

MENTORING TEACHING SKILLS IN HIGHER EDUCATION WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF OPEN DISTANCE LEARNING (ODL)

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ABSTRACT

To sustain and develop teaching skills relevant to a contextualised ODL environment, a college at the University of South Africa (Unisa) embarked on a formal mentoring programme. The focus of the programme was to mentor newcomers 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 ODL-related teaching skills are ideally conveyed through formal mentoring. A mixed-method 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 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 a refining of the discourse on mentoring for constructive ODL teaching.

Key words: distance education, open distance learning, mentoring of teaching skills, diverse student characteristics, constructive feedback, interactive communication

INTRODUCTION

Including the principle of open learning, and embracing lifelong learning, distance education manifests in open distance learning (ODL) with openness embodied in an ideological position affecting access, availability, knowledge production and facilitation. The potential of open distance learning (ODL) with regard to access, equity, lifelong learning and community development is well documented (Heydenrych & Prinsloo, 2010; King, 2001; Park & Moser, 2008; Tait, 2002; Wei, 2010). Efforts are made to ensure that students' needs and circumstances and other stakeholder expectations are correctly defined and appropriately met within context-specific environments. This holds the challenge of achieving the right balance in a triangle comprising of a vector of access, a vector of cost and a vector of quality.

Mentoring as one of the strategies to improve the own practice includes coaching and counselling. Owing to transformation to ensure demographic representativeness and counteract ageing academia, mentoring is relevant to the South African higher education context. At the University of South Africa (Unisa) it is declared policy that the academic duty of experienced academics is to help less experienced colleagues develop tuition skills. This provided the platform for the implementation of formal mentoring programmes to establish a learning environment that enables participation and achievement.

The purpose of my research was to determine the scope of mentoring of newcomers as ODL practitioners at a college of Unisa. This included determining what newcomers with their mentors understand as ODL provisioning and what the ODL-related teaching skills are that mentees need to be equipped with.

THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

I conducted the inquiry with community of practice as the theoretical framework underlying my investigation. Wenger (2000) describes the workplace 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. Learning within a community of practice is directed towards desirable outcomes for the individual and the organisation to ensure sustained development for them both. By employing aspects such as tailor-made learning projects, newcomers are equipped with a learning process of legitimate peripheral participation from which they gradually move on to central participation. Central participation implies the mastering of techniques for operating successfully within the specific community of practice. For young academics this implies, inter alia, the acquiring of tuition skills which, within an ODL environment, pertain 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.

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 (Wei, 2010). As directed by the challenges of creating, capturing, duplicating 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 its

purist 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, 2002; Wei, 2010). This holds that a broader notion of communication, rather than technology, be considered with developments in learning theory, curriculum, and innovative student support as foci for ODL catering (Heydenrych & Prinsloo, 2010)

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

As I wanted to understand what the main teaching skills are for mentoring academia 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). Data from mentoring reports on the tuition-related objectives with mentoring were interpreted as frequencies and percentages. This was followed by in-depth individual interviews for a deeper understanding of the “what” of tuition skills to be mentored within an ODL context. A total of 63 mentor-mentee partnership reports were considered. These documents were submitted during the first cycle of a formal mentoring programme implemented at a college of Unisa. Individual interviews were conducted with thirteen mentors whose work experience as academics varied between sixteen and twenty-three years. All thirteen interviews were guided by the same theme, namely as to what the main teaching skills are in ODL practice to be conveyed via formal mentoring.

FINDINGS

Fifteen mentoring objectives were determined from the quarterly reports of the 63 mentor-mentee partnerships. Most significant were the pertinence of assignment and examination setting and marking and the compiling of tutorial letters still addressed via print media. The mentoring objective of attending appropriately to students’ mail and e-mail enquiries was considered very important. It was also considered important to address students’ enquiries online via course website discussion forums. Of significance was the mentoring objective of academic writing skills to capacitate mentees to develop study material appropriate to the Unisa context. Findings from the individual interviews pertained to the importance of acquiring of appropriate academic writing skills for diverse learning needs, the developing of quality print media study material, the use of applicable learning technologies, provision of constructive feedback on assignments, and acquiring lasting psychosocial skills. With regard to academic writing skills and owing to the fact that English is not the first language of the majority of Unisa students, study material needs to be written in such a way that students follow the most complex of arguments without watering down the depth of the discussion.

Developing quality study material in print media is still considered relevant due to students’ different contexts. Quality study material is contingent on academics’ searching for literature and empirical data within their specialised fields of lecturing. Competencies in using blended teaching of applicable technologies together with face-to-face tuition were considered very important. Face-to-face tuition was understood as satellite broadcasts that are repeated. The competency of

constructive feedback on formative assessment was pointed out to be linked to the promptness of response and the acquiring of time management skills for efficient course administration. Acquiring lasting psychosocial skills which are also applicable to contexts other than ODL, relates to the fostering of diligence, dedication and responsibility accompanied by being self-driven and self-motivated. Listening in order to hear what colleagues and students are saying and being sensitive to meta-language should be pursued for healthy interpersonal relationships and a tolerance of differences.

The findings are significant 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 contribute to a refining of the discourse on mentoring for constructive ODL teaching.

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