

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND TEACHER LEARNING AT AN OPEN DISTANCE LEARNING UNIVERSITY (ODL) IN SOUTH AFRICA

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—Abstract —

Quality education requires quality training internationally and nationally. Professional development of staff for student learning is thus essential in a fast-changing, complex, globalised knowledge environment. This paper explores how one open-distance learning (ODL) university in South Africa plans professional development for the training of undergraduate teachers to improve teaching practices, leading to students learning more. Using a qualitative research paradigm and a phenomenological design, data were collected from six purposely selected, fourth-year undergraduate student teachers and analysed according to Giorgi's phenomenological methods. The results confirm previous studies, for the participants felt that it was important to establish communities of practice within their individual subject areas, to enable them to share their experiences and maintain their passion for teaching. This study recommends that the IT support personnel in the Department of Basic Education, provides learning materials needed by schools and assist in the training of teachers for quality training.

Key Words: *Education, Innovative teaching, Open distance learning, Professional development, Skills development, Student learning*

JEL Classification: J53, M12, M54

1. INTRODUCTION

Several authors equate professional development to activities that are designed to develop people's skills, knowledge, expertise and any other characteristics that enhance individuals' work performance (Caena, 2011; Gibbs & Coffey, 2004; Godfrey, Dennick & Welsh, 2004; Levander & Repo-Kaarento, 2004; Postareff, Lindblom-Ylänne & Nevgi, 2007). In this case, therefore professional development is necessary to enhance teachers' growth and performance (Borko, 2004). Against this observation, education institutions are required to plan and implement professional development programmes carefully to steer through the complexities of teaching and learning (Seyoum, 2012). If quality teaching and learning have to be realised, Caena (2011) and Gulamhussein (2013) suggest that the teacher has to engage in a lifelong learning process. Indeed, international studies on teacher professional development have shown that in-service training should be compulsory in order to ensure student learning (Borko, 2004; Gulamhussein, 2013). Gulamhussein (2013) notes that whilst we focus on how students learn, we do not ask how teachers learn to teach.

This study explores the experiences of fourth-year undergraduate student teachers at an open learning institution who took part in training programmes to enable them teach innovatively. According to Bradshaw and Lowenstein (2013), innovation closely relates to change for the better. In education, the concept innovation has been linked to the use of technology to achieve effective teaching and learning (Meyer, 2014; Weng & Tang, 2014). Bradshaw and Lowenstein (2013), Kirkpatrick (2001), Laurillard (2013); and Rodgers (2014) note that innovation in education is related to flexibility in the teaching and learning methods, open learning, independent learning, student-centred teaching/learning, online teaching/learning and learning with technology. However, authors like Hoidn and Karkkainen (2014), Neo and Neo (2001), Oliver, Oesterreich, Aranda, Archeleta, Blazer and De la Cruz and Robinson (2015) equate the concept to learning and teaching that entail problem solving.

It is important to note that problem solving learning is student-centred. Therefore, student-centred innovative learning is characterised by many student activities. Such activities are planned in a way that makes it possible for students to develop critical thinking in a content area or field (Hoidn & Karkkainen, 2014; Oliver et al., 2015). Neo and Neo (2001) and Kim, Kim, Khera and Getman (2014) acknowledge the close link that between teaching, the students and the subject

content in student-centred learning. It is therefore vital that during training teachers are equipped with the skills and knowledge to use such approaches in a technology-dominated class. In such a case, the teacher should be able to create a learning environment in which students actively engage with content as they construct their own knowledge.

A study of this nature is important since in this age of technology and internet, teachers have to change the way they manage, assess, and deliver their lessons (Beetham & Sharpe, 2013). It is important for the teacher to take cognisance of the fact that as technologies change, teaching and learning methods to change. The digital age students for instance are able to collect content that is engaging, relevant and responsive to their needs of pace and level, and that links the classroom to the workplace.

2. STATEMENT OF THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

Though South Africa spends 20 percent of its budget on education, the country performs dismally in international comparisons; ranking 140 out of 144 countries in the World Economic Forum's competitiveness index for 2012–2013. The country does not only experience a high drop-out and a dismal throughput rate, but also faces numerous other factors like inadequate training of teachers to teach and manage schools. Teachers do not only have inadequate teaching skills but also face a serious challenge of inadequate content knowledge (Holborn, 2013). While teacher-training institutions have numerous teacher-training programmes in place to ensure competent teachers and while the government has numerous education policies to ensure teacher effectiveness and competence, researchers like Armstrong, Armstrong and Spandagou (2011), Forlin, Keen and Barrett (2008) reveal that internationally, teachers feel that they are inadequately prepared to facilitate learning. It is against this backdrop that this paper seeks to explore teacher trainees' professional development experiences in order to advise how best they could be trained to ensure effective teaching and learning.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

If nations have to ensure their future freedom and advancement, they need to invest teaching and learning (Borko, 2004). Professional development for innovative teaching and learning is critical for student learning and achievement (Blackie, Case & Jawitz, 2010). However, if it has to improve the way staff

members teach, it should be intellectually challenging and should take into account knowledge about how teachers learn (Borko, 2004). In this regard, Erasmus, Loedolff, Mda and Nel (2015) posit that the professional development programme should be relevant to the participants' and the institutions' needs. The authors further note that it should be structured with clear timelines, activities and topics to be covered, focusing on theory, practical activities and knowledge and skills acquisition. It is vital for the facilitators to determine, in advance, the instructional strategies to be used in the training, ensuring that they identify the appropriate combination of methods and techniques, sources and materials to be used (Koert, Borgen & Amundson, 2011, Erasmus et al., 2015). Several authors (Erasmus et al., 2015; Smith, 2014; Koert et al., 2011) further note that the selection and use of good training facilities is bound to enhance participants' learning experiences positively. Erasmus et al. (2015) identify an appropriate facility as one that is big enough to accommodate all participants comfortably, has enough lighting, is accessible and has a quality indoor environment with technological connectivity.

It is also important that in providing training, the facilitators have not only adequate knowledge about the subject but also effective presentation skills (Erasmus et al., 2015). Schwarz, Davidson, Carlson and McKinney (2011) note that the facilitator should have the ability to improve participants' effectiveness during the learning process. In this regard, Erasmus et al. (2015) posit that the facilitator should be an expert in the subject matter, have the ability to make the learning content interesting and involve the participants in the learning experiences.

It is also important that trainers ensure trainees' positive experiences, by encouraging them to work together and emphasise collegiality. Focus should also be on ensuring quality. In this regard, trainees should be exposed in all aspects of teaching like the various approaches to teaching and learning, assessment and curriculum development (Seyoum, 2012). The main findings of Gulamhussein's study (2013) on professional development are that the common core standards focus on teaching for critical thinking, but research shows that most classroom instruction is weak in this area. In light of this observation, there is need for professional development programmes that bring to the fore trainees' critical thinking and problem solving abilities. Such programmes are bound to enhance their positive experiences. Most professional development programmes neither change teacher practice nor improve student learning.

According to Seyoum (2012), effective professional development should not only be ongoing but should also support teachers to overcome the challenges of implementing the new classroom practices. Ongoing professional development does not only allow teachers to learn new teaching approaches, but also enables them to grapple with issues related to implementation. With regard to support, the dual roles of teachers as technicians in researched-based practices and intellectuals developing teaching innovations have to be recognised. Seyoum (2012) further notes that effective programmes engage trainees through different approaches, ensuring that they remain active as they make sense of a new practice.

4. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Through the lived experiences of teacher trainees, this paper aims at providing insights on how professional development and teacher training are done at an ODL institution and how they could address teacher learning?

5. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

To capture the participants' professional development experiences, we used Giorgi's (1989) phenomenology. As a genre of a qualitative design, phenomenology aims at capturing and describing the meanings that individuals attach to a phenomenon in their real-life world (Giorgi, 1989; Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). According to Greenwood and Levin (2005), an individual's life world is about voice, reflexivity, informed consent and good and bad stories. Giorgi's (1989) phenomenology was found appropriate in this study to find out how participants describe their experiences in a given context (Giorgi, 1985).

6. POPULATION AND SAMPLE

The population consisted of all undergraduate teacher education students who had attended e-learning training offered by the university. Through purposive and reputational sampling, six undergraduate students determined by data saturation were selected and code named L1 to L6. The inclusion criteria in the purposive sample were such that each participant should have had four years of continuous studying at the university, and should have participated in professional development activities (Trochim & Donnelly, 2008).

7. MEASURES AND DATA COLLECTION

To collect rich data, semi-structured in-depth interviews were used. Both researchers and participants worked together to collect the data. The interviews were recorded and later transcribed for analysis. Solicitation and documentation of the respondents' were then guided by the descriptive phenomenological psychological method of Giorgi (2009).

8. DATA ANALYSIS

The data were analysed in accordance with the phenomenological approach of Giorgi and Giorgi (2003). The researchers listened to the audiotapes several times in order to get a global sense of what the interviewees were saying before delineating the transcribed interviews into meaning units. The meaning units then were transformed into descriptive expressions before synthesising them into general descriptions that reflected the participants' experiences (Giorgi, 2009; Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003; Giorgi, 1986).

9. CREDIBILITY

Maritz and Visagie (2010) indicated that research credibility is about truth-value and truth in reality. Accordingly, a coherent description explaining and justifying the choice of the research method, techniques employed to collect and analyse the data was provided (Morse, Barrett & Mayan, 2002). A clear and defensible link for each step of the research from the raw data to the reported findings was provided. In the data collection section information was further coherently presented in such a way that future researchers in similar contexts could emulate the steps. It was then interpreted in light of the empirical findings. Personal assumptions and pre-conceived ideas that would possibly influence the outcomes of the research were avoided (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

10. ETHICAL CONSIDERATION

Ethical clearance was obtained through the Ethical Research committee of the university. Participation in the study was voluntary and the respondents were free to withdraw at any stage without victimisation. Participants' informed consent was attained by disclosing the purpose of the study to all participants. This was done both verbally and in writing. Participants were assured that their names would remain anonymous and the collected data would not be used for any other

purposes other than to ‘advance scholarly research and improve academic practise’ (Morse, Barrett & Mayan, 2002).

11. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Van Manen (1990) observes that there are no hard and fast rules that guide identification of themes in phenomenology. However, individuals’ experiences can be grouped into four major categories; which, according to him are the four basic themes that describe how individuals exist or live in their real worlds.

These themes include the lived space, also referred to as spatiality, lived body or corporeality, lived time or temporality and the lived human relations; also called relationality or communality. Indeed, in giving accounts of the respondents’ experiences, the researchers were guided by Van Manen’s themes.

11.1 The lived space (spatiality) experiences

Lived space experiences entailed movement to the institution’s training centres, the experience of being trained, interaction with fellow trainees, training resources and interaction with the physical space provided by the university. Through this interaction, respondents were oriented to the training programme. This prepared them for the coming training sessions. In the words of L6,

“..., I experienced the training. ... We attended sort of an introductory course where the whole thing was introduced to us...They also rather wanted to know how good we were at teaching online... I should say that it was a good experience, apart from the speed with which it was introduced and conducted. Everything, from the introductory phase throughout the training sessions, everything was done sort of hurriedly”.

The above finding confirms the need for trainers to create a supportive space for learning. Erasmus et al (2015) indicate that such a space should be characterised among other things by proper furnishings, media, lighting and air conditioning. The finding further confirms findings in previous studies (Erasmus et al, 2015) which require that trainees need notification of the training to enable mental and physical preparation for it.

11.2 The lived-body (corporeality) experiences

Lived body experiences had to do with the participants' use of their senses of feeling, touching and their physical participation in learning activities that empowered them with the skills and the knowledge they required to teach innovatively. In this regard, respondents revealed that they participated in challenging authentic learning activities, experienced technophobia, anxiety and fear of failure and an inadequate focus on subject content during their training.

Because of these experiences, participants were empowered with the ability to lay out the essential elements of their subjects, to map out the processes involved in the units they taught, reflect on their learning and to give feedback to the facilitators. L6 aptly summarised the respondents' experiences with regard to lived body experiences:

“The sessions after orientation were enjoyable but challenging. Here we went practical. All teachers teaching a particular module worked together to identify the essential elements of the subjects we taught. We actually worked on our own subjects. We drew out the processes that were involved in the units in the form of a storyboard on paper. ... Our facilitators required us to design them online. Following this, it was now time to try out what we had designed to see if it worked. This was not easy; but we had to do it. We reviewed our work; and if it was necessary, we made adjustments.... this was an enjoyable but challenging experience. ... What we were doing was mimicking what we were going to do in the real world of teaching online.”

Although the participants indicated that, they liked the course, those who were not familiar with the use of technology, experienced fear and anxiety. As L4, one of the participants not familiar with the use of technology, indicated:

“..., am not good at the manipulation of computers and this for me was a big challenge. Some of my friends did well when it came to real practical work but not me....and this made me have some fear and anxiety. People like me required more time to finish the practical activities and this time was not there.”

Basing on the above finding, it can be argued that lived body experiences enabled learning through doing (Botha & Coetzee, 2012). Trainees learnt through trial and error; eventually developing further thoughts and ideas about e- learning and

teaching that could be followed up in the subsequent training sessions. Botha and Coetzee (2012) note in this regard that such learning empowers trainees with concrete experiences which are transferred to the work place.

11.3 Participants' lived-time (temporality)

According to Dapkus (1985), lived-time is the time experienced by individuals. In their real world individuals experience time differently. Whilst people with many tasks to execute in a day may complain about lack of time, those with little to do may find abundant time on their hands. The latter will always refer to the slowness of time (McLoughlin & Oliver, 2000). Respondents in this study referred to the little time they had to accomplish their learning activities and the more time they needed to master the needed skills. Respondents also indicated the need for the need for time to interact and engage one another as they participated in the training.

Talking about time of the training intervention, L1 stated:

“... We were supposed to do the entire course within just a few days; and some of... us had to overcome the fear of using technology. That takes time. And then we were given the practical work. This work required more than the 30 minutes in which we were supposed to do it. And the presenters were in a hurry. ... It was too much. And when we had finished the training; that was it! No follow-up. No continuity. We were on our own”.

This finding confirms the importance of time in training as observed by Erasmus et al (2015). Trainees do not only require enough time to execute the given activities during training, but they also require the programme to be presented over a long period. It is also important for the trainer to establish needed time to accomplish each of the activities and the programme as a whole.

But not all respondents complained about the lack of time. This was especially true with those respondents who had mastered the use of technology before the training. L2 for instance stated that:

“of course some of my friends still had the fear of technology. I suppose they needed more time to overcome that anxiety and fear.”

Nevertheless, confirming the need for more time for an intervention, like this one, L4 revealed that, “... I needed ... more time, in order to do the activities, and ...

get used to the technology.” Whilst some participants were concerned about the little time they had to execute learning activities, some required time for the entire training programme. L5 stated in this regard that, “We generally needed more time for the whole intervention to be successful; and we also needed enough time to go through and do all the learning activities.”

11.4 The lived-relational experiences

The relationship among the trainees and between the trainees and the facilitators of the training programme epitomised the lived-relational experiences of the respondents. In both cases, such relationships should be supportive and should enhance learning.

Whilst they appreciated the collaborative and team relations during the training, the respondents would have liked the establishment of teachers’ club, communities of teacher practices that would thrive even after the training. Such communities would act as support structures for the participants when back in their schools. Answering a question that solicited his concerns about the training, Respondent L4 observed that, *“My concern was the lack of total support from the facilitators. I cannot deny though that they did a good job with regard to training; but there were times when one noted that they too could not answer certain questions ... trainees, were grappling with”*.

In line with L4, L1 indicated that, *“You see, me, I wanted support right from the word go.... we needed support from colleagues.... I also wanted support from the facilitator herself... (But)... in one session the facilitator was also not very clear; I mean she did not have the technical know-how and probably enough knowledge to facilitate e-learning....”* What this implies is the importance support through a professional learning community as confirmed by Tam’s (2015) study. According to Tam (2015), such a community should be well organised with all its members working together to ensure quality learning among the professionals.

The findings of this study indicate that trainees experienced staff development in several ways that were characterised first by an orientation phase and a learning phase. Orientation and all activities in the learning phase constituted the lived body experiences; experiences that enabled trainees to acquire skills and competencies to teach innovatively. Several authors (Harrison, 2004; Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2009) note that when teachers’ knowledge and skills change, student attainment is also bound

to improve. However, whilst participants in this study indicated that their exposure to professional development improved their knowledge and skills to teach innovatively, they were not certain whether this new knowledge translated into student learning.

The lived body findings as captured in the study were not only characterised by participants' engagement with authentic learning activities but also the experiences of the fear of technology accompanied by anxiety. The respondents further indicated that they were not presented with enough subject content as the trainers focused mostly on teaching methods. The little focus on subject content was of great concern to the participants for they indicated that a teacher who has mastered both the subject content and the methods of teaching is always a better teacher. Several authors (Leu & Ginsburg, 2011) indicate in this regard that effective staff development programmes incorporate pedagogy into their design.

The lived time findings described the duration of time assigned to the development programme and the time that was needed to follow up training sessions. The short duration of the programme was an impediment to the anticipated the participants' expected change as short staff development programmes may not translate in trainees' improved performance. It was against this backdrop that respondents indicated that longer programmes would have resulted in better training. With regard to the absence of follow-up sessions, participants indicated that they were denied the opportunity to share their challenges and successes during such sessions. According to Collin (2009), Leu and Ginsburg (2011); and Hemmington (2009) such sessions provide a support mechanism that stimulate and empower teachers continuously.

With regard to the lived human relations experiences, participants were concerned about the trainers' poor presentation skills, lack of in-depth knowledge with regards to some computer applications, in addition to their lack of technical knowledge and experience in the use of technology. Furthermore the absence of long lasting relationships in form of online communities of practice among the participants was also of great concern. This implies that if human relations experiences have to lead to effective staff development, the trainer should have effective facilitating skills. Erasmus et al (2015) note in this regard the facilitator has to demonstrate among other things listening, questioning and communication skills.

12. IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

The study provides some understanding regarding teacher training at the institution be concerned. It shows that staff development programmes should aim at creating positive experiences for the participants. It is through such experiences that teachers' knowledge and skills can be changed to ensure both student and teacher learning. This study reveals that for effective staff development, programme designers have to emphasise the creation of an environment that supports positive experiences. The findings and recommendations given in this study could be used, as some form of directory to guide professional development. This will probably lead to quality teacher training and eventually quality student learning and improved throughput rates within the South African schooling system through improved classroom practices. However, change of this magnitude requires a great deal of learning on the part of teachers and will be difficult without support and guidance (Borko, 2004).

13. RECOMMENDATIONS

This study recommends that more time be given to the orientation phase of professional development programmes, in order to reduce the anxiety and uncertainty experienced during the first days of training programmes. Furthermore, there is need to emphasise the creation and development of communities of practice for teachers as they exit training centres; as such communities keep all teachers in touch with each other, playing a major supporting role. It is also recommended that teachers' negative experiences and concerns should be used to improve on any staff development programmes.

14. CONCLUSION

This study explored professional development and teacher learning experiences of fourth year student teachers at one ODL university in South Africa. From the analysed data, four themes pertaining to the professional development experiences emerged. These are lived human relations, lived space, lived time and lived body. Whilst the lived human relations experiences had to do with how trainees related the facilitators and their colleagues, lived space had to do with participants experiencing the physical training spaces, and being trained. On the other hand lived time experiences described the duration of the programme and the time participants needed to accomplish their training tasks. Finally, the lived body

experiences described the participants' senses that were used as mediums of learning. While the participants perceived their experience as positive, some of them experienced some form of technophobia during the training sessions.

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