africa embarked on a formal mentoring programme, with the aim of mentoring newcomer academics in appropriate teaching skills. The mentors were experienced academics, who will be retiring from the system over the next decade. The aim of the research was to investigate which Open Distance Learning-related teaching skills are ideally conveyed through formal mentoring. A mixed-methods research approach was followed, employing document study and individual e-interviewing. It was found that due to a student corps with diverse characteristics and needs, the emphasis remained on preparing mentees for tuition via the print media, while incorporating technology to arrange for constructive learning through interactive communication. Major teaching skills to be mentored related to presenting quality study material in the proper register for reader understanding, providing constructive feedback on evaluated assignments and employing myUnisa (a web-based learning system) to facilitate learning. The study contributes to the refining of the discourse on mentoring for constructive Open Distance Learning teaching.

## INTRODUCTION

The potential of Open Distance Learning (ODL) in higher education to arrange for access, equity, lifelong learning and community development is well documented (King 2001; Park and Moser 2008; Tait 2002; Wei 2010). Many ODL institutions are making concerted efforts to ensure that their students' needs and circumstances and other stakeholder expectations are correctly defined and appropriately met within context-specific environments. In pursuit of the right balance in a triangle comprising a vector of access, cost and quality, ODL institutions increasingly use the Internet and the World Wide Web to arrange for dynamic content and constructive interaction all hours of every day (Daniel 2003). But ODL providers know that the use of learning technology is contingent

on lecturer attitude, because notwithstanding the official endorsing of particular learning technology, it is ultimately the academics who determine the extent and effectiveness of technology use. Many ODL managers therefore, arrange for applicable training for their staff to serve as motivating factor, owing to the fact that being competent in technology use results in being willing to carry out the task.

The context for using mentoring as a training strategy to improve an organisation's practice was initially framed by business and corporate settings; however, higher education organisations followed suit for the sake of sustained performance (Blunt and Conolly 2006, 195). In the South African higher education context mentoring is relevant, owing to transformation to ensure demographic representativeness and counteract ageing academia (Gravett and Petersen 2007, 194). It was therefore, declared policy at the University of South Africa (UNISA) that experienced academics should assist less experienced colleagues develop work-related skills (UNISA 2006, 8). This provided the platform for the implementation of formal mentoring programmes to establish a learning environment that enables participation and achievement in all aspects of academic life, including teaching skills.

With this in mind I undertook research to determine the scope of mentoring teaching skills to newcomer academics as ODL practitioners at a college at UNISA. This included determining what newcomer academics (and their mentors) understand as ODL practice, and what the ODL-related teaching skills are that mentees need to be equipped with. Common ground on important teaching skills for ODL practice contributes to a focused plan for formal mentoring so as to ensure sustained excellence.

## **THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

I conducted the inquiry with community of practice as the theoretical framework underlying my investigation.

### **Community of practice and appropriate workplace learning**

Wenger (2000, 229) describes the environment of a higher education institution as a community of practice that manifests as the social 'container' of the competencies that are needed in the setting and which, through mutual discourse, are defined by the participants in the setting. Mutual discourse frames life in a particular way and encapsulates a particular social identity, brought about by the elements of joint enterprise, mutual engagement and shared repertoire (Pratt and Nesbit 2000, 118; Wenger 2000, 229). A community of practice, with its specific

discourse, such as, for example proper ODL practice, grows out of a convergent interplay of these three elements, which is born of, and based on learning (Lave and Wenger 1991, 96).

Learning within a community of practice is directed towards achieving desirable outcomes for the individual and the organisation to ensure sustained development for them both (Mathews 2003, 321). By employing tailor-made learning projects, newcomers are equipped with a learning process of legitimate peripheral participation from which they gradually move on to central participation (Lave and Wenger 1991, 29; Wenger 2000, 230). Darwin's (2000, 4) view is that central participation conveys a Darwinian survival-of-the-fittest approach, which points to newcomers learning techniques for operating successfully within the specific community, thus placing them 'ahead of the pack'.

To be placed 'ahead of the pack' within the Unisa ODL environment entails that young academics acquire tuition skills, among other things. These skills should relate to the enhancing of learning content at any point in the duration of a course of study, accompanied by consistent and effective synchronous and asynchronous communication with students.

### **Mentoring to enhance applicable competencies**

As a learning strategy to enhance workplace learning in an encompassing way, mentoring involves the career advancement and professional development of a mentee by a high-ranking member of the organisation with advanced experience and knowledge, who is committed to act as a mentor (Darwin 2000; Gardiner et al 2007; Kram 1983; Mathews 2003; Mertz 2004). In order to advance both the career and the professional development of the mentee, career and psychosocial functions are presupposed.

Career functions of mentoring enable mentees to learn the ropes of the workplace and to prepare for advancement. This is linked to sponsorship and coaching with a mentoring intent of brokering and advising (Kram 1983, 612; Mertz 2004, 551). Psychosocial functions of mentoring raise mentees' sense of competence and professional effectiveness, and include the mentoring roles of counselling and friendship, based on a modelling intent of the mentor (Kram 1983, 613; Mertz 2004, 551). Considering ODL practice, both career and psychosocial function are implied. Given, however, that mentoring is linked to the historically common practice of assistance in vocational development, the career function precedes the psychosocial function (Louw and Waghid 2008, 208).

The vocational development of academics points to teaching competencies which, within the discourse of an ODL community of practice, relates to distance education and open learning with its particular history, culture and social identity.

## **The relation of distance education and open learning as Open Distance Learning**

Distance education, 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 (Daniel 2003, 4; Lengrand 1989, 6; Wei 2010, 46). As directed by the challenges of creating and delivering content and of facilitating and supporting learning, theories for legitimising a distance education philosophy support the notion of educational egalitarianism through interactive communication.

In this regard, Wedemeyer's theory (1981) emphasises the application of technology for promoting democracy and independent study through extended access and interactive communication. Holmberg (1995) highlights the guided conversation character of distance education manifesting in various forms of study at all levels so as to facilitate learning. Although without direct contact, students benefit from the conversation contained in pre-produced courses, and from interactive communication with their lecturers. Moore (1993) emphasises the maintaining of a transactional balance between the variables of dialogue, structure and learner autonomy. The transactional balance is dependent on proper communications media, the design of courses, the selection and training of lecturers, and the learning styles of students. Peters (2008) draws attention to the principles of industrial organisation, whereby technology enables a large numbers of students to access university study due to online learning possibilities. Contemplating all of these opinions, it is evident that apart from the principles of educational democracy, equity and egalitarianism, the notion of supportive communication dominates distance education theory. It is further clear that knowledge construction is representative of constructivist and social constructivist learning philosophies, which are psychosocially maintained through encouraging communication.

By including the principle of open learning, and embracing lifelong learning, distance education manifests in ODL with openness embodied in an ideological position affecting access, availability, knowledge production and facilitation. 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 (Tait 1994, 27; Wei 2010, 49).

In view of the tailor-made provision options of ODL, sensitivity for context is crucial. The Unisa context encompasses a wide range of learner characteristics, learning conditions and learning environments which demand flexible learning facilitation to sustain egalitarianism.

### **Open Distance Learning -- instructional design and student support**

Open Distance Learning materials represent the lecturer and are therefore, carefully designed to encourage and support self-study (Lentell 2007, 3). In general, learning content is developed around learning goals and learning outcomes with students interacting with texts through contextualised activities, built into the text that replicate reality, and which 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 (Carr, Fung and Chan 2002, 168; Louw 2010, 49). Psychosocial engagement with the content is enhanced by professional two-way communication, characterised by a more personal and conversational style (Kanuka and Jugdev 2006, 153; Wei 2010, 47).

Constant interaction via the print media tutorials, telephone, SMS and online tools are the order of the day at many ODL institutions intended to assist students in developing self-efficacy for lifelong learning (King 2001, 57; Yorke 2004, 29). This holds that constructive learning is facilitated through blended teaching, using learning technology, together with traditional forms of teaching to accommodate learners' diverse needs. In this regard many ODL institutions are challenged to improve the computer literacy and communication skills of their students with a consideration of learner differences in terms of educational backgrounds, instrumental motivation and lecturer-dependent learning behaviour (Park and Moser 2008, 202; Wei 2010, 52). Many ODL institutions are also challenged to train their academics to develop quality content with a consideration of contextualisation in terms of culture and social settings, and to be techno-literate experts capable of facilitating online learning effectively (Cant and Bothma 2010, 56; Park and Moser 2008, 203).

### **Open Distance Learning provisioning at the University of South Africa**

School leavers in South Africa, often underprepared by the school system, enrol at a distance education institution as an affordable option for further study. This intensifies the challenges for ODL to cater for the different expectations and competencies of employed adults and underprepared school leavers as two distinct categories of students with distinct differences in the nature of learning experience (Bloch 2009, 59; Heydenrych and Prinsloo 2010, 8; O'Rourke 2009, 7). Moreover, adult students are representative of contexts with differing enabling opportunities, which might also present challenges in terms of how ODL should cater for their needs. Strategies for meeting these diverse learning needs involve materials development, student support and responsive administration.

There is an increasing demand for ODL provisioning at UNISA to align African and Western realities based on the *uBuntu* principle of social and communal harmony articulated through the values of belonging, participating and sharing (Pioneers of Change Associates 2006, 16). This entails the construction of learning experiences based on collaborative learning, shaped and paced by activities and inquiry embedded in societal contexts (Heydenrych and Prinsloo 2010, 23; Louw 2010, 49).

As a basis for success and to arrange for an enabling environment that allows for diverse student characteristics, many ODL students at UNISA are assisted in developing cognitive academic literacy proficiency (CALP). CALP skills include competencies in summarising, writing paragraphs and coherent essays and applying learning within their own context to solve problems in personally-authentic situations (Lemmer 2010, 240; Louw 2010, 49; O'Rourke 2009, 9). For techno-literate students, learning is facilitated through web-based and online learning systems with various interactive communication possibilities. Interactive communication possibilities for a wider range of students include SMS and e-mail. Limited interactive communication possibilities pertain to satellite broadcasts, podcasting, DVDs, radio and television. Within the Unisa context, all of these technology learning possibilities are however, still treated as being supplementary to the interactive print media (Cant and Bothma 2010, 66; Heydenrych and Prinsloo 2010, 18).

Owing to the functional interaction between theory, which informs practice and practice refining theory, a contextual investigation of the mentoring of newcomer academics to ODL teaching is relevant. An understanding of what is regarded as crucial lecturer skills for ODL teaching, considered within context, may play some part as reliable evidence in refining the discourse on ODL tuition within the encompassing ODL social 'container' of community of practice.

## **RESEARCH DESIGN FOR THE EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION**

As I wanted to understand what the main teaching skills are for mentoring academics in ODL practice, 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, 16). The final outcome was a deeper understanding of the 'what' of mentoring teaching skills in ODL practice.

## Document study

To elicit mentor-mentee objectives with gaining competencies in ODL teaching, data were collected by means of a document study that consisted of the interpretation of 63 mentor-mentee partnership reports that were generated by formal partnership contracts. These documents were submitted during the first cycle of a formal mentoring programme implemented at a college at UNISA to capacitate newcomers for ODL teaching. The reports entailed original documentation on the ODL-related objectives with formal mentoring as articulated by mentors with their mentees. This, in line with the findings of Strydom and Delpont (2005, 315), classified the documents as primary sources. To report on the data from the mentoring reports, a frequency distribution was constructed and the data analysed by means of frequencies and percentages. Accordingly, quantitative data values of objectives with acquiring ODL teaching skills through formal mentoring were determined.

## E-interviewing

For a deeper understanding of the major ODL-related teaching skills that are to be facilitated through a formal mentoring process, 13 mentors were approached for individual e-interviewing. In line with the experiences of Bampton and Cowton (2002, 3), e-interviewing was asynchronously conducted, giving the interviewees time to reflect before supplying considered replies. In many instances, this resulted in further prompting through interactive communication via e-mail for the sake of a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of study. The selection of mentors was based on their distinguished ODL teaching in that they were all rated higher than average for tuition with their annual integrated performance management system (IPMS) evaluations. Their work experience as academics varied between 16 and 23 years. In collecting the relevant data, all 13 e-interviews were guided by the same theme; namely, *what are the main teaching skills in ODL practice to be facilitated via formal mentoring*.

Qualitative content analysis, based on Tesch's model, was used to ensure that all the perspectives and issues that arose from the e-interview data were considered. This meant that each e-interview was read and reread to ensure an overview of as much contextual data as possible, with a view to achieving an inductive selection of codes determined on sentence level (Henning, Van Rensburg and Smit 2004, 104; Poggenpoel 1998, 343). This was followed by an axial coding of the related codes into categories, and the inductive naming of these categories by using the data as a guideline for labelling purposes. Finally, selective coding ensured that themes from the labelled categories were constructed and extracted to represent the interpreted and rationalised data as research findings (Henning et al. 2004,

105; Johnson and Christensen 2004, 384). Guba's model for trustworthiness was used to establish the validity and reliability of the qualitative research in terms of truth value, applicability, consistency and neutrality (Poggenpoel 1998, 348--350). The anonymity of the participants and the confidentiality of their disclosures were ensured at all times during the research project.

The limitations of the findings reside in the recentness of the mentoring programme and the fact that mentees' perceptions of teaching skills with formal mentoring still need to be investigated. What should be determined is the extent to which the formal mentoring programme is fostering independence, creativity and initiative in ODL teaching. The findings are, however, valid in highlighting the extent of teaching skills crucial to effective tuition in a contextualised ODL environment. As a justifiable option for sustaining and increasing teaching effectiveness within an ODL environment, an understanding of contextualised mentoring initiatives contributes to a refining of the discourse on mentoring for constructive ODL teaching.

## **FINDINGS**

The presentation of findings includes a discussion of the objectives with mentoring of ODL-related teaching skills as was evident from the document study. This is followed by a discussion of the perceptions of mentors regarding teaching skills to be acquired in an ODL environment. The discussions serve to capture the gist of ODL teaching skills to be facilitated via a formal mentoring programme viewed within the framework of Lave and Wenger's (1991) theory of equipping newcomers with a learning process of legitimate peripheral participation to move to full participation. In the case of this study, 'full participation' means to teach competently within an ODL discourse.

### **Objectives for mentoring teaching skills for Open Distance Learning**

Table 1 represents the ODL-related teaching needs of mentees as articulated to their mentors during the first mentoring cycle of April 2009 to March 2010. These needs translated into 15 mentoring objectives that were determined from the quarterly reports of the 63 mentor-mentee partnerships. Most significant is the pertinence of assignment (71%) and examination (70%) setting and marking, and the fact that the compilation of tutorial letters (71%) is still addressed via the print media. Although alerted to the importance of incorporating myUnisa as an online, web-based management learning system into teaching responsibilities, mentoring in the technology-related teaching skills were rated lower than the traditional skills for learning facilitation. This was interesting, considering

the fact that myUnisa functions as UNISA's online campus, with all official study material available on site, and with opportunities for communication with lecturers, fellow students and administrative departments. The mentoring objective of attending appropriately to students' mail and e-mail enquiries (37%) was considered to be more relevant than addressing students' enquiries online via course website discussion forums (11%). As opposed to the assessment of assignments and the providing of constructive feedback via print media (68%), on-screen marking (10%) was not considered to be a major teaching objective with formal mentoring. Similarly, preparing and presenting contact group discussion classes (49%) received more attention as a mentoring objective than satellite broadcasts (22%). Apart from the teaching staff's awareness that many students are not familiar with sophisticated learning technology, techno-illiteracy, with regard to teaching technology amongst some lecturing staff, could be a factor for the predominance of print media-related mentoring objectives in ODL teaching. Of significance is the mentoring objective of academic writing skills (51%) to capacitate mentees to develop study material appropriate to the Unisa context.

Table 1: Mentor-mentee teaching objectives

<b>Objectives</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>% of total of 63 mentor-mentee partnerships</b>
Address student enquiries on the course website's discussion forum	7	11
Attend to students' e-mail and mail enquiries	23	37
Develop academic writing skills relevant to ODL study material	32	51
Mark assignments and provide detailed feedback	43	68
Master on-screen marking	6	10
Master supervision skills	21	33
Moderate examination papers that are externally marked	15	24
Present group discussion classes	31	49
Present satellite broadcasts	14	22
Schedule reminders of important dates on the course website	4	6
Send SMS messages as reminders or as motivation	15	24
Set assignments by aligning outcomes with assessment	45	71

Set and mark examination papers	44	70
Update supplementary information on the course website	14	22
Write tutorial letters	45	71

To bring a deeper understanding of these teaching-related objectives with formal mentoring, the emerging categories from the e-interviews representing the perceptions of mentors regarding major teaching skills in the UNISA ODL environment are discussed. The categories that emerged pertain to the acquiring of appropriate academic writing skills for diverse learning needs, the development of quality print media study material, the use of applicable learning technologies, the provision of constructive feedback on assignments, and the acquiring of lasting psychosocial skills. I substantiate my discussions with verbatim excerpts from the interviews. For confidentiality and authenticity purposes, I distinguish the mentor participants as M1, M2 and so forth.

#### ***Acquire appropriate academic writing skills for diverse learning needs***

All the mentor participants agreed that it was important to write study material in an accessible and engaging manner. Since English is not the first language of the majority of UNISA students, study material needs to be written ‘in such a way that they are able to follow the most complex of arguments’ (M1). However, a challenge relates to ensuring that ‘writing in the proper register for optimal reader-friendliness’ (M5) is not construed as watering down the depth of the discussion. Due to the diversity of the Unisa student corps, English first language speakers expect quality English, because ‘there is nothing worse for a native English speaker than to be confronted with poorly written material’ (M1). This results in students questioning the quality of tuition and the ability of the lecturer.

#### ***Develop quality print media study material***

A clear understanding is needed of the contexts of Unisa students insofar as that online learning is available to only a minority of students, and that the need for ‘designing and developing quality materials’ (M2) still pertains mainly to the print media. In order to have ‘knowledge and insight into the subject content that they are teaching’ (M3), mentees need to be students themselves ‘in searching for literature and empirical data’ (M5), so as to ensure that their tuition contribution ‘resembles a running stream and not a stagnant pond’ (M7). It is also important that mentoring be focused on ‘training to teach in a specialist field’ (M6), which incorporates ‘the discipline to read extensively’ (M11) for the sake of ‘breadth and depth of specialist knowledge’ (M7).

### ***Use applicable learning technologies***

Notwithstanding the technological challenges faced by many students, technology is playing an increasingly important role in facilitating learning in higher education, and UNISA is therefore, 'adamant in its pursuit of online teaching' (M4). Mentors agreed that competencies in 'using blended teaching of applicable technologies, together with face-to-face tuition' (M2) includes mentoring in 'using myUnisa optimally' (M4), owing to the fact that myUnisa incorporates interactive learning technologies such as 'automated e-mailing' (M13), 'discussion forums' (M6) and 'blogs' (M2). Following up automated e-mailing on myUnisa with SMS was highlighted as an example of reaching all students in a blended communication approach. Closely linked to the knowledge of teaching and learning technologies is the mentoring objective of 'how the UNISA admin system works that supports ODL' (M3). Skills to master relate to the course work administration of 'finalising the assessment plan on myUnisa' (M9), and ensuring that 'cutting-edge e-reserves are captured as additional reading material' (M12) to formal prescribed work.

### ***Provide constructive feedback on assignments***

Given the context of ODL students, which implies limited interaction with peers and lecturers, students have difficulty in benchmarking their own efforts and level of engagement with their study material. A mentoring objective is 'to capacitate mentees to provide supportive and encouraging feedback on assignments' (M4) so as to guide the student 'to improvement and deeper understanding' (M1). Linked to constructive feedback is mentoring for promptness of response. Most UNISA students study part time, and 'the time they put aside for studies is often en bloc' (M1), implying that not responding timeously to their enquiries could result in 'the moment for meaningful tuition lost' (M1). Linked to promptness is the acquiring of time management skills for efficient course administration in view of 'crucial deadlines for submission of tutorial letters and exam papers' (M5). In general, considered a skill which novice academics would eventually master, some mentors however, emphasised the need for mentoring of supervision skills in light of 'Unisa's vast numbers of master's and doctoral students' (M10).

### ***Acquire lasting psychosocial skills***

Mentors agreed on some behavioural and attitudinal skills that mentees need to acquire in order to become full-fledged members of academia within an ODL community of practice, although such skills are also applicable to contexts other than ODL. 'Diligence, dedication and responsibility' (M3), accompanied by being 'self-driven and self-motivated' (M5) should translate into 'believing in

oneself and becoming actively involved' (M8). Inspired by the *uBuntu* principle of collaboration and team work, 'openness to criticism in the interest of quality assurance of whatever goes out to students' (M5), and the approach that 'one learns through one's mistakes' (M8) should foster an attitude of 'consistently reviewing one's own decisions' (M11) for the sake of improved teaching; however, with a 'renouncing of perfectionism' (M2). Listening in order to hear what colleagues and students are saying and 'being sensitive to meta-language' (M2) should be pursued for healthy interpersonal relationships and a tolerance of differences.

## DISCUSSION

Embedded in the distance education principles of egalitarianism and flexibility, ODL embodies openness which affects access, availability, knowledge production and facilitation. At UNISA the accommodation of diverse student needs covers opposite poles of learner characteristics and learning environments. This poses a challenge for applicable learning facilitation in that employed adult students with sophisticated learning needs, some of them purist English mother tongue speakers, are accommodated, together with unemployed school leavers, many of whom are not adequately prepared for higher education, and with a large student corps of English second language speakers.

Open Distance Learning students are generally guided through independent study with the provision of appropriately developed print media learning content, which is accompanied by interactive activities, and which is sensitive to the demands of diverse contexts and lifelong learning needs. At UNISA, learning content in the form of study guides, tutorials and assignments is developed around learning outcomes, thus enabling students to interact independently with the text. The approach is that UNISA students construct their own meanings through contextualised activities that are incorporated into the content and reflect on their own actions for solving context-based problems. Learning technology implementation manifests in combining the human, the technological and the organisational to facilitate learning on line which, in the case of UNISA, realises through myUnisa as a powerful web-based learning system representing Unisa's online campus. Learning facilitation at UNISA is psychosocially-supported by interactive communication through constructive feedback on assignments and interactive communication via telephone, SMS, e-mail and online discussion forums. The incorporation of technology for learning poses a challenge, not only to academics, but also to the large component of Unisa students who are relatively techno-illiterate, to develop skills to use online tools effectively.

Owing to the combination of transformation in terms of demographic representativeness and the ageing of the academic corps, newcomer academics to higher education in South Africa are equipped with knowledge and skills through formal mentoring programmes. Within the UNISA ODL community of practice and in line with the findings of Lave and Wenger (1991) and Tait (2002), a movement from legitimate peripheral participation to central participation includes mentoring objectives that are focused on capacitating mentees to develop and enhance learning content, and to facilitate learning through effective synchronous and asynchronous communication with students. Of the most crucial teaching skills to be acquired are the writing of tutorial letters and study guides, the setting and marking of assignments and examination papers, as well as the provision of meaningful feedback on assignments.

Mentoring newcomer academics at UNISA in developing academic writing skills relevant to ODL study material is very important. In this regard mentees are guided to be sensitive to the diverse UNISA student corps by ensuring that writing in the proper register for optimal reader friendliness and reader understanding is not construed as jeopardising the depth of the content or the quality of the language. Maintaining depth of content relates to fostering the approach of continuously searching for literature and empirical data for sustained specialised knowledge. To facilitate constructive learning through interactive communication mentoring demands the mastering of a blended teaching approach of applicable technology with face-to-face tuition. Mentoring in the use of web-based learning with powerful interactive communication possibilities is important for learning facilitation and effective module administration. Competencies in providing supportive and encouraging feedback on assignments and dissertations are mentored in relation to an understanding of the importance of promptness of response in ODL teaching.

In line with the findings of Wenger (2000) and with UNISA as a case in point, to be full-fledged members of an ODL community of practice embracing the *uBuntu* principles of belonging, participating and sharing, mentoring means to encourage mentees to pursue diligence, dedication and responsibility within a teamwork approach of learning through constructivism and collaboration. Realising that they learn through the mistakes they make, through being involved, and through constant reflection, mentees are mentored in becoming self-driven and self-motivated in pursuing good teaching skills in a mutually constructed ODL environment.

## CONCLUSION

With reference to a community of practice and the framing of life in a particular way encapsulating a particular social identity, the mentoring of newcomer academics to ODL practice relates to pursuing the distance education principles of egalitarianism and flexibility. This is achieved through facilitating learning through quality learning material via the print media and through constructive interactive communication, employing blended teaching of learning technologies and traditional communication. The mentoring of newcomer academics is focused on the development of teaching skills, with the purpose of facilitating learning to be constructive and meaningful for the diverse range of the student corps. Skills in developing quality study material, writing constructive tutorial letters, setting appropriate assignments and examination papers, and providing encouraging feedback on assignments and dissertations are developed together with competencies in appropriate interactive communication via telephone, e-mail and online discussion forums. All of these enable mentees to move 'ahead of the pack' with regard to teaching competencies in an ODL community of practice.

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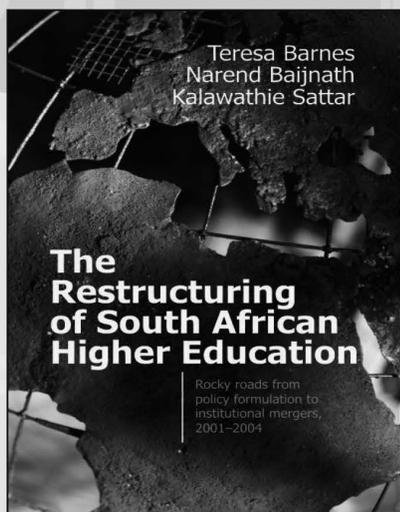
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