

SUPERVISING MASTERS STUDENTS WITHIN THE ODL CONTEXT, IN THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

AUTHOR DETAILS:

Prof Lizeth Roets
University of South Africa
Department of Health Studies
Preller Street
Muckleneuk Ridge
Pretoria
roetsl@unisa.ac.za
012 429 2226

ABSTRACT

The internationalisation of higher education is a global imperative that impact on students and supervision practises. Cultural and language diversity as well as the dynamic characteristics of the learners in an Open Distant Learning environment has been given little concern (Lee, Driscoll, & Nelson, 2004) and the impact is not always taken into account. When implementing a scholarship development programme across language, cultural and socioeconomic borders these factors should be taken into consideration as it may affect supervisory practices and thus the success of such a programme. Implementing a masters' programme to enhance scholarship development in a resource poor African context through Open Distant Learning therefore is challenging. Effective supervision was essential in supervising masters' students in the Democratic Republic of Congo in an ODL context. Supervision in a language not mutually understood by me, the supervisor, and students challenged the traditional western methodology and paradigms. A qualitative narrative reflection was done to critically reflect on the challenges faced and to initiate the innovative ideas that emerged from this experience. The Western body of knowledge and dominant logic were challenged in my supervisory practice. New research methodology and paradigms to enhance distant education research were initiated and implemented.

Key terms: Open Distant Learning, Scholarship development, Supervision, Language diversity.

INTRODUCTION

Culture in varied guises impacts on supervision and mentoring and when we mentor or supervise across ethnic cultures (Grant & Manathunga, 2011:351), in different languages and over distance it becomes a pedagogical site of rich possibility. Supervision is expected to be smooth and the dominance of the Western knowledge system is rarely challenged (Grant & Manathunga, 2011). In the African context I did not experience it to be smooth for various reasons, of which one was the language barrier. A lack of resources and culture differences were other factors that impacted on my supervisory practises.

The impact that culture and language diversity have on the outcomes of internationalisation are not often discussed. Taking in consideration that institutions in Africa partake in internationalisation mostly to strengthen research and knowledge production (Marmolejo, 2010: Online), the impact of language and culture on both the supervisor and student became even more relevant. My experience in the Democratic Republic of Congo taught me that to accomplish research related outcomes the challenges regarding supervision and mentoring of post graduate students in the ODL context needs to be addressed and reflect upon.

The purpose of this presentation is to describe my experience as mentor and supervisor in an ODL context. I also want to share how reflexivity aided me to implement innovative ideas into my supervisory practice in the absence of a language mutually understood by me and the students.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

When embarking on this scholarship development programme I was ignorant not to foresee the challenges I would face. The conceptual challenges were vast. My mother tongue is Afrikaans, although I am fluent in English. The students were French speaking and their mother tongue Swahili. There was not a language mutually understood by myself and the students. The available interpreter was an English teacher, with no background in health related studies or concepts.

I do believe that supervision and mentoring are equally important in scholarship development and that effective supervision might even be seen as a form of mentoring to guide and facilitate students to develop into independent researchers through dialogue and by modelling appropriate research behaviour (Manathunga, 2007) were

extremely difficult taking into consideration the language barriers and cultural differences we were faced with.

The practicalities pertaining to the supervision of students was equally daunting. The geographical distance between me in South Africa and the students in the DRC enforced a distant learning approach. The fact that resources in the DRC were inadequate and accessibility of the available resources problematic were challenges that needed to be addressed. The students involved had no previous experience of ODL. They had no experience in writing research proposals, conducting research or receiving supervision. Not to mention the lack of experience being supervised by a white female from a different culture and one who did not understand any of the languages they were literate in.

DESIGN

We need new research methodology and paradigms to enhance distant education research (Lee, Driscoll, & Nelson, 2004). I will therefore present a qualitative narrative to provide better understanding of my experiences and actions (Mahoney, McCahill, McIntosh & Reed, 2007:62).

DATA COLLECTION

I used aspects from the guided narrative report as described by Forneris and Pedan-McAlpine (2006:8) as well as that of Ness, Duffy, McCullum & Price (2010:44) to guide me through this narrative. The field notes and reflective narrative report followed the following structure:

1. Describe the situation
2. Critical reflection
3. What other perspectives can I consider?
4. How will I integrate this learning experience in future practice?
5. Debriefing

Unprepared and in trouble

I was sent to Lubumbashi to meet with the students and initiate the writing of their research proposals before the rest of my contact, which would have been electronic.

My experiences started from the moment the plane touched ground on the airport in Lubumbashi. I felt terribly uncomfortable when I stepped from the plane and I did not see any other white women. As I walked towards the airport building people were smiling and I assumed greeting me, but I could not understand what they were saying. On the drive from the airport the Professor explained that they want to take me to have lunch with colleagues.

The moment the waiter gave me the menu to order I experienced how it feels to be “from a foreign country”. I explained to the interpreter that I would like leg of lamb and he ordered on my behalf. My food arrived and shocked I stared at the plate of liver and rice. I was in trouble! How will I communicate? The interpreter was my only voice (means of communication) with the students. I needed him to translate my conversations with students. How will I know what was allowed in the culture that is acceptable and not offend colleagues or students?

I was unprepared. I did not foresee that the language would be such a big problem and that no colleague or other person will be able to communicate with in English. There had to be a solution for every challenge I faced. I had to find a way to communicate before my first encounter with the students.

I went to the lounge and addressed the first person who spoke English and asked whether he understood French. He changed my cell phone’s instruction to English and one problem was solved.

An alien in the classroom

When I saw the University the next morning I felt embarrassed and shocked. I knew that I will need to work within a poor resources environment, but I did not expect how poorly resourced the environment would be. There was no running water in the bathroom, no water to flush a toilet and no a lecture room where the students and I could sit around a table. There was no glass in the windows frames, the roof was broken and I could see the birds flying in the roof above my head. The only available research literature were those that I brought with me and it was all in English.

I met the most enthusiastic students. I had the feeling that they were so grateful to have me there, but I felt overwhelmed and stressed, because I could not understand a word of what they were saying. I was the only white female on the entire campus and not one person understood me. I felt like an alien trying to achieve something that I was not yet sure how I was going to manage.

A student officially welcomed me in French, and with the assistance of the interpreter I understood and replied. I wanted to use the only available resource in the room, the blackboard, to jot down the topics and research problems identified by the students. The

blackboard was impossible to use because the black ink faded and the chalk was no longer visible. I realised I made an assumption when it became clear that not one student had a problem formulated.

I assumed that due to the fact that the students all have passed a research module offered by another university that they would be prepared for my visit. Two months prior to my planned visit I had prepared research related documents and assignments for the students to work through.

I requested that all students should have a topic, a problem statement as well as a purpose or aim formulated. That should have been ready to present in class. I therefore asked the students to present their work. The students started to explain the topics and the problems they have identified. I tried to use the topic scoring sheet from Hofstee (2006:17) to assist the students to verify whether they have a good topic or not, but was unable to do so. The students were unable to complete or discuss the topic according to the scoring sheet. It took hours of translation and interpretation to come to the conclusion that the way I normally go about engaging in students topics was not going to work.

The students had little understanding of research methodology and the language problem seemed to be so overwhelming that I felt totally inadequate. Not one student had read any literature on the “topic” of interest. The fact that previous research on a topic has to be known and read about (De Vos, 2011:99) was not expected to be important to students. This might have been due to the fact that they were all true novices in research but also that literature studies and searches was an unfamiliar assignment in their environment. Other contributing factors were the lack of research methodology books and literature, the lack of accessible research articles in French, the lack of mentors in research as well as the lack of fiscal resources. I had to come up with alternative methods of supervision, other than my normal Western body of knowledge attitude towards supervision and research methodology.

ACTIVE STRUCTURED STRATEGY

It was important for me, through critical reflection, to create new knowledge that refers to “knowing how” rather than “knowing what” (Morgan, Rawlinson, & Weaver, 2006). I needed to create an innovative method to mentor the students to write a research proposal, taking into consideration the lack of physical and human resources, the language barrier as well as the lack of scholarly dialogue and engagement in their environment and community of scholars. I had to find an object to explain a concept rather than textbook explanations to counteract misunderstanding and misinterpretation.

I developed a structured guide, illustrated in Figure 1, to assist the students with regard to the format as well as the content of the research proposal. Students were used to direct questions, therefore I used a step-by-step active involvement of the student to guide them towards a research question. After the discussion of part A of their assignment I divided them into three groups, working with the same methodology. This active and structured learning strategy (Lundahl, 2008:273) made it possible for me to supervise three groups of students while they all were actively involved in similar projects. I assumed it would also contribute to better interpretation by the interpreter as there would have been less difficult concepts. I could spend more time with the group than with each individual student. Students also heard explanations to concepts more than once contributing to understanding the concepts used in research methodology. I had to make use of objects and pictures to explain to both the interpreter, as well as the students, what concepts mean.

Students were faced with real problems regarding resources. Working in groups helped them to share resources and provided them with more opportunities of learning that was mediated by their peer group (Samara, 2006:117). Literature searches were combined efforts from both me as well as the students to ensure progress as well as quality research projects.

As revealed in the study of Dimitrov (2008:Online) students never challenged any idea because they felt I know best, they never asked a lot of questions because I would feel that I did not explain well enough. The interpreter, being a senior lecture and colleague from their culture helped me to understand this. I needed to give them permission that critical thinking and academic argumentation are acceptable and valued in the Western milieu of higher education (Cryer, 2012:Online) and guiding the process by structured questions and answers allowed them to reflect on their experiences and to ask questions to stimulate dialogue.

DEBRIEFING

I used personal critical self-reflection as a form of debriefing as well as post-mortem debriefing sessions with a colleague not directly involved in this programme enabled me to give a pure reflection of my account (Onwuegbuzie, Leech & Collins,2008:11).

Integration this experience in future practice

Most challenging in this supervision experience was the language barrier. Many studies on internationalisation and research supervision emphasises the importance of English language proficiency (Guerin & Green, 2009: in press) a luxury that the students and I did not have. It was not only the grammar that was a problem, but also the tone that got lost in translation, either by the interpreter or by internet messages through translation. This is something to remember when giving feedback to students in the ODL

environment. I recommend that supervisors, for their own interest and that of the students, never underestimate the role of language and culture in the supervisory role. Once you allow the student into a programme the institution, invariably the supervisor, has the responsibility to ensure that the students have the support to complete the programme.

Using this question and answer approach, group supervision and concepts, objects and structures to explain methodology, contributed to the progress of these students. Reflection on my experience redefined my supervisory practice into a practice that includes mentoring skills. I discovered innovative ways to use culture diversity, language barriers and indigenous knowledge to build bridges to the Western ways of research methodology. Students understand the process by being actively involved. Expecting evidence from the literature to motivate answers familiarised the students with the important skill of literature searches and analysis. Feedback on every question, thus the interactive approach that was enforced, contributed to the progress of these students. It still remains to be seen whether these students, after obtaining their masters will feel and act as if they belong to the global community of scholars.

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Name of student	Student nr	Topic/title	E-mail address: Supervisor name and contact details:
A photo of the student			

PART A

1. Complete the following: **Identify the topic and problem**

1.1 Identify a question/problem in your working environment that you want to have the answer for.

1.2 Why do you want to have the answer?

1.3 Why do you want to do research to get to a possible answer?

2. Complete the following sentence:

The purpose of this research will be to

.....

Date for discussion:

Field notes:

Reflection:

PART B

Read 6 sources (articles, books, policy documents, hospital registers etc) pertaining to your question and answer the following questions by referring to information or statistics obtained from these sources. You must present the evidence to me that these answers are from sources used.

3.1 What is this problem about?

3.1 Why is there this problem?

3.2 Where specific is this problem?

3.3 What is the extend of this problem?

3.4 Who said this is a problem?

Date for discussion:

Field notes:

Reflection:

PART C

The aim and objectives

Complete the following sentences:

The aim of this study is to

Look very carefully at what you have written in the above sentence and then complete the objectives of your study:

The objectives of this study is to:

1. Identify/describe..... (what?)..... (where?)(how?).....
2. Identify/describe (what?)..... (where?)(how?).....
3. Make recommendations to (do what?)..... (where?)(how?).....

Date for discussion:

Field notes:

Reflection:

PART D

Population, sampling and ethics

In order for you to do this research, from what or whom will you obtain the information that you need?

Will you need one of the following to gather you data?

- Patients (under 18 or above 18 years of age)
- Patient records/files (of patients under or above 18 years of age)
- Colleagues
- Nurses
- Documents for example policy documents or examination scripts
- Students (under or above 18 years of age)
- Any other, name them

1. Identify the applicable sources?
2. Next to each source answer the following questions:
 - 2.1 How many of them are there? Give numbers and statistics from a reliable source like literature or registers.
 - 2.2 Will you have easy access to all of them? How?
 - 2.3 Will you understand the language of either the person or the documents?
 - 2.4 Are there any reasons why some of them may refuse to give information to you?
 - 2.5 Do you think that anybody may be harmed by being part of your research?
 - 2.6 What will you do to make sure that the information that you obtain will be kept confidential?
 - 2.7 Will you be able to afford to get the information from your selected sources?

After answering these questions read about population and sampling in the textbooks as well as the journal articles.

Date for discussion:

Field notes:

Reflection:

PART E

Research techniques, validity, reliability

Read in your textbooks about data gathering instruments and answer the following questions.

1. What will be the best way of getting the information that you need?

- 1.1 Questionnaire
- 1.2 Checklist
- 1.3 Structured interview
- 1.4 Other techniques.....

- 2. Motivate why this is the best way. Use your textbook and write down the reference of where you found evidence for your choice.
- 3. Where will you get the questions or the items that you will include in your instrument?
- 4. Write down what you will do to give ensure that the data that you obtain will be gather is valid and reliable?
- 5. Remember to give evidence.

Date for discussion:

Field notes:

Reflection:

Figure 1: Step-by-step structured guide