

## Research-in-progress proposal

### POST-GRADUATE SUPERVISION: CYCLE ONE IN AN ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT

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#### ABSTRACT

This research-in-progress paper reports on post-graduate supervision in an open and distance teaching context. The students are registered for the Masters (with specialisation in the teaching of English to Students of Other Languages (TESOL)), a field that is especially relevant in Kachru's Outer and Expanding Circle teaching contexts (Kachru 1990) and thus the majority of the students come from as far as Namibia, Zambia, Malaysia and Saudi Arabia. The entire interaction frequently takes place in cyberspace without the parties having met in person. The research is an action research project with the *status quo* representing the first research cycle. The aim is to describe the *status quo*, which includes a recommended text that provides e-mail enrichment and a system which operates using tutorial letters, extensive e-mail interaction and track change commentary on submitted work. The number of graduations attests to the fact that the system works. However, this action research project is based on the belief that the learning environment must be enriched. The aim is to describe cycle one and then to enter the phase of critical reflection. In cycle two improvements will be devised to enrich the on-line learning environment so that fewer students become lost in transmission.

**KEY WORDS:** Supervision, ODE, action research, track changes, learning environment

#### PROPOSAL

This paper describes the initial stages (cycle one) of an action research project with the aim of eliciting response from the audience as part of the critical reflection phase which precedes the second cycle of implementation. Action research was selected as it involves evaluating the researcher's teaching context by reflecting on teaching practice with the aim of introducing improvements to the teaching situation (Bell 2005: 9). Action Research is cyclical by definition with phases involving observation, planning, action

and critical reflection. Cycles are repeated after periods of critical reflection after which a revised plan, action, and reflection cycle follows (Blaxter, Hughes & Tight 2006: 71). An action research format allows a researcher to examine the *status quo* critically with the aim of improving teaching practice.

This paper reports on post-graduate supervision in the English Studies Department at UNISA, an open and distance teaching institution. The students in this project are registered for the Masters (with specialisation in the Teaching of English to Students of Other Languages (TESOL)), a field that is especially relevant in Kachru's Outer and Expanding Circle teaching contexts (Kachru 1990). The majority of students come from outside South Africa and countries as far afield as Namibia, Zambia, Malaysia and Saudi Arabia are represented. The entire interaction between supervisor and student frequently takes place in cyberspace without the parties meeting in person. Where meetings do take place, they characteristically involve short, intense periods of contact interaction during a period when the student is able to travel to South Africa for a relatively short period. This is followed by distance contact again. It is vital that the learning environment be made as rich as possible.

The first step in an action research project involves describing the *status quo* and identifying its shortcomings. The process to be followed in the proposal phase is outlined in tutorial letters. In the proposal phase students complete "assignment" tasks (statement of intent, literature review, research proposal) prior to submission of the proposal to the Higher Degrees Committee of the Department for approval. Here work is submitted online directly to the proposal mentor and response is given using track changes and additional e-mail interaction when necessary. The final proposal is evaluated using an assessment grid and once the project has gained approval, the student registers for the main dissertation. A supervisor is allocated and extensive e-mail contact and track change commentary on submitted work are the primary means of communication. Examples of these communication channels will be provided. In the rare instances where students are able to come to UNISA for a period, a detailed summary of the interaction is required from the student. This is normally submitted by e-mail once the student is home. An example of this interaction will be provided. In this module Eric Hofstee's *Constructing a Good Dissertation* is the recommended book. This has been selected because of its problem-solving approach. The text outlines the requirements for post-graduate research but also warns students at the onset of possible pitfalls. Hofstee's website ([www.exactica.co.za](http://www.exactica.co.za)) provides students with free, electronic, bi-weekly research bulletins on request.

The number of graduations attests to the fact that the system works. However, this action research project is based on the belief that the learning environment must be enriched. Which systems can be introduced to enrich the contact? Should contact sessions become compulsory? To what extent should Skype be used? Would chat rooms be feasible at this level? If so, how should they be constructed? Could a modelling approach be implemented with students being supplied with examples of successful proposals or dissertations representing divergent research paradigms? Could these be enriched by meta-commentary by the supervisor? These are questions that need to be asked during the phase of critical reflection. In cycle two improvements

will be devised to enrich the on-line learning environment so that fewer students become lost in transmission.

## **Bibliography**

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