

## Chapter 1

# INTRODUCTION

***“ We shall not cease from exploration.  
And the end of all our exploring  
will be to arrive where we started  
and know the place for the first time”***

T. S. Eliot (<http://www.dailycelebrations.com/092600.htm>)

## GENERAL INTRODUCTION

T.S. Eliot has been described as “[a] master of renewal and exploration”. He strived to articulate a general truth based on the exploration of a personal experience that he was intensely involved in - thus encouraging a continuing cycle of exploration to facilitate a broader understanding of a specific phenomenon or experience (<http://www.dailycelebrations.com/092600.htm>).

This exploratory study is based on the same principle. Peer helping is a process whereby trained and regularly supervised students “... offer listening, support and alternatives, but little or no advice to other students” (de Jager, 1995, p. 3). Peer helping, however, is a relatively new concept in South Africa and was implemented at the University of South Africa (Unisa) in 1996. To date the peer help programme development at this institution of higher learning and the implementation of portfolios as a tool to help peer helpers monitor their growth, has been on an experiential basis - thus linking with a further viewpoint of Eliot namely that “[o]nly those who will risk going too far can possibly find out how far one can go” (<http://www.dailycelebrations.com/092600.htm>).

As will be evident from the literature survey in Chapters 2 and 3 of this study, peer counselling,

which originated from the paraprofessional movement, has grown into its own identity since the late 1960's. The catalyst for this development was based on the imbalance between the increasing need for counselling and the limited number of trained professionals available - thus leading to a shift in focus to the 'student-helping-student' concept (Varenhorst, 1984). Since the 1970's there has therefore been a phenomenal growth in these programmes to such an extent that peer counselling has been applied in different educational levels, various locations, as well as in diverse social contexts dealing with different issues. The peer helping programmes, developed since the 1970's, have contributed to the development of a specific peer help model focussing on issues ranging from recruitment and selection through to training, supervision and service delivery.

Chapter 4 of this study will provide an overview of how peer help programmes have been established in South Africa, as a result of international funding and the initiative of the former Port Elizabeth Technikon (now the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University). The implementation of the peer help programme at Unisa has allowed the Bureau for Counselling, Career and Academic Development (BCCAD) to utilise senior students, who have been trained as peer helpers, to build capacity to render services to a population of 154 000 students in 2005 (Unisa Planning Office Statistics, 2005).

The challenge of managing a group of peer helpers, with varying degrees of commitment, dedication and motivation required the project leaders to implement a mechanism that would not only allow them to monitor the development of each individual peer helper, but also encourage the peer helpers themselves to monitor their own growth and development which has taken place as a result of their involvement in the peer helper activities. The concept of portfolio development (discussed in detail in chapter 5) was selected as the vehicle to achieve this.

## **DEFINITIONS OF TERMS**

The following terms namely peer helping / peer counselling; peer helpers / peer counsellors; portfolio; management; tool; monitor; and development are specifically defined to provide the context for this study.

### **Peer helping / peer counselling**

Peer helping / peer counselling can be described as “... a process in which trained and supervised students perform interpersonal helping tasks that qualify as counseling functions with similar-aged clients who either have referred themselves, or have been referred by others” (Varenhorst, 1984, p. 717).

The basic premise of peer counselling is that students can, and often do solve many of their daily problems if given the opportunity to do so. The role of the peer helper / peer counsellor is therefore not to try to solve another person’s problem by giving advice. The focus is on the facilitation of a decision-making process by helping the person clarify his/her feelings about the problem, by discussing different alternatives and by exploring the different consequences. Through this process the other person is empowered to make his/her own decision (Salovey & D’Andrea, 1984).

A variety of terms have been found in the literature consulted for this study. The majority of researchers used either the term peer helping or peer counselling. These two terms will therefore be used interchangeably.

### **Peer helpers / peer counsellors**

Peer helpers / counsellors are students who have been trained in effective communication and empathic listening skills and are regularly supervised to provide guidance and support to

other students with the specific aim to “... help in the systematic facilitation of affective growth and the development of effective coping skills” (Downe, Altmann & Nysetvold, 1986, p. 355). Peer counsellors are, however, not professional counsellors or therapists (Carr, 1981).

A variety of terms have been found in the literature to describe the individual providing peer support, namely:

**Table 1: Terms used to describe individuals providing peer support**

Peer Ambassadors	Peer Aides	Peer Advisors	Assistant Counsellors
Paraprofessionals	Student Aides	Dons / Donnettes	Counsellor Aides
Teaching Assistants	Buddies	Liaison Workers	Student Peer Counsellors
Peer Learning	Proctors	Student Helpers	Student Assistants
Assistants	Prefects	Peer Counsellors	Sub Professionals
Peer Support Workers	Peer Tutors	Student Peer	Peer Facilitators
Residence Advisors	Tutors	Counsellors	Health Advocates
Orientation Guides	Student Aides	Student Paraprofessional	Peer Helpers
Mental Health	Peer Friends	Helpers	Junior Counsellors
Paraprofessionals	Peer Workers		

(Carr, 1981; Carr, 1988; Carr, 1993; de Rosenroll, 1986b; Downe et al., 1986; Lawson, 1989; Varenhorst, 1984).

There is, however, no consensus on the use and definition of these terms. According to Varenhorst (1984, p. 717) the variety of titles point to the “... lack of clarity that has surrounded the growth of these programs”.

According to Carr (1993) a similar problem was apparent in Canada. One of the first peer counselling issues that needed to be addressed focussed on the term used for the work conducted by peers. Carr (1993, p. 17) stated that more than thirty different terms are used to describe the work performed by these helpers. More than 38% of approximately 1 200 active members of the Canadian National Peer Network used the term “peer helpers”; 35% preferred the term “peer counsellor”; 12% use the term “peer support workers”; 2% prefer the

term “peer facilitators”; while the remainder of the members (13%) used an array of other terms. According to Carr (1993) it seemed, however, as if consensus is being reached with the use of the term “peer helper”.

As the majority of researchers used either the term peer helper or peer counsellor, these two terms will be used interchangeably in this study.

### **A portfolio**

A portfolio “... provides a complex and comprehensive view of student performance in context. It is a portfolio when the student is a participant in, rather than the object of assessment ... it provides a forum that encourages students to develop the abilities needed to become independent, self-directed learners” (Paulson, Paulson & Meyer, cited in van Niekerk, 1998, p. 82).

The portfolio is purposefully compiled to provide an overview of “... the student’s efforts, progress, and achievements”. The student plays a definite role in selecting the contents, determining the criteria for selecting items and for determining merit. The portfolio also contains examples of reflection on experiences (Paulson et al., cited in Lankes, 1995, p.1).

The key concepts of portfolios, according to van Niekerk (1998, p. 82), are: “purposeful collection; student work; showing efforts, progress and achievement; participation; criteria for selection and judging merit; evidence of self-reflection; comprehensive view of performance; a forum for independent, self-directed learners”.

### **Management**

According to Merriam-Webster OnLine the definition of management is as follows:

**1** : the act or art of managing: the conducting or supervising of something (as a business) **2** : judicious use of means to accomplish an end **3** : the collective body of those who manage or direct an enterprise (<http://www.m-w.com>).

The term portfolio management used in this study will therefore refer to the action taken by a peer helper in directing and taking charge of the development of his/her portfolio.

### **A tool**

According to Merriam-Webster OnLine the definition of a tool is as follows:

**1 a** : a handheld device that aids in accomplishing a task **b** (1) : the cutting or shaping part in a machine or machine tool (2) : a machine for shaping metal: MACHINE TOOL **2 a** : something (as an instrument or apparatus) used in performing an operation or necessary in the practice of a vocation or profession (a scholar's books are his *tools*) **b** : a means to an end <a book's cover can be a marketing tool> **c** : *often vulgar* : **PENIS** **3** : one that is used or manipulated by another **4 plural**: natural ability (has all the *tools*) **synonym** see IMPLEMENT (<http://www.m-c.com>).

The term tool used in this study will therefore refer to not only the portfolio as a career tool to be used to provide evidence of growth and development, but also to the process through which a peer helper becomes aware of his/her growth and development.

### **Monitor**

According to Merriam-Webster OnLine the definition of the word monitor is as follows:

**mon-i-tor-ing** : to watch, keep track of, or check usually for a special purpose (<http://www.m-w.com>)

The term monitoring used in this study will therefore refer to the process whereby peer helpers keep track of individual growth and development that has taken place during their peer help involvement. The monitoring action will be based on reflection on experiences to identify the

development of knowledge and skills, which in turn will be noted in their portfolios.

## **Development**

According to Merriam-Webster OnLine the definition of the word development is as follows:

**1 a** : to go through a process of natural growth, differentiation, or evolution by successive changes <a blossom *develops* from a bud> **b** : to acquire secondary sex characters **2** : to become gradually manifest **3** : to come into being gradually (<http://www.m-w.com>).

The term development used in this study will therefore refer to the growth and successive personal and emotional changes that have taken place within each peer helper through participation in the different peer help activities such as during training, supervision and experiences of service delivery. Through reflection on activities and experiences the peer helpers will identify the development that has taken place in their self-knowledge and skills. This will then be recorded in their individual portfolios.

## **AIM AND RATIONALE OF THE STUDY**

The implementation of the peer help programme at Unisa has allowed the Bureau for Counselling, Career and Academic Development (BCCAD) to utilise senior students, who have been trained as peer helpers, to build capacity to render services to a larger proportion of students. A group of researchers has agreed that peer helpers do benefit from the training and supervision that they receive and that the experience of service delivery as volunteers allows them to develop in a number of ways (Blain & Brusko, 1985; Bowman, 1986; Carr, 1988; de Rosenroll, 1986b; Downe, et al., 1986; Foster-Harrison, 1995; Gougeon, 1989; Lawson, 1989; McCarthy, Wasserman & Ferree, 1975; Osborn & Cassidy, 2001; Robinson, Morrow, Kigin & Lindeman, 1991).

Despite the fact that the peer helpers in the Unisa programme have been empowered through

an extensive training programme, all five Unisa project leaders reported that it seemed as if many of the peer helpers remained passive, lacked initiative, did not reflect on experiences and did not take responsibility or ownership for on-going learning and development. It furthermore seemed as if the dedication, commitment and motivation amongst the peer helpers varied considerably and also fluctuated during the academic year due to a variety of factors such as personal and academic commitments. Some peer helpers remained passive and overtly stated that they were waiting for the project leaders to develop further training modules to broaden their knowledge bases.

This problem was further exacerbated by the fact that the trained peer helpers were often faced with questions and requests for information during interviews with clients which were not specifically covered in the core and supplemental training modules. It therefore became critical to motivate the peer helpers to take responsibility for such learning and to encourage them to continue to explore such issues to gain more information. The demands of managing the programme and monitoring the development of such a diverse group of peer helpers, increased the pressures on the already overloaded counsellors acting as project leaders.

Similar difficulties were reported by Lawson (1989) who conducted research amongst 19 colleges and universities in Ontario and Quebec. A number of difficulties were encountered by the programmes investigated, of which two have specific bearing on this study, namely: (1) motivating and encouraging peer helpers in the programme; and (2) the shortage of time to monitor and supervise the group.

The challenge for the Unisa project leaders was therefore to implement a mechanism that would: (1) require peer helpers to reflect on their peer helping experiences in order to determine what they have learnt; (2) allow peer helpers to provide proof of any self-directed learning that has taken place since they have been trained - thus ensuring accountability; and (3) provide a feedback loop between the project leader and a peer helper with regard to the level of his/her development. The concept of portfolio development was therefore introduced



as a mechanism to reach these goals.

The aim of this study is therefore to provide information on how peer helpers, as research participants, managed their individual portfolio development processes to compile career portfolios that provide evidence of their learning and skills development that has taken place during their peer help involvement. It is envisaged that the research will provide the reader with an overview of: (1) the level of commitment of each research participant in compiling his/her portfolio; (2) the level of ownership that was adopted in terms of self-directed learning; and (3) the depth of the reflection on experiences that was conducted to enable the participants to become aware of self-knowledge and skills that have been developed. It is also envisaged that this study will allow for the experience gained through the implementation of portfolios to be consolidated with the current research in this field - thus reaching the point where we "know the place for the first time".

It is therefore hoped that this study will make a valuable contribution in the area of peer helping and the use of portfolios to monitor peer helper's growth and development. It is furthermore hoped that this study will be of particular value, not only to project leaders considering implementing such a portfolio development programme, but will also generate constructive feedback and new insights that would lead to the further development of the existing programme at Unisa.

## **DESIGN OF THE STUDY**

Quantitative research focusses on human behaviour which repeats itself and can therefore be explained and predicted (Cohen & Manion, cited in Schulze, 2003). The emphasis is therefore on the objective measurement of a phenomenon (Wassenaar, cited in Rapmund, 1996), which takes place by means of numerical / statistical methods, against a specific experimental design. The larger contexts of the research participants are therefore not taken into account.

Qualitative research, on the other hand, examines human behaviour, such as words and actions, as "... particular units of study, in and for themselves, as wholes" (Morrow & Smith, 2000, p. 200). Groups of individuals, institutions and even a single individual can be studied and the claims that are produced are made about these research participants only (Morrow & Smith, 2000). Qualitative research is therefore concerned with critical aspects of human behaviour taking the historical background, the verbal narratives and the social situation of each participant into consideration (Kelly, 1999c p. 398) - thus focussing on the larger setting or context of the participant.

A qualitative / interpretative approach will therefore be the research method of choice for this study. The study will aim to provide insight into the way in which the peer helpers, as research participants, use their individual portfolios to monitor their growth and development. The study will furthermore aim to gather rich descriptions from the stories of the participants to learn how they struggled with the concept, took charge of the process and managed to develop their career portfolios.

According to Rapmund (1996) this type of research can lead to the personal growth of not only the participants, but also of the researcher him-/herself. Meanings presented by the participants will be discussed and new meanings will be co-created by the researcher and a participant. The relationship that will develop between these two parties will allow the participants to experience relating to another person in a distinctive way. Rapmund (1996, p. 9) emphasised that "[t]he participants and the researcher cannot but be affected by this encounter". The study will therefore aim to provide an overview of what both the researcher and the participant found helpful through this encounter.

Rapmund (1996, p. 9) continued to describe this approach as "... humble" in that the researcher, as the learner, needs to acknowledge that the research presents only a small part of the system that she is interacting with - thus allowing her to only have an "... incomplete view" at all times. This research therefore does not aim to present an absolute, objective truth. The

themes that will be generated and which will relate to a specific research participant, as well as the common themes that will be generated from the stories of the four participants will therefore only provide an "... alternative reality" (Rapmund, 1996, p. 109) about the way in which the peer helpers as research participants, used their portfolios to monitor their development.

### **Sampling and selection**

In this study sampling will be a "stratified purposeful sampling" method (Morrow & Smith, 2000, p. 208). This method will allow the researcher to sample "... above-average, average (typical) and below-average cases" (p. 208). The criteria for selection of participants will therefore be to select four peer helpers, at least one from each of three different regional centres, who meet the sample criteria and who can provide rich descriptions of their experiences with using portfolios to monitor their development.

### **Data collection**

The unstructured interview will be the data collection strategy of choice as it is a natural way of interacting with others. The questions will be mostly open-ended and preference will be given to 'what' questions to elicit answers focussing on what the participant has direct knowledge of and will be easier to answer. This is opposed to "why" questions that could lead to "... half-baked theories or post hoc justifications for what clients think or do" (Stiles, 1993, p. 607). Personal data will be collated via the *Personal Data and Consent Form* completed at the beginning of the interview.

### **Data analysis**

Hermeneutics as an interpretive method to analyse data will be used to uncover meaning of what the participants' share. The following sequence will be followed to analyse the data:

- **Step 1:** The participants will be interviewed and the interviews will be tape recorded after written permission for this is obtained from the participants.
- **Step 2:** The transcription of the taped interviews will take place.
- **Step 3:** The researcher will listen to the tape recordings to verify the correctness of the transcription and make a summary of the interview with each participant.
- **Step 4:** The researcher will then write her story of each of the participants' stories. This recount will be written around the themes that emerged from each of the stories. The focus will be on initial difficulties with portfolio development; how the participants took charge of the process; how their attitudes toward this process changed; and how they managed the process to compile their career portfolios. This recount will contain both the actual words of the respondents and the interpretations of the researcher (Kelly, 1999c). The story will also contain a section focussing on the relationship between the researcher and the individual participant, specifically in terms of what both parties found to be helpful, or not.
- **Step 5:** Next, the researcher will write the story of the participants' stories. The recurring themes from all four stories will be recounted and common themes will be identified.
- **Step 6:** This will be followed by a comparative analysis between the common themes related to the portfolio development process as well as the literature study on peer helping and portfolio development.

### **FORMAT OF THE STUDY**

This study will comprise both a literature study and a practical component. The purpose of the literature study is to explore current research on the topics of both peer helping and portfolio development. The purpose of the practical component will be to allow the research participants to tell the stories about their experiences with portfolio development - thus providing "... an alternative reality" (Rapmund, 1996, p. 109) to that which is provided in the

literature survey.

This study will comprise the following chapters:

*Chapter 2* will provide the perspective on peer helping / counselling focussing on the central historical influences since the 1960's. The historical development from the paraprofessional movement through to peer counselling, over more than four decades, will be discussed. The chapter will furthermore focus on the theoretical roots of peer counselling and will provide a comprehensive summary of the application of this movement in diverse contexts and in different educational levels and locations. Finally the reasons for implementing peer counselling programmes will be explored.

*Chapter 3* will focus on the peer counselling / helping model. Attention will be given to the recruitment and selection processes; the content of the core training model; the topics for additional training and the importance of experiential learning activities. The chapter furthermore will highlight the importance of supervision focussing on the functions and mechanisms of supervision. Peer helper service delivery and logistics will be discussed and the peer helper duties will be highlighted. Finally the personal growth of the peer helpers and the importance of evaluation will be elaborated on.

*Chapter 4* will tell the University of South Africa (Unisa) peer help story starting with a historical overview of the developments of peer helping in South Africa focussing on the role of the former Port Elizabeth Technikon and the roll out to other higher education institutions, including Unisa. The peer help model used and adapted by the Unisa project leaders will be discussed focussing on selection and recruitment; core and supplemental training; supervision and the evaluation of the peer helpers.

*Chapter 5* will discuss portfolio development, a tool which allows the student to tell his/her story. The chapter will provide a comprehensive definition of a portfolio; will briefly focus on

both the instructional and assessment uses; will highlight the types of portfolios, with special emphasis on the career portfolio. The content of the portfolio, both in general and career specific terms will then be outlined, after which the organisation of material, ethical considerations and the importance of experiential learning and self-reflection will be described. The chapter will, furthermore, provide a brief description of steps in developing a portfolio and highlight the advantages and disadvantages of portfolios. Finally, the chapter will focus on the steps in implementing a portfolio programme as well as the evaluation of portfolios.

*Chapter 6* will commence with an overview of the qualitative / interpretive research methodology and a discussion of the hermeneutic method. The focus will then be on the research approach of this study, highlighting the rationale for selecting an interpretive, qualitative method; describing the role of the researcher; highlighting both reliability and validity with reference to this study; and finally will describe the sampling and selection method, data collection strategy and the data analysis process.

*Chapters 7, 8, 9 and 10* will contain the researcher's stories of the individual stories of each participant. Themes will be identified and descriptions will be provided on how the participants initially struggled with the concept of portfolio development. The chapter will then focus on how the peer helpers took charge of the process; how they documented their experiences and what they learnt through the process. The relationship between the researcher and the individual participants will also be described in terms of what both parties found to be helpful, or not.

*Chapter 11* will contain the researcher's story of the four different stories. Themes will be highlighted and both similarities and differences in how the participants managed their portfolio development processes will be described.

*Chapter 12* will contain the comparative analysis between the recurring themes that were

identified and the findings of the literature survey.

*Chapter 13* will provide the conclusion to this study. The study will be evaluated and recommendations regarding future research will be made.

## **CONCLUSION**

No research was found in the literature consulted for this study on how peer helpers themselves can use their portfolios to monitor their growth and development which resulted from their participation in peer helper activities. This study therefore aims to address this shortcoming by employing a qualitative / interpretive research approach and the hermeneutic method in an attempt to provide information on how portfolios, as a career tool, can be used for this purpose.