A TUTOR'S PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCES OF TUTORING IN A SCIENCE TEACHER EDUCATION MODULE

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Abstract

Student tutoring in innovative teaching and learning practices promotes personal and professional learning. Experiential learning theory underpins this research. An interpretive, qualitative approach and narrative strategy with purposive sampling was used. The tutor narrative accounts of tutoring the Research and Service-Learning module in Biological Science Education were compiled from a reflective diary, coordinator - tutor discussions and tutor notes. The qualitative data were analysed using descriptive content analysis. The tutor's self-confidence, language competence, understanding and application of research and Service-Learning and engagements with students were greatly improved.

Keywords: *experiential learning, pre-service teacher, teacher education, tutor's personal and professional experiences.*

Introduction

Pre-service teacher education in South African universities is expansive and policy driven. The Revised policy on the Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2015, p. 6), "is aimed at ensuring that the higher education system produces teachers of high quality, in line with the needs of the country,". Pre-service teacher professional development programmes are faced with increased numbers of students in the specialisation lecture groups and various support mechanisms are employed to enhance the teaching and learning, which include the employment of temporary contract module tutors.

The employment of tutors raises issues with regard to their interest, experience, competence, contextual and disciplinary knowledge including the specialised pedagogical content knowledge. Tutors are not ready-made individuals, so their development is linked to the module coordinator's understanding and practice of working with tutors, assumptions about teaching and learning particular specialised disciplines (modules) and also their beliefs about challenging traditional beliefs and practices. The partnership role between tutor and lecturer is one that is underplayed and yet it could influence the teaching and learning in the discipline (Layton & McKenna, 2015). Moreover, tutors, as postgraduate and undergraduate students are an essential component for the teaching of large groups of students, for effective working relationships for all students. Research

in professional development internationally, mainly focuses on lecturer development and not tutor development or tutor experiential learning. According to Burge, Godinho, Knottenbelt and Loads (2017, p. 3), "None of this research has considered the experiences of tutors more holistically, thinking about how tutors feel and experience their roles. There is comparatively little knowledge about how tutors themselves see their professional development needs." The research explored the experiential learning of a Biological Science for Educators 420 undergraduate module tutor through his observations and personal experiences of tutoring the module on Research and Service-Learning.

Literature Review

The use of a tutoring system in many universities and supplemental instruction in some, is an accepted process, especially with postgraduate students as tutors. Tutors were regarded as an "academic underclass" (Sharaff & Lessinger, 1994 cited in McCormack & Kelly, 2013, p. 94), this being the case over ten years ago, but their importance and value has increased over the years and they are critical to the teaching and assessment in any university (Beaton & Gilbert, 2013). In fact, the teaching and learning in a South African university would be negatively impacted on if no tutors were employed as contract staff, to teach. At this stage tutors are also engaged in online teaching and assessment in various subjects/specialisations for contact and distance learning students.

Research on tutors in the academic sector has focussed mainly on postgraduate students and the issues that they experience. These include an analysis of tutor support and development programmes (Chadha, 2013; Hall & Sutherland 2013); the female tutors and their needs (Starr, 2013); online tutoring and the requirements (Parker & Sumner, 2013); and the importance of policy development for tutoring and tutors (Gaskell, 2013) and in the South African context the issues of employment equity with regard to race, and South African citizenship.

The theoretical framework that underpins this research was experiential learning. Experiential learning in its simplest form may be defined as "learning from experience or learning by doing... immerses learners in an experience and then encourages reflection about the experience to develop new skills, new attitudes, or new ways of thinking" (Lewis & Williams, 1994, p. 5). Experiential learning is associated with constructivist theory of learning, as the "outcomes of the learning process are varied and often unpredictable" (Wurdinger, 2005, p. 69). The tutor's engagement in the tutoring while learning how to tutor specialised content of research and Service-Learning was new territory for him, which he was eager to be engaged with in a space where he had to decide on how to conduct his role and the relationship with the students, the content and the context, and in the process observe his personal and professional development.

Research Methodology

An interpretive, qualitative research was undertaken to explore the undergraduate tutor's experiential learning during the process of tutoring the Biological Sciences module. The module engages pre-service students in learning about research and Service-Learning and they are then expected to conduct research on their Service-Learning. Service-Learning is not volunteerism nor community service (Furco, 1996),

and with the pre-service teachers they were expected to provide service activities that did not entail teaching Life Sciences at a school or in any community organisation. So, the placement sites included old age homes, crèches, preschools, public gyms, children's homes. Service-Learning involved students in community service activities and their application of their experiences to their personal and academic development.

Fifty-eight Biological Sciences for Educators 420 (Bio 420) pre-service teachers participated in the Research and Service-Learning module. The pre-service teachers were engaged in the development of critical skills and community interactions and enhancement focused on their personal and professional development, so as to influence their work as future teachers. The module tutors were employed to support the pre-service teachers through consultations and informal interactions, inform the learning and assessment. In this research the module tutor was an undergraduate fourth year pre-service teacher who had completed and passed the module with a mark over 65%. Purposive sampling was undertaken, as the undergraduate tutor was the participant and researcher in the research.

The research is a narrative account of the tutor's observations and personal experiences of tutoring the module, over a period of 11 weeks. The experiences encountered by the tutor were written in a reflective diary and the research notes for each lecture session, in a notebook. Also, the informal discussions between the tutor and the module coordinator were recorded in a text format in the notebook as well. The data analysis using descriptive content analysis and the experiential framework indicated the data sets to be presented and discussed. As the tutor wanted to present the developmental nature of his learning, he presented it in three parts, as indicated in the findings section. The research rigour of credibility and dependability were worked with and the research ethics were considered and acted on.

Research Results

The findings obtained from the analysis of the data are presented in three parts, the student tutor's thoughts before the module, during the module and after the module.

Thoughts before the Module

My prime reason for wanting to be a tutor was for, "learning from this intense, different experience of tutoring, where research and Service-learning are integrated" (Reflective diary, 2016). Biological Sciences for Educators 420 (bio 420) is quite a different module compared to other biology modules offered in the School of Education. As a result, there was a lot that is required from anyone who is the tutor of the module. Lot of readings, long consultations with students asking for clarity in every step of their projects is what I will be engaged with. A reflective diary entry, "I never thought or saw myself as a tutor for this module and I think this was because of its different nature and I felt inadequate to advise others about how to conduct research". Another entry, "This module will really require a lot of time and reading, it is even worse this year because the class size is huge, there are 58 pre-service teachers in the class" (Reflective diary, 2016).

The thoughts that I had before the module also focused on my feelings and state of happiness that my application to be a tutor was accepted by the module coordinator.

The statement written, "What I am happy about is that the lecturer has accepted my application to be a tutor, as in her words she said that she sees potential in me and that from working with the students that I will also develop." I also wrote about the gratitude that I have in that, "I am extremely grateful and happy that the lecturer of this calibre sees potential in me. This is so important for me as it gives me confidence and strength to work with students." A further aspect that I focused on was that I was not alone in tutoring the pre-service students - I was to work with two other tutors: An Honours student and a fourth-year student.

Experiences during the Module

The experiences during the module focussed on incidences that were pertinent to the tutor's learning and growth. These included the tutor attending lecture sessions and exploring student learning and attitudes during the module.

Tutors attending lecture sessions

Since I was expected to attend all the lecture sessions, I recorded in my reflective journal,

> "I feel that it is necessary that bio420 tutor/s should attend classes for their own benefits and student benefits as well. This is beneficial because tutors get to be on the same page with the lecturer to avoid cases where tutor and lecturer have contradicting thoughts about the same aspect of the module. This also ensures consistency in working between the tutor/s and lecturer" (Reflective diary, 2016).

I experienced that attending lectures was important for me to be aware of the developments in the module. I wrote, "I was aware of the personal learning of a number of things from both the lecturer, students and the lecture, that I did not know and also for some, which I had forgotten." The lecture attendance was also important for the personal relationships with the students in that, "it helped me to develop a relationship with the students and to understand them better and it became easy for them to share the problems they encountered during the course of their project (research) with me." The relationship building is a process which required time and close interaction with the pre-service teachers.

I observed the actions of the pre-service teachers during lectures and recorded, "they were well engaged, kept busy and challenged, sharing ideas and experiences but time was always a limiting factor." What I found critical to the pre-service teachers' development is that they were, "given opportunities to share their work/ideas/thought, but only a few responded." I questioned this lack of participation, as I recalled how important my participation in the module was for my development as, "it helped me as a student to be able to 'speak' my thoughts and have confidence in sharing my thoughts with peers." My learning from these observations was that I took the sharing of ideas as a crucial part of learning. Therefore, as a tutor I was focused on the wish that, "more students be given a platform to speak/share what they have written because it is beneficial for them."

Student Attitudes and Learning

Students did not use a correct procedure for making appointments with tutors. They would see you on the taxi from Pinetown and ask you about their project and very few of them sent emails to make appointments. During the student reflection sessions, the peer tutor and I facilitated them. The module coordinator informed us and "she has a faith in us, she believed that we can work well with the students." (Reflective journal, 2016). The student learning was evident on the Research and Service-Learning Presentation day. During this day students showed a great impression while presenting their work, sat long hours listening to one another and it was the first time most students were engaged in experiencing such a long and intensive formal session. I think students showed tolerance and respect to one another. I believe that the presentation was one of the most well-planned aspects of this module and everything went accordingly. Some students though lacked confidence, as they had too much fear in such a way that it was difficult for them to even utter words. I think this should be taken seriously, not as a normal issue, the university should expose student in speaking in environment like this one, most student who have that problem are students who are coming from poor schools where there is a poor background of English.

Future Thoughts and Suggestions

Working with the module coordinator is always a great honour and privilege and I knew very well that whenever I went to her, I knew that she was going to say something either funny or serious, but it was always constructive and innovative. Tutoring this module was sometimes funny and interesting but in most cases the module was demanding, hectic, challenging especially towards the end we had to sit and mark 16-20 pages of student chapters. I sometimes sat for 1h 30 minutes dealing with one literature review.

I am grateful that I was given this opportunity of tutoring bio420 in 2016 and I call it an experience of a lifetime. Working with the coordinator in this module has grown me a lot, now I can confidently share my ideas, ask questions, for clarity if it necessary. All of this I could not do at first and "believe me it played and still has a very crucial role for me because it made learning to be very interesting to me." Module coordinator, you taught me to "make my life interesting", "learn to work with what you have" and "getting things done"

Conclusions

During this module I became aware that "I lack self-confidence (low self-esteem). This is because of my poor English background which causes me to be scared of speaking when there are many people, I feel that they know English better than I do" … "Towards the end of the module I ended up speaking without fear." (Reflective diary, 2016). This emotion is one that I have carried with me throughout the tutoring of this module. The work that I do with the students should be encouraging them for the development of self-confidence, be able to freely share their ideas and thoughts, including feelings; and to feel good doing it.

As a tutor, "I believe that I have grown and was tested in this module by being exposed in challenging situations - from the responsibility of presenting group sessions with the other tutors on Service-Learning, coordinating a reflective session with students and reading and editing their research report chapters." As a second language learner and as a future teacher who will teach Life Sciences in English – I am confident that the use of English and the exploration of meaning, developing the literacy in Science for learners will be a prime focus. This will further enhance my own literacy development and that of the learners. Furthermore, the use and assessment of the development of research knowledge and skills for students places me at a level of teacher as researcher where my practice will inform my theory about effective teaching, for enhancing learning of learners.

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