

## Chapter 13

# CONCLUSION

*“The power of a qualitative presentation  
lies in the words of the participants  
and the analysis of the researcher”*

Morrow and Smith (2000, p. 200)

## INTRODUCTION

This concluding chapter will provide an evaluation of this study in terms of its strengths and limitations. Recommendations for future research will also be provided.

## EVALUATION OF THE STUDY

The aim of this research was to tell the stories of how four peer helpers within the Unisa Peer Help Volunteer Programme, monitored their development by using a portfolio management process. The stories that were retold provided rich accounts of the participants' experiences in managing the process and in developing their portfolios. It is therefore believed that the research was adequately carried out. No other research on how peer helpers themselves can monitor their growth and development while participating in peer helper activities was found in the literature consulted. This study was therefore aimed at providing valuable information to address this shortcoming.

By reading these stories, the readers of this study are given the opportunity to view portfolio development from the viewpoint of those who were involved in managing such a process. The stories of the four participants allowed for a number of themes to be highlighted and the research process further allowed for the identification of recurring themes to become evident.

The common themes that emerged were the following:

- Initial difficulties with portfolio development
- Taking charge of the process
- Positive versus negative attitudes towards portfolio development
- Reflection on goals and goal-directedness
- Reflection and experiential learning
- Monitoring of skills development and growth
- Using the portfolio as a resource file.

This study furthermore supported the researcher's description of the processes that she found to be helpful or less helpful to the participants. The following were regarded as helpful:

- Establishing rapport at the beginning of the interview eased the start of the conversation and allowed the participants to readily share their experiences with regard to their initial difficulties and how they coped.
- The important role that their project leaders played in helping some participants to cope, was highlighted.
- The interview allowed the researcher to gain an understanding of the distinct objective that each participant had with the development of his/her portfolio.
- The process allowed the researcher to gaining an overview of how each participant managed the process - thus linking to the level of their dedication and commitment.
- The process furthermore allowed the researcher to gain an understanding of the impact that the portfolio development process had on the life of each of the participants.
- The process allowed the researcher to understand how the level of the skill of reflection impacted on a participant's ability to monitor his /her growth and development.
- Allowing the participants to page through their portfolios by themselves, was in itself, educational as it allowed the participants to highlight the items that were significant to them.

- Creating a safe context which allowed some of the participants to debrief in terms of significant issues, was experienced as helpful.
- The process also helped the researcher gain an overview of how the concept of portfolio development was implemented in the different Unisa regions.

The processes that were regarded as less helpful related to the distinctive characteristics of the individual participants. The following processes were regarded as being less helpful by the researcher, but allowed her to learn:

- In Nandi's case, she often spoke in general terms, moving from sharing personal experiences to speaking in the third person. This issue was not raised during the interview - thus Nandi was not made aware of this.
- In Nandi's case the researcher omitted asking her whether she had identified any growth in individual skills.
- In Bongji's case, she spoke fast at times and the researcher omitted exploring this issue.
- In Boitumelo's case there were times during the interview that the researcher's tone of voice and volume did not match that of Boitumelo as she often spoke softly.
- In Tebogo's case his lack of reflection seemed to be related to his perspective that he preferred to look forward rather than look back. This issue was not explored during the interview.

The participants also regarded the process as helpful and have identified the following aspects as beneficial:

- For Nandi and Bongji it affirmed their ability to present the portfolio to a third person and acted as a dry run in using their portfolios during job interviews.
- The feedback that Nandi, Bongji and Boitumelo received from the researcher boosted their confidence and motivated them to continue with the process.
- The interview highlighted a number of issues that Bongji, Boitumelo and Tebogo omitted reflecting on and also identified areas in the portfolio that could be improved

on.

- The interview process allowed for the participants to debrief in terms of a number of issues.

It is envisaged that this information will be valuable to those intending to introduce portfolio development in their programmes.

### **STRENGTHS OF THE STUDY**

This study was aimed at reaching two specific goals. The primary goal was to gain an overview of how the research participants, as peer helpers within the Unisa Peer Help Volunteer Programme, monitored their growth and development over a period of peer helper involvement by managing their portfolio development processes. An auxiliary aim was to yield data that would be valuable to project leaders considering implementing such a portfolio development programme, as well as to generate constructive feedback and new insights that would lead to the further development of the existing programme at Unisa.

The research method of choice was interpretive and the researcher aimed to describe and understand the feelings and the experiences of the four participants relating to their portfolio development processes. These feelings and experiences were interpreted in the specific context in which they took place (Terre Blanche & Kelly, 1999). By listening to the descriptions of the participants and by examining the content of their portfolios, the researcher attempted to understand the phenomenon by identifying specific themes in each story (Morrow & Smith, 2000). In line with the hermeneutic cycle, the researcher cycled between the part and whole - thus between a single unit of meaning, the whole story as well as all the stories that were told. This approach therefore included both “insider” - “first person” perspectives as well as “outsider” - “third person” perspectives (Kelly, 1999c, p. 399). As Kelly (1999c) stated, certain aspects in the research only became apparent by looking at them from the outside. This “distancing” was therefore critical in the process of disclosing meaning (Kelly, 1999c, p. 400).

The information yielded by the research also highlighted significant aspects that will contribute not only to the use of portfolios to monitor the growth and development of peer helpers in general, but also to the on-going growth and development of the Unisa Peer Help Volunteer Programme in particular. These aspects are the following:

- It highlighted the importance of individual interviews with participants at different stages of the portfolio development process, namely, (1) just after the concept has been introduced to determine the level of acceptance of the concept and the understanding of the importance of the process; and, (2) during the development phase to provide feedback and to highlight omissions. Such interventions become critical if the development of portfolios is a compulsory requirement within a programme.
- The research highlighted that the reflective abilities of the participants varied greatly - thus raising an important training issue as reflection is the essential part of the portfolio development process.
- The use of the Critical Reflection Sheet is not standardised practice in all the Unisa regions - thus raising an important issue to be addressed.
- It highlighted the fact that not all participants used the structure of the career portfolio as the outline for their portfolios. This raised an important issue of standardisation in the Unisa programme, which also impacts on the standardisation of the evaluation of Unisa peer helpers on a national basis.
- The research process highlighted different perspectives and confusion amongst the participants of what the focus of the portfolio should be. Some participants seemed to view this as restricted to peer helper activities only. This raised an important training aspect that needs attention.
- Not all the participants could use their portfolios to provide verifiable proof of the claims that they made in terms of the skills that they felt they had developed. This linked closely with the aspect of reflection and highlighted an important training issue.
- Many items were included in the portfolios without any reflection added to them to indicate the meaning that the items had for the compiler. This needs to be addressed in the training and during the individual sessions with the project leader.

- Only one participant developed both a working and a presentation portfolio, a practice which should be standardised across the Unisa regions.
- The research also highlighted the importance of ethics in the introduction of portfolio programmes. Students need to know from the onset what level of competency will be expected, how this will be assessed and when the assessment will take place (Carney et al., 1996).

Although reliability and validity in this study have already been mentioned, it needs to be highlighted in terms of the strength of the study. Reliability was achieved as follows: the researcher disclosed her orientation with regard to her expectations of the study; defined the social and cultural context under which the data was gathered; described her internal processes; engaged with both the research participants and the different types of data (the portfolio, the individual artifacts and the biographical information) to gain an in-depth understanding of the participants' perspective; cycled between interpretation and observation to achieve "iteration" (Stiles, 1993); grounded her interpretations by linking abstract interpretations to particular observations and excerpts from the original text; and asked open-ended questions to allow the participants to tell their stories and share information that they had direct knowledge of.

Validity was achieved as follows: triangulation was achieved by gathering data from multiple sources namely through interviews, by observing the portfolios and by discussing the artifacts in the portfolio with each participant, and by studying the biographical information; by presenting coherent interpretations of the experiences of the four participants; by obtaining "catalytic validity" (Stiles, 1993) from the research participants who stated that they have benefited from the encounter; by achieving consensus amongst the researcher, her study leader and three project leaders who participated in peer reviewing and debriefing to cross check the interpretations; and by applying the hermeneutic cycle to her observations which allowed her to extend her understanding of the phenomenon being studied.

## LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

According to Rapmund (1996) qualitative research is time consuming and “...labour intensive” (p. 271) and for this reason this type of research focusses on intensively studying only a few cases. Although this research focussed on the study of only four cases, seven interviews were conducted to select participants that could provide data rich descriptions of their experiences. Each interview lasted between 60 - 90 minutes. Once the four cases were selected the transcription of the interviews had to take place, which took a lot of time and effort on the part of the researcher. The writing of the final report required creativity, empathic understanding and critical analysis skills from the researcher.

The final report therefore highlighted the following as limitations of the study as no evidence of the following issues could be provided:

- No evidence was found amongst the participants on how individual skills have developed incrementally. The focus has been on monitoring the development of ranges of skills - not the honing of individual skills. This highlights an important training issue.
- No evidence was found in the use of the portfolios in monitoring the incremental development of counselling skills - which forms the basis of a peer helper's functioning. This highlights a critical oversight which needs to be addressed.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

During the research process a number of issues were highlighted as significant topics requiring future research, namely:

- Both Nandi and Bonggi were able to reflect in-depth on their experiences and were able to provide data rich reflections both in terms of the depth of their reflections and the breadth of the experiences that they reflected on. Both these participants are students in the field of Psychology. It would therefore be interesting to compare the reflective abilities of peer helpers across different study fields.

- Both Boitumelo and Tebogo did not master the process of reflection on experience. It would therefore be insightful to learn how the reflective abilities of peer helpers develop incrementally over time.
- Tebogo was the only male participant in this research and was clearly threatened by the process of reflecting on experiences. This raises the question whether gender plays any role in the ability and willingness of an individual to reflect on experiences - thus highlighting an interesting topic for future research.
- The sampling applied in this study was a “stratified purposeful sampling” method. This method allowed the researcher to sample “... above-average, average (typical) and below-average cases” (Morrow & Smith, 2000, p. 208). The participants who were selected have therefore previously been evaluated, and the portfolios formed an integral part of this evaluation. The standardisation of the evaluation of the portfolios of Unisa peer helpers is an important issue that needs attention.
- According to Paulson *et al.* (cited in van Niekerk, 1998), the portfolio development process provides a medium that facilitates the student’s growth towards independence and self-directedness. The use of portfolios to facilitate the growth process towards independence and self-directedness could be an important aspect for future research.
- It was evident that both Nandi and Bongsi had developed “... documenting and reflecting attitude[s]” as proposed by Steigerwald (cited in Boes, et al., 2001, p. 230). It would be interesting to conduct follow-up research in three to five years time to determine whether they have maintained this attitude and have developed into reflective professionals.

## CONCLUSION

There is agreement amongst a number of researchers that peer counsellors do benefit from the training that they receive and that they develop a number of skills through participation in such programmes. This study has provided valuable information on how the research participants have used their portfolios to monitor their growth and development to a greater



or lesser degree of success. Themes were identified from the participants' experiences which allowed for a number of recurrent themes to become apparent. This led to the identification of common themes that were discussed in detail. The study also provided an overview of the processes that were found to be helpful and those that were less helpful, although they allowed the researcher to learn from them.

The research process furthermore allowed for the articulation of a number of aspects that project leaders intending to introduce portfolio development in their programmes should bear in mind. Valuable information was also generated that could lead to the adaptation and further development of the Unisa Peer Help Volunteer Programme. The study has therefore also succeeded in reaching its auxiliary aim. Specific areas for future research have also been identified which could lead to the expansion of the knowledge about peer helping and portfolio development.

***“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>).