INAUGURAL ADDRESS: PROF EC DU PLESSIS (28 February 2019)

CLASSROOM READINESS OF OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING STUDENT TEACHERS: CAN THEY STEP OUT "IN STYLE"?

INTRODUCTION

I believe that tuition, community engagement and research complement one another, and that is why my research is motivated by observing communities of practice. I agree with authors like Vygotsky, Grundy and Killen, who acknowledge both intended and unintended learning, and who view a curriculum as a social construct. It is all about context. A combination of training and practical experience led to my intense interest in how open and distance learning (known as ODL) student teachers experience their studies. I was specifically interested in the challenges that confront them – what these are, how students attempt to deal with them and how lecturers can support them in dealing with these challenges.

My school visits, including personal observations, student enquiries and assessment of student teachers in the classroom, all led me to my niche area, namely, teacher training in an ODL community of practice. The objective of my research is to recommend changes to the teaching approaches that are used in an ODL environment and to do this using a community of practice by means of which students' voices, needs and experiences can be revealed.

RESEARCH

My initial research in this field exposed an essential gap, namely, a lack of communication and a subsequent lack of understanding between the designers of course content, the academic staff members who present the course material and the classroom reality that ODL student teachers have to face. My research revealed that easily accessible ways

and means for ODL student teachers to bring their challenges to the attention to their lecturers do not always exist.

Student teachers need to be supported and mentored, not only by the mentor teachers at the respective schools where they do their teaching practice but also by the lecturers. This is a difficult task if lecturers' guidance and support have not been grounded in authentic research. Only authentic research can disclose the challenges that student teachers face, at the same time promoting proper understanding of challenging encounters. Crucial to this enterprise is an alignment of the different processes, systems and procedures in the interest of optimal service delivery and support to student teachers.

My research has been dedicated to exploring the significance of teacher education, particularly teaching practice in ODL, in preparing student teachers for the teaching profession. Important to note is that access to technology and the profile of ODL students were of essential concern to me. Teaching practice forms an integral part of teacher training programmes to aid students to become competent teachers and good teaching cannot exist without good teaching practice. My completed research states that it is imperative to make teacher training institutions aware of the factors that militate against a positive teaching practice experience, to ensure that teacher education is re-conceptualised to help reduce the dissonance between theory and practice, and to meet the expectations of all role players in education.

Over the past nine years, I focused on publishing articles on the concept of "openness" in ODL and student teachers' experiences in teaching practice. In a co-authored article, with Prof Kamper, we cleared a popular misconception that open learning is synonymous with distance education (DE) and explained that DE institutions' branding as "ODL institutions" was partly responsible for this misconception (Kamper & Du Plessis, 2014). ODL institutions should be truly open and should optimally accommodate distance students' choices in learning matters.

ODL theories and challenges

I made use of ODL theories of authors such as Anderson and Dron; Daniel; Holmberg; Wedemeyer; and Wei and Moore, highlighting the maintenance of a transactional balance

between the variables of dialogue, structure and learner autonomy as my conceptual framework. In the realm of teacher training, work-integrated learning (WIL) has proved beneficial in preparing the student to become an effective teacher because, according to Milne (2005:5), the student interacts with the leadership, staff, learners and other role players of the school during teaching practice. Students learn by observing, participating, intervening in and influencing what is taking place. Incorporating all these elements optimally in teaching practice can pose pertinent challenges, particularly in a DE context.

Aspects identified

My article on students' experiences of WIL in teacher education highlighted the need for more training in lesson planning, mainly in specific learning areas, learning outcomes and assessment (Du Plessis, 2010). After I had determined general aspects of student teachers' experiences, I was able to identify specific aspects which I wanted to investigate further.

The first step was to investigate all aspects of assessment. The findings of an article entitled, "The role of lecturers as mentors in the assessment of student teachers", suggested that lecturers should carefully reflect on (i) formulating statements of intended learning outcomes; (ii) developing or selecting assessment measures; (iii) creating relevant experiences that would lead to the desired outcomes; and (iv) discussing and using assessment results to improve learning (Du Plessis, Marais & Van Schalkwyk, 2011).

This was followed by my research project, entitled "Mentorship challenges in the teaching practice of distance learning students". From this research, it was clear that mentors need to provide student teachers with support and opportunities to develop their own identities as teachers, and should create challenging and complex environments in which to learn (Du Plessis, 2013).

In 2013, the Unisa Council adopted a new Open Distance e-Learning (ODeL) model, which meant that Unisa would become an online university over a relatively short period of time. The concept of ODeL is at the heart of my research, and my next article reflected my personal interest in student teachers' views about access to e-learning

facilities in a distance education (DE) community of practice. According to Wenger (1998), communities of practice comprise groups of people who share a concern about something they do and who learn how to do it better as they are interacting regularly. It should be noted that communities of practice can be very effective in a digital world, in which the working context is often volatile, complex, uncertain and unclear. The conclusions and recommendations of this quantitative research article, involving 600 respondents, highlighted the need for an optimally considerate approach to the provision of e-learning in teacher education, with specific reference to the need for rectifying the identified lack of training. The need for training in the use of e-learning has been identified as a high priority before the university can impose e-learning. A noteworthy result of training students in the use of technology is enabling them to train and empower their communities and to keep up with transformation (Du Plessis, 2017).

CLASSROOM READINESS OF ODL STUDENT TEACHERS

In my most recent research into classroom readiness of ODL student teachers, I determined 15 student teachers' classroom readiness on completion of the teaching practice modules of the Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) in the Senior phase and a Further Education and Training (FET) qualification.

The theoretical framework used in this research was Lave and Wenger's model of situated learning, which involves a process of engaging in a community of practice. 'Legitimate peripheral participation' provides a way to speak about the relations between newcomers and old-timers, and about activities, identities, artefacts, and communities of knowledge, skill and practice. A person's intentions to learn are engaged, and the meaning of learning is configured through the process of becoming a full participant in a socio-cultural practice.

While research supports the notion that great teachers have qualities beyond their academic achievement (e.g. a passion for helping kids learn and conscientiousness), it also shows that academic ability and a deep knowledge of the material being taught are essential (Kilian, 2015). The following two questions are important: How can teachers be trained to apply theory to practice, and how can undergraduate education be improved?

In 1987, Chickering and Gamson answered this question when they formulated seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education (Chickering & Gamson, 1987). Research spanning more than 50 years into the practical experience of students and teachers still supports these principles (University of Tennessee, 2018).

Principles for good teaching practice

1. Encourage contact between students and the faculty.
2. Develop interaction and cooperation among students.
3. Encourage active learning (active learning is effective learning.)
4. Give prompt feedback.
5. Emphasise time on task (time management skills are important).
6. Communicate high expectations.
7. Respect diverse talents and ways of learning.

Another aspect of teaching practice is the duration of teaching practice.

Duration of teaching practice

The Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications (MRTEQ) specify that a total of 32 credits be allocated to practical learning. Of these, 24 credits must be allocated to school-based, WIL, including supervised and assessed teaching practice. In a full-time contact programme, students should spend a minimum of eight weeks and a maximum of 12 weeks in formally supervised and assessed school-based practice during the one-year duration of the programme) (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2015:31).

In the PGCE under discussion, student teachers are required to do at least 10 weeks of teaching practice as part of the experiential learning programme required for the qualification.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A summary of the findings of this research revealed that student teachers experienced their teaching practice as a first-hand event with classrooms as their daily learning environments. These opportunities provided abundant ways of preparing them for the teaching profession.

Based on the views of the majority of participants, it seems that their participation in teaching in real classrooms allowed them to use the theoretical knowledge they had acquired from their formal academic instruction in everyday, practical teaching events. However, it was also clear from the findings that challenging classroom situations may arise, which would require student teachers to take action immediately.

Aspects such as appreciating diverse backgrounds, emphasising learners' participation, creating and planning lessons, managing disruptive behaviour, recognising the needs of learners and developing curricula are covered in the academic content, and one can conclude that participants valued the excellent tutorial matter.

Eleven participants indicated their appreciation for their mentors. They highlighted aspects such as the support and encouragement they had received from their mentors.

Regarding the duration of teaching practice at schools, one participant felt that the time *"is too long, as sometimes we fail to get enough leave days to cover the entire duration of the teaching practice".* Another participant was of the opinion, however, that the duration of teaching practice is too short. This participant suggested that the duration be extended to give student teachers enough time to complete all the portfolios, since they must also be involved in other academic, curricular and extracurricular activities at the schools.

A total of 13 out of 15 participants, feel self-confident and prepared for the teaching profession.

A few negative experiences were reported, for example that teaching staff sometimes view them as an *"extra burden on their shoulders".* A participant referred to teaching practice as being *"very stressful for student teachers".* A few other participants indicated that lecturers do not provide enough support and guidance and felt that lecturers need to focus more on mentoring student teachers, even when they are doing their

practice at their respective schools. Visits by lecturers will assist student teachers in improving their performance by discussing the lessons in more detail afterwards.

Based on this research, the general picture looks very positive, students feel prepared and we can acknowledge good training.

REALITY OF OUR EDUCATION

Unfortunately, if we look at the reality of our education, South Africa was identified as one of the worst-performing countries in the field of education by the World Economic Forum Report in 2014 (Du Plooy, Henkeman & Nyoka, 2014:2). In 2017, South Africa ranked 10th out of 15 for Grade 6 reading and 8th for Mathematics, even when compared with low-income countries such as Tanzania, Kenya, Swaziland and Zimbabwe and even though South Africa has fewer pupils per teacher, better resources and more qualified teachers than those countries (Mail & Guardian, 2018:1). The 2018 International Institute for Management Development (IMD) World Digital Competitiveness Ranking positioned South Africa 49th out of 63 economies, a drop from 47th place in 2017 (IMD World Competitiveness Center, 2018). Breaking this down further, we dropped from 37th to 54th place for training and education. We rank 60th for higher education achievements, which the IMD highlights as an overall top weakness. The quality of education of any system is predicated on the quality of its teachers.

QUALITY OF TEACHER TRAINING

If we want to produce quality teachers, it makes sense to select the best applicants for teacher education courses. If our students struggled academically at school, how can they help their future learners to excel in the academic arena? In a comparison of academic performance in 57 countries, learners in Finland came out on top overall (Wilde, 2015:1). This is because a top-performing school system like that of Finland has strict procedures for selecting who will be admitted to their teacher education courses. In Finland, only the top 10 college graduates of each teacher's institution are allowed to

enter the teaching profession (United States Department of Education, 2011:1). In general education, all teachers are required to obtain a master's degree.

As a service provider, Unisa trains 52% of our countries' teachers. We need to reflect seriously about the quality of teachers we eventually send out to our schools and we have a duty to answer the question: Can our student teachers step out "in style"?

CHALLENGES

I would like to put forward a few challenges, specifically to the College of Education.

Firstly, set higher enrolment standards for teaching degrees, by increasing the Admission Point Score (APS).

Secondly, set professional standards for teachers in our training by working in collaboration with The South African Council for Educators (SACE).

Thirdly, find ways to visit each student teacher at their respective schools for authentic assessment by appointing more field workers and finally, to consider a type of "internship" be implemented, where a student teacher shadows a teacher at a school for six to 12 months while receiving a basic allowance.

CONCLUSION

Looking back at the research I conducted, I have striven to understand students and their learning experiences through ODL and ODeL, as it is my firm belief that such an awareness, of students' characteristics, needs and the difficulties they encounter, is essential for effective practice in ODeL. My plea is to increase the admission requirements and to improve the quality of teacher education courses to assist student teachers in becoming competent and reflective practitioners and stepping out in style. I am looking forward to our journey and how we can find solutions for these challenges together.

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