To infinity and beyond: An auto-ethnographic journey through the development and implementation of a self-coaching support programme for social work students

"To infinity and beyond!" Toy story (1995)

Toy Story" is a heart-warming animated film produced by Pixar Animation Studios in 1995. It tells the story of a group of toys that come to life when humans are not around. The movie follows the adventures of two of a young boy, Andy's, toys: Woody, a pull-string cowboy doll, and a new birthday gift, Buzz Lightyear, a state-of-the-art space action figure.

Initially, Buzz firmly believes he is a real space ranger on a mission to protect the galaxy from the evil Emperor Zurg. Unaware that he is just a toy, Buzz is confident in his abilities and unaware of the reality around him. Buzz's self-assurance and belief in his purpose as a space ranger are unshakable. However, a series of mishaps leads Buzz to question his identity. He witnesses a television advertisement revealing that he is, in fact, a mass-produced toy. This revelation deeply affects Buzz, shattering his belief in being a real space ranger and leaving him in a state of despair. Woody and Buzz get lost and through their shared experiences develop a unique bond. As they navigate their way back to Andy's house, Buzz undergoes a transformation. He realizes that although he may not be a real space ranger, his purpose lies in bringing joy and happiness to a child's life. Buzz learns the value of friendship, teamwork and acceptance, embracing his role as a toy and a loyal companion to Andy (ChatGTP, 23 July 2023).

When you do your PhD, you are reaching into infinity – on the one hand, it feels as if you are conquering the world, on the other hand, it feels as if you will never reach your elusive destiny. But you soon find that you are on a journey, a journey that might take you even beyond what you imagined.

I will share this journey with you today through an auto-ethnographic lens and the analogy between my journey and the movie Toy story. I chose auto-ethnography as a means to consolidate the sense-making of my journey and share lessons learnt with others reaching for the sky. Toy story, as subtext, will be immersed in the presentation through reference to quotes from the movie linked to the headings of the different sections.

Auto-ethnography – "I am Buzz Lightyear, Space Ranger, Universe Protection Unit." (Toy story, 1995)

Ethnography is one of the six primary approaches in qualitative research (Padgett, 2017).

It is described as "more a matter of research attitude (i.e., being open towards the field and collecting any sorts of data for understanding it) rather than a method" (Flick,

2018:59). "Ethnography as a methodology is non-prescriptive and thus offers considerable latitude, but this freedom comes with a price. Ample time and labor are needed to get it right (and what is right is not always agreed-upon or apparent)." (Padgett, 2017:32) Data sources can include life stories, interviews, documents, records, memos and field notes, and data could be analysed for idiographic detail, but should ultimately address larger theoretical, practical or policy concerns (Padgett, 2017). The researcher often has to "swoop in and out" of the data when analysing, interpreting and reporting on a phenomenon (Padgett, 2017:154).

Auto-ethnography, a genre of ethnography, is a qualitative research method researchers use to examine themselves in relation to a topic in the context of a specific discipline (Ellis & Bochner, 1996; Padgett, 2017). Hayano, from the field of anthropology, developed the concept of "auto-ethnography" in 1979 to refer to the ethnography of the researcher's "own people"; later, this concept was applied to the ethnographic study of "self". (Chang, 2018). According to Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011), auto-ethnography "seeks to describe and systematically analyse (graphy) personal experience (auto) to understand cultural experience (ethno). The researcher focuses on him/herself as an active participant in a specific setting and uses his/her experience, knowledge and access to material for research purposes (Poerwandari, 2021). Yazan (2019) underlines that authors engaging in auto-ethnography can experience tension between their different identities, which may or not may be negotiated through the writing process. Gibbs (2013) refers to auto-ethnography as a 'one-voice strategy', retelling a story to "challenge the underpinnings of that story", to transform and to make a difference. She also stresses the conversational element of auto-ethnography, seeing it as a series of reflections in conversation with the audience to whom the author is presenting. "Writers of auto-ethnography are expecting feedback and hoping that what they write has an impact – for the social work auto-ethnographer the hope is for positive change."

As the storyteller and the researcher are the same person, the question arises of how auto-ethnography can be "relevant and carried out properly and responsibly" – in other words, how standards of rigour can be incorporated (Poerwanderi, 2021). Poerwanderi (2021) suggests that rigour can be ensured by using a variety of data collection methods, creating "dialogical spaces" by bringing in other voices; reflexivity on the research process being ongoing and clearly situating the research.

An ethical approach to auto-ethnography is also essential, as writing about one's own experience can leave the author and 'others' in the story exposed and vulnerable. The author needs to reflect on the likely impact the story might have on him/herself or others (Gibbs, 2013). Chang (2009) reminds us that the researcher's story is never made in a vacuum and others are always "visible" or "invisible participants" in the story.

Against this theoretical background, I am now going to situate the programme I developed as part of my doctoral studies.

Student support as situated context – "You've got a friend in me" (Toy story, 1995)

My PhD was situated in the field of student support, specifically the support of social work students within an ODL context. My curiosity about the topic originated in the early 2000s when there was a renewed international concern about student access and throughput at both residential and distance education institutions (Tinto, 2006-2007:1-2). In South Africa, the concerns surrounding poor student success were seen against the history of higher education and the effects of apartheid (Qakisa-Makoe, 2005:44). Since 1994, various strategies have been formulated to redress the imbalances created by the apartheid system and improve access of low-income students to institutions of higher learning. Distance education was identified as a means that could increase access to education for people who did not have the opportunity to study full-time, either because they lived in remote areas or had full-time jobs, or for younger people who did not meet the requirements of campus-based institutions, or for people who did not have the money, as fees are generally lower for distance education (Qakisa-Makoe, 2005:44-61). Based on the National Plan for Higher Education, a process of merging the various distance education institutions in South Africa to create a single dedicated, more effective open and distance learning institution in South Africa, commenced in 2001. On 1 January 2004, the old UNISA, the former Technikon Southern Africa (TSA) and the Vista Distance Education Campus (VUDEC) were merged as a single distance and comprehensive education institution in South Africa (Ntuli, 2008:20; UNISA, 2008a:13).

UNISA then became one of the mega-universities of the world and the largest in Africa UNISA, striving to provide open access to higher education by removing all unnecessary barriers to learning (Prinsloo, 2009:6). Despite the increase in the proportion of black students at UNISA, the throughput rate of the post-merger UNISA remained very low. In 2007, UNISA registered 244 000 students, while the pass rate was only 6% in that year (Schenck, 2008:4).

In 2008, the UNISA Throughput Forum tasked Prof George Subotzky (Executive Director: Information and Strategic Analysis) and Prof Chris Swanepoel (Department of Decision Sciences) to form a working group to develop a conceptual model regarding factors impacting on student throughput as well as the provision of effective and appropriate student support, as set out in UNISA's 2015 objectives (Prinsloo, 2009:7). A comprehensive discussion document, *Modelling throughput at UNISA: The key to successful implementation of ODL* (Prinsloo, 2009), was compiled on factors contributing to student throughput as well as a conceptual model, called *A socio-critical model and framework for improving student success in open and distance learning at UNISA* was developed for UNISA's unique context.
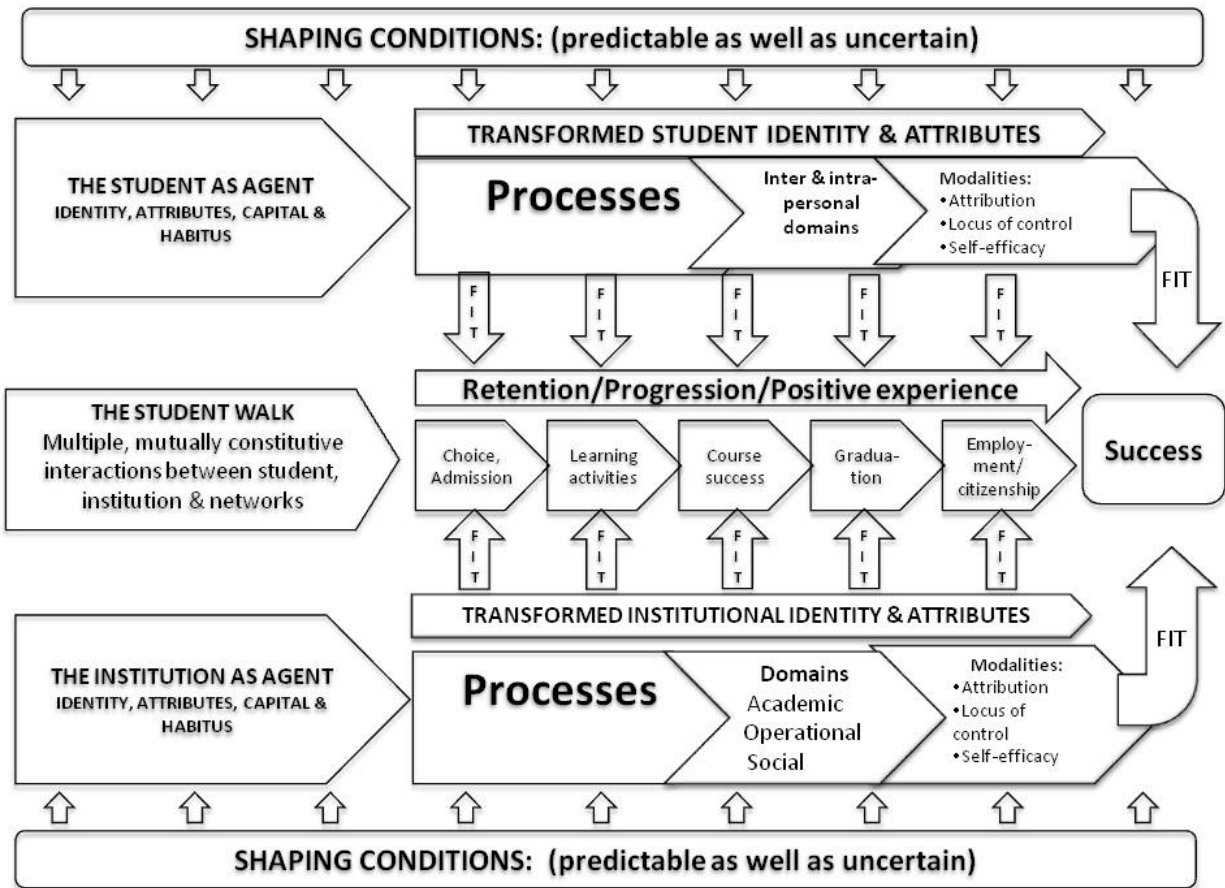
Figure 1.1: UNISA's socio-critical model for explaining, predicting and enhancing student success (Subotzky & Prinsloo, 2011:92-119)

This model has been informed by a set of key constructs that describe the dynamic nature of student success (Subotzky & Prinsloo, 2011:92-119). These constructs are as follows:

• **Situated agents and the institution**

The student as well as the institution is seen as "situated agents", which implies that their attributes and behaviour are shaped by their historical, geographical, socio-economic and cultural backgrounds and circumstances. Yet, as "agents", they are relatively free to grow and change their attributes to gain success (Subotzky & Prinsloo, 2011:184).

• **Student walk**

A central concept in the model is the "student walk", which refers to "the numerous continuous interactions between student and institution throughout each step of the student's journey, beginning with application and registration but also including teaching, learning and assessment, student support, graduation and ending with participation in the community and labour market" (Subotzky & Prinsloo, 2011:185). The model stresses the mutual responsibility for transformation of student and institutional attributes. To transform

and achieve success, the student needs to have "knowledge of the institution", which includes making an informed choice of the qualification he or she wants to achieve, courses assessment expectations, and mastering the necessary competencies. It also involves knowledge of where, when and how to access guidance from lecturers, tutors, counsellors, administrators as well as library staff. For the institution, "knowledge of the student" involves understanding the needs, attitudes, behaviours, academic and non-academic profiles, backgrounds, risk factors, life circumstances and socio-economic conditions of students, and fulfilling the needs of students. If sufficient mutual knowledge is transformed into effective action at each point of the student walk, a "fit" between student and institution leads to sustained success (Subotzky & Prinsloo, 2011:186).

• **Capital**

Success is enhanced when student and institution have specific kinds of capital, such as financial, cultural, intellectual, organisational and attitudinal forms of capital. Academic literacy is one form of cultural and intellectual capital required by the student, while the capacity of institutional learning is required by the institution (Subotzky & Prinsloo, 2011:186).

• **Habitus**

The habitus refers to "the complex combination of perceptions, experiences, values, practices, discourses and assumptions that underlie the construction of our worldviews" (Subotzky & Prinsloo, 2011:186). These are often hidden, and both student and institution need to reflect on how their behaviour is influenced by their habitus.

• **Domains and modalities of transformation**

For students, change must occur in both the "intrapersonal" and "interpersonal" domains. The first refers to "the range of individual psychological attributes required for success", including a positive attitude and beliefs, self-discipline, motivation and confidence. The second refers to the "range of social, psychological and sociological aspects of social interaction that need to be negotiated and mastered in self-development", which includes communication and interpersonal skills, assertiveness, critical reflection and self-knowledge derived from these interactions (Subotzky & Prinsloo, 2011:187). For the institution, change must occur in the academic, administrative and non-academic social domains. The first two refer to the core activities of teaching, research and community engagement, while the last refers to aspects like the institutional culture, intergroup dynamics and dominant ideologies (Subotzky & Prinsloo, 2011:187).

Three key modalities, namely attribution, locus of control and self-efficacy are applied to the student and the institution:

☐ Attribution is the process of attributing causality (rightly or wrongly) to external or internal factors, which are mostly based on perceptions and not evidence. The risk is to identify only one or a few of many factors that partially attribute cause. It is

important that both the student and the institution identify all possible factors impacting on success (Subotzky & Prinsloo, 2011:187).

☐ Locus of control refers to allocating control to factors over which we have or do not have control. Both the student and the institution need to rightly attribute causes to factors over which they have or do not have control (Subotzky & Prinsloo, 2011:187).

☐ Self-efficacy refers to the belief in one's own capacity to succeed, which applies to both the institution and the student (Subotzky & Prinsloo, 2011:188).
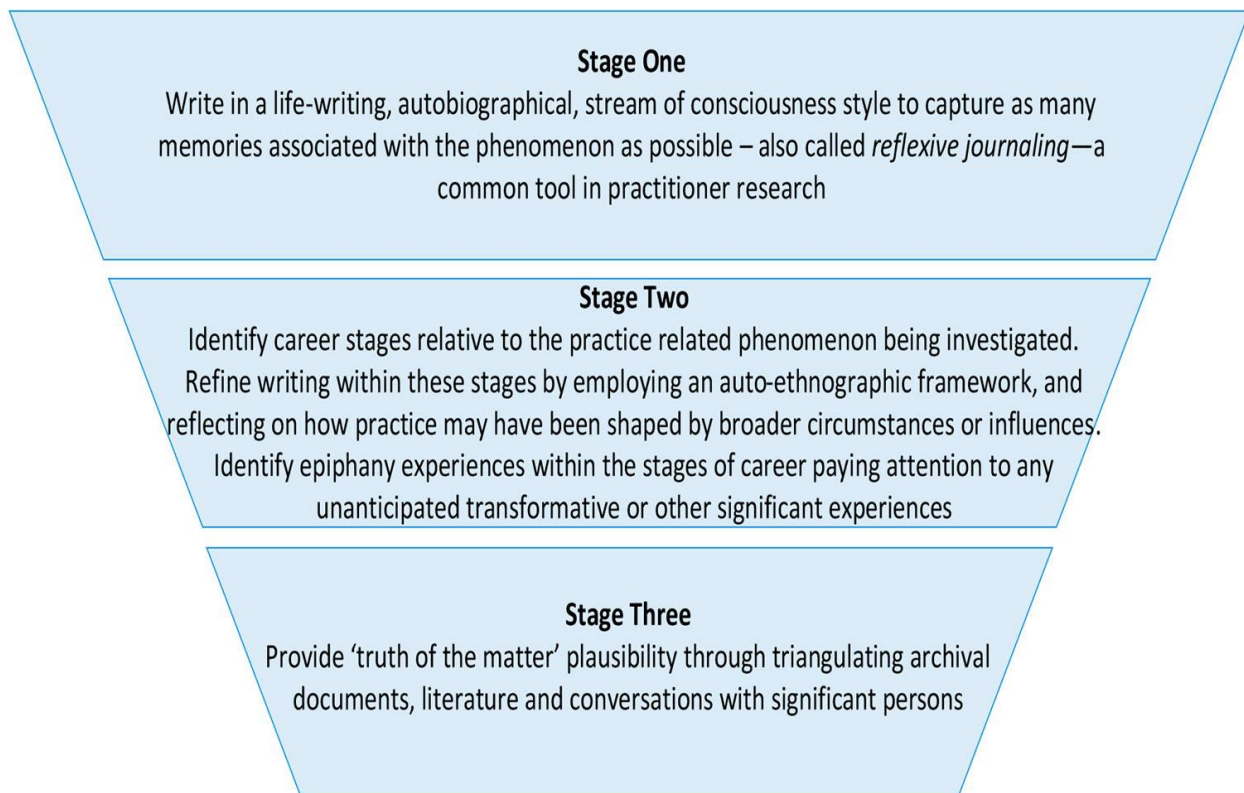
• **A broad definition of success**

Success can be defined as course success leading to graduation, a positive student experience and satisfaction throughout the student walk, a successful fit between students' graduate attributes and the requirement of the workplace and society as well as course success without graduating (Subotzky & Prinsloo, 2011:188).

Within this broader institutional context, the Department of Social Work undertook research to identify the impeding influence of the personal, social and learning contexts of social work students on their performance, as well as the need for student support programmes (Lawlor, 2008; Lintvelt, 2008; Wade, 2009). A meta-analysis of these studies indicated that UNISA's social work students live in three worlds or contexts: the world of UNISA as an ODeL institution, the Department of Social Work that needs to prepare the students for the world of work, and the world of multiple interconnected poverties. For students to be successful and increase the throughput rates, these three worlds have to be in synergy. Creating synergy between these worlds requires a holistic approach to student development or a student-centeredness, which includes additional programmes to assist students with their social skills, life- and work-related skills, the development of a work ethos, and access to counselling and support services (Schenk, 2008).

A model for my auto-ethnographic reflection – **"Good idea Andy. I like your thinking." (Toy story, 1995)**

As too much latitude makes me uncomfortable, and maybe not always knowing whether I am doing the "right thing", I searched for more structure before embarking on my self-reflection. I came across an emergent, evolving model of auto-ethnographic narrative (Slade, Matin & Watson, 2020:225) adopted in the field of sport and physical education.

Stage One
Write in a life-writing, autobiographical, stream of consciousness style to capture as many memories associated with the phenomenon as possible – also called *reflexive journaling*—a common tool in practitioner research

Stage Two
Identify career stages relative to the practice related phenomenon being investigated. Refine writing within these stages by employing an auto-ethnographic framework, and reflecting on how practice may have been shaped by broader circumstances or influences. Identify epiphany experiences within the stages of career paying attention to any unanticipated transformative or other significant experiences

Stage Three
Provide 'truth of the matter' plausibility through triangulating archival documents, literature and conversations with significant persons

**Figure 1.2 An emergent, evolving model of auto-ethnographic narrative** (Slade, Matin & Watson, 2020:225)

Slade et al. (2020) describe Stage One as the life story biography, where the author writes in an autobiographical, stream of consciousness style to capture as many memories associated with the phenomenon as possible. Stage Two, labelled by Slade et al. (2020) as evocative auto-ethnography, writing as critical self-reflection, aims to bring understanding of the social context, and may elicit feelings and emotions, as a part of sense-making. In Stage Three, referred to as analytical auto-ethnography, understanding is crystalised through triangulation and "the truth of the matter" is investigated exploring policy, archival documents and literature, especially journal articles and conversations with significant persons within the genre (Slade et al., 2020).

Stage One (Slade et al., 2020): "Reaching for the sky" (Toy story, 1995)

How do you describe the content, process of and feelings surrounding a research project that you are involved in for 14 years? I started my PhD in 2009 when I was employed at UNISA as a junior lecturer responsible for case work and the national coordination of practical work. My research questions were:

- What are the support needs of social work students studying within an ODeL context?

- What would a life coaching programme to support social work students within an ODeL context comprise?

I adapted the Intervention Design and Development (IDD) model of Rothman and Thomas (1994) to establish the support needs of social work students and social workers recently employed to develop a self-coaching programme and to develop a support programme. The aims to programme were to enhance academic student success, facilitate the personal and professional development of students, empower students to take ownership of their learning process, and develop self-reflective and self-development skills as part of lifelong learning. I utilised information gained during research, interviews, discussions with CODs from other social work universities, specialists in student support at various tertiary institutions, as well as UNISA's socio-critical model for explaining, predicting and enhancing student success (Subotzky & Prinsloo, 2011) to structure a life-coaching model called the "Seven Cs and I. The "I" represents the student and the "Seven Cs" refer to the seven actions in the process of the student's personal, academic and professional growth. The process is depicted as spirals, implying that the same process can be repeated in any context as a guideline for life-long learning (Figure 1).
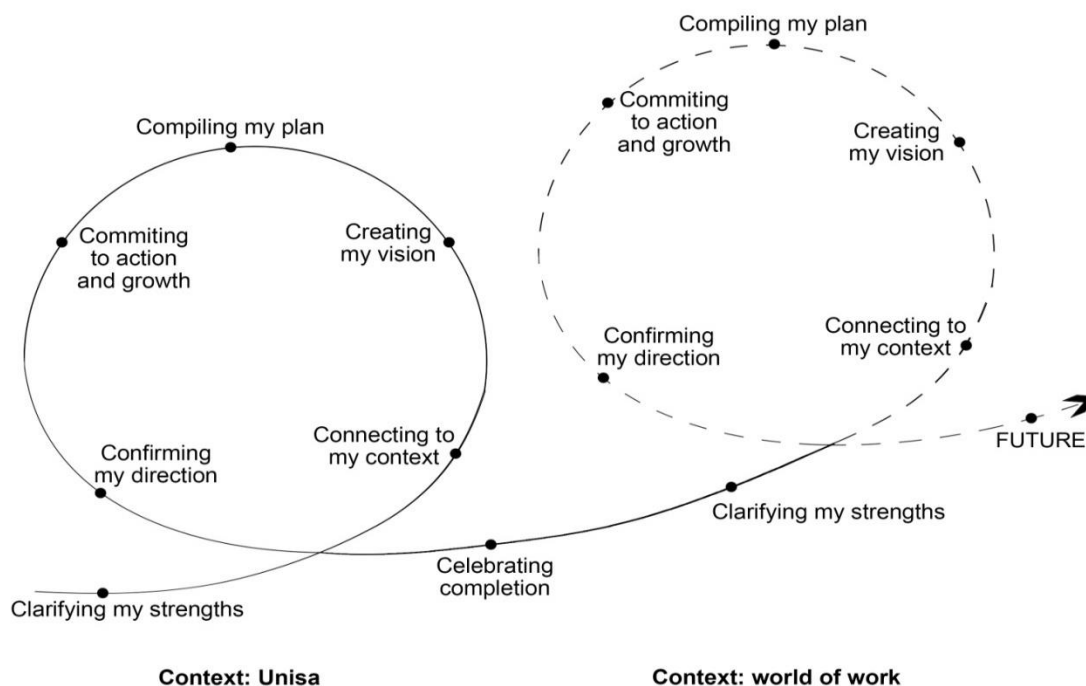
Figure 1: The Seven Cs and I – A life-coaching model to support social work students in an ODeL context

The self-coaching programme built on the "Seven Cs and I" model consists of eight conversations, two prepared for each level of the social work qualification. The purpose of each conversation is as follows:

- Conversation one, level one (Clarifying my strengths) assists students to articulate their strengths, passion and values. One example of an activity is that students recall three events where they were at their best.

- Conversation two, level one (Connecting to your context) creates opportunity awareness relating to social work and resources within the university. A variety of videos on the niche areas of social work are presented to students.

- Conversation three, level two (Creating my vision) enables students to set their academic, personal and professional goals. Students measure their knowledge and skills against the standards of the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) degree.

- Conversation four, level two (Compiling my plan) teaches students to use a Personal Development Plan (PDP) to plan actions to achieve their goals.

- Conversation five, level three (Commitment to change) stimulates students' personal and interpersonal growth through various activities e.g., the 360° feedback exercise and team building.

- Conversation six, level three (Confirming my direction) requests students to monitor their progress through their PDP.

- Conversation seven, level four (Celebrating completion) guides students to prepare their own career portfolio.

- Conversation eight, level four facilitates the evaluation of the students' journey and prepare them for lifelong learning by celebrating their success and dealing with any unfinished business.

During the time I was working on my PhD, my marriage broke down and I was divorced in 2012. This set me back, but I submitted my completed PhD for examination in January 2014. During the same year, the BSW programme was reviewed by the CHE and the Department of Social Work received a notice of withdrawal of accreditation. I started to share my findings and programme with colleagues in March 2014 with the hope of incorporating my programme in the new curriculum. Colleagues had mixed reactions and requested that I present again at our bosberaad in May 2014. Again, my presentation was not received positively. The programme was referred to Bright Site, a community engagement project of the department where I introduced fourth-level students who did their practical work at Bright Site to the programme form March – August 2014. The school director of the CHS at that time commended the programme as innovative and invited me to share my programme at a conference.

In September 2014, I was awarded funds as part of the university's Innovation and Support Programme to develop the self-coaching programme for social work learners into an online programme and pilot it within the context of an ODeL institution as well as a residential facility. This reinforced my belief in the programme. The self-coaching programme for social work students was developed into an online programme by UNISA as an ODeL institution and another university as a residential facility, piloted by a group of students at both universities. The colleague who spearheaded the programme at the other university received ample support from the university's online developer's e-learning section, while I really struggled to get the necessary guidance to approach UNISA's in-house ICT department. Thanks to the funding received, I could outsource the necessary services. I tried to introduce departmental staff to the online version of the programme. I booked a computer lab and demonstrated the use of the programme on different levels. However, I did not find mutual agreement on the implementation of the self-coaching programme.

I persevered and wrote a few articles on the work done and presented it at conferences. Together with a group of departmental lecturers doing community engagement at a care centre in Mamelodi, we adjusted and presented the programme to the centre's management and care workers. In 2017, the UNISA Open Learning platform was established. The CHS motivated staff to develop massive open online courses (MOOCs) and I took this as an opportunity to start converting Conversation 1 and 2 into a MOOC format. In 2018, a colleague within the Department of Social Work got involved and we developed the Self-coaching MOOC 101 with a lot of support from the CHS and the institutional MOOC facilitator. After piloting MOOC 101, and receiving an overwhelming positive response from a sample of first-level students, permission was obtained from the Department of Social Work to link the programme as an open educational resource (OER) to complement the outcomes of the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) on each level, specifically the practical work modules, by facilitating the academic, personal and professional growth of social work students. In 2021, MOOC 101 was incorporated in BSW1503 as an OER and accommodated as part of a formative assignment. MOOC 201 was linked to BSW2605 in 2022, while MOOC 301 is being incorporated in BSW3705 in 2023. MOOC 401 will be used as OER on fourth-level BSW4805 in 2023. The content of the MOOCs is to be revised annually based on the level of lecturers' and students' feedback. Even though we got official permission from a staff meeting to continue with the implementation, I felt more than once that we had to defend the programme. A fear of conflict prevented us from sharing regular progress of the programme at staff meetings. As part of the process, we obtained ethical clearance from the relevant institutional structures to undertake a longitudinal research study. The aims of the longitudinal research are to develop an in-depth understanding of the significance of self-coaching MOOCs and to refine self-coaching MOOCs for social work students within an Open Distance e-Learning (ODeL) institution. At the time we obtained ethical clearance, it felt to me as if the departmental ethics committee again questioned the existence of the project while ethics committees on a college and university level, positively contributed to the of research project. It thus confirmed my experience of the university and college

welcoming the self-coaching programme, while being consistently questioned on a departmental level.

Stage Two (Slade et al., 2020): "Come in Star Command. Do you hear me Star Command?" (Toy story, 1995)

In line with of Stage 2 of the auto-ethnographic model of Slade et al. (2020), I will now try to create meaning of my experience by dividing my reflexive narrative into career stages and comparing it to UNISA's socio-critical model for student success. This model provides a valuable framework to interpret the relationship and fit between the student as an agent on his/her student walk to success and the institution as an agent facilitating this success. For the purpose of this interpretation, I will separate the institution into the individual researcher, the department in which he/she resides, the college holding this department and the institution as a whole.

Career stage 1: Development and initial marketing of the social work student support programme

As a PhD student and lecturer within the Department of Social Work, I strongly relied on the socio-critical model when I developed my support programme. I wanted to identify the support needs of social work students on this student walk within UNISA as an ODeL institution and develop a life coaching programme to support these students and to maximise their academic, personal and professional growth. It was relatively easy to find a fit with the students and get to know their support needs as part of my initial research. I developed the programme as a self-coaching programme to empower students with knowledge and skills to facilitate their own life-long learning. To achieve this, I developed the "Seven Cs and I" model to span the students' walk from first level to fourth level and included aspects like the choice of a profession and university, the outcomes of the BSW, graduation and preparation for a career. I also tried to expedite transformation in the students' identity as professionals and graduate attributes. I included multi-media material to assist the students to find a fit with social work and the institution. I adjusted my programme based on students' feedback.

As discussed in the narrative, I tried to convince the department of the value of the self-coaching programme. I could, however, not find an academic, operational or social fit with the department This could have been due to me "over-identifying" with the programme and not being flexible enough to change the programme into separate parts to incorporate it into different modules. It also felt as if there was a departmental culture or habitus of academics not wanting to become involved unless a project will directly further their own career path.

Career stage 2: Development of the life coaching programme into two online programmes

It was part of the original planning to develop the programme into an online format, but without the buy-in of the department, I could not approach ICT. The school director and a former colleague made me aware of institutional capital in the form of the Innovation and Support Programme. I was awarded funds to develop the programme into an online format and to pilot it within the respective contexts of ODL and residential institutions. Although the same self-coaching programme was used, two different online programmes emerged as a result of the different shaping conditions and capital. I found the other university more receptive on an operational level, as the e-learning unit of this institution saw this as an innovative opportunity and even wrote an article on how they developed their version. The ten fourth-level social work students, five from each university, completed the online programmes in 2015, completed questionnaires and participated in focus groups. They all agreed that the online self-coaching programme should be implemented at both institutions and offered some insights for improvements. The programme thus found a fit with the participating students, the institution as a whole as well as the social work department situated at another university.

I tried to again promote the transformed online programme to the department, without success. Although I could still attribute the lack of success to external factors – possibly an unwillingness to adapt to new circumstances or the outcomes of change – I had to also consider other internal factors e.g., that the programme and research on the incremental development of the programme did indeed facilitate my own career, even though I still believed with all my heart that it could make a difference in the personal and professional development of the students.

Career stage three: Development and implementation of four self-coaching MOOCs as OERs

UNISA as a situated agent celebrated transformation in its academic domain in 2017 with the introduction of its Open Learning platform. I recognized the CHSs call for departments to develop MOOCs as institutional capital and started the process of obtaining permission to develop the self-coaching programme into four MOOCs. The College and the MOOC team of the institution welcomed the initiative and recognition was given to the department for being part of the MOOC development. This prepared the ground for a greater openness towards the programme.

In the process of developing the first MOOC, a colleague became involved in the project. The lecturer of the practical work module in the first level assisted us in piloting the online programme in 2018. For the first time we were really working on the programme as a team. Sharing the outcomes of the pilot study with colleagues may have helped to allay their fears or concerns. As mentioned, in 2019, the staff of the department approved the linking of the programme as an open educational resource (OER) to complement the outcomes of the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) on each level. It felt as if the online

support programme found a fit on all levels of the institution. Throughout the process of development, I often doubted my own capacity to succeed, but kept on believing in the potential of the programme to contribute to a successful fit of the social work student with UNISA and the social work profession.

Stage 3 (Slade et al., 2020): "I am just a toy. I am not a space ranger." (Toy story, 1995)

To determine the "truth of the matter plausibility" (Slade et al., 2020) of my reflection, I want to refer to a qualitative study done by Makofane (2018) to explore and describe the dissemination of research findings and implementation of practice recommendations among 31 doctoral graduates. Her findings provide a discourse to my experience. She interviewed doctoral graduates from academia and practitioners in the public and private sector (Makofane, 2018). Out of a total of 31 doctorate graduated, only ten (six educators, two practitioners from the public sector and two practitioners from the private sector) applied the recommendations of their studies.

Makofane (2018) highlighted several challenges experienced by graduates during the implementation of practice recommendations. Fear of change and resistance from colleagues and managers to embrace a new intervention posed a challenge to some graduates. Others found organisational or systemic barriers such as a high caseload or a lack of funds to be hindering factors. Change in organisational management and a lack of commitment to the advancement of progress from persons in authority were described as stumbling blocks. Graduates also felt that they could not rely on informal discussions with individuals in authority promising to facilitate implementation of research findings. Inaccessibility of policy makers and time constraints were also listed as challenges (Makofane, 2018).

As possible solutions, Makofane (2018) suggested accessibility of assistance and support, which will provide graduates with the confidence to apply their interventions. Her recommendations include:

- a workshop on dissemination and implementation four weeks after graduation,
- an extended relationship with the supervisor/mentor, and
- holding a colloquium, at least bi-annually, to report back to the larger community on research outputs.

Coming back to the "truth" of my own journey from my perspective, I would like to share the lessons I learnt with other graduates reaching for the sky.

- If you feel strongly about implementing your research findings, start to interact with the relevant institutional structures when planning your research. Find a "fit" with your topic.

- Continuously plan the dissemination and implementation of findings in your proposal and thesis. Keep the levels or systems within your institution in mind.
- If possible, continue the relationship with your supervisor after graduation or request a mentor within your institution who assist you with further development and implementation of your findings.
- Do not work on your own. A team consisting of your supervisor/mentor and stakeholders from the various levels or systems within your institution will assist you to be flexible and link the findings to current priorities and policies.
- Conduct a pilot study early in the implementation process. Give the target group a voice.
- Do not defend your research findings. It is not about your findings, but about making a difference to your clients/students.
- Network with other graduates who are further developing and implementing their findings. Multiple voices become a choir.

Conclusion: "Come on Sheriff. There is a kid in that house who needs us." (Toy story, 1995)

When you do your PhD, you are reaching into infinity. You will not conquer the world. You will not reach your elusive destiny. But together with others, you can make a 'real' difference!

"Hey Buzz, you are flying.

This is not flying; this is falling in style!

To infinity and beyond!" (Toy story, 1995)

List of references

Anderson, L. 2006. Analytic autoethnography. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 35: 373–395.

Botha, P. 2015. *A life-coaching programme for the support of social work learners within an open and distance learning context*. PhD dissertation, UNISA, Pretoria.

Chang, H. 2008. *Autoethnography as method*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, Inc.

Ellis, C., & Bochner, A. P. (eds.). 1996. *Ethnographic alternatives book series: Vol. 1. Composing ethnography: Alternative forms of qualitative writing*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press (Accessed: January 21, 2020). http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/fqs-12.1.1589.

Ellis, C., Adams, T. E., & Bochner, A. P. 2011. Autoethnography: An overview. *Historical Social Research*, 36(4): 273–290. https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.36.2011.4.273-290.

Flick, U. 2018. *An introduction to qualitative research*. 6th edition. Los Angeles: SAGE.

Gibbs, A. 2013. The Power of One: Why auto-ethnography, solo service-user voice and reflective case study analysis are useful strategies for researching family-centred social work practice, *Aotearoa New Zealand Social Work*, 25(4): 15-25.

Lawlor, G. M. 2008. *Examining the fit between personal, learning and practical work contexts of learners to further practice excellence in social work training*. MA (MH) dissertation, Unisa.

Lintvelt, R. A. 2008. *The personal contexts of undergraduate learners in social work at Unisa*. MA dissertation, UNISA, Pretoria.

Makofane, M. 2018. "S*haring of findings and recommendations remains a fallacy"*: reinvigoration of the dissemination and implementation of social work doctoral research findings, *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk*, 2018: 54(2).

Ntuli, A.Z.S. 2008. *Management of Open and Distance Learning at UNISA: Meeting students' needs and expectations*. MA dissertation, UNISA, Pretoria.

Padgett, D.K. 2017. *Qualitative methods in social work research*. 3rd edition. Los Angeles: SAGE.

Poerwani, E.K. 2021. Minimizing Bias and Maximizing the Potential Strengths of Autoethnography as a Narrative Research. *Japanese Psychological Research* 63(4):310–323. Special issue: Narrative Based Research, doi: 10.1111/jpr.12320.

Prinsloo, P. 2009. Discussion document. Modelling throughput at UNISA: the key to the successful implementation of ODL. UNISA, Directorate for Curriculum and Learning Development. Pretoria: UNISA.

Qakisa-Makoe, M. 2005. Reaching out: supporting black learners in distance education. *Progressio*, 27(1&2): 44-61.

Rothman, J., & Thomas, E. J. 1994. *Interview research: design and development of human service*. New York: The Haworth Press.

Schenck, C.J. 2008. Should being a South African make social work training different? Towards giving new meaning to the concept "student-centredness". Inaugural lecture, 21 October, UNISA, Pretoria.

Slade, D., Martin, A., & Watson, G. 2020. Practitioner auto-ethnography: self-reflection for discovery and deeper understanding. *Curriculum Studies in Health and Physical Education*,11(3): 252–264. https://doi.org/10.1080/25742981.2020.1778496

Subotzky, G. & Prinsloo, P. 2011. *Turning the tide: a socio-critical model and framework for improving student success in open and distance learning at the University of South.* Pretoria: UNISA.

Tinto, V. 2006-2007. Research and practice of student retention: what next? *College Student Retention*, 8(1): 1-19.

Toy Story. 1995. Walt Disney. Pixar Animation Studios.

UNISA. 2008a. *Five years transformation 2004-2008*. Pretoria: UNISA.

Yzan, B. 2019. An uto-ethnography of a language teacher educator wrestling with ideologies and identity positions. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, Summer: 34-57.

Wade, B.L. 2009. *UNISA social work students' experiences of trauma: an exploratory study from a person-centred perspective.* DPhil thesis, Pretoria, UNISA.

Wall, S.S. 2016. Toward a Moderate Auto-ethnography. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, January-December: 1–9.