Reflective practice

An Assessment of the Impact of the Mentoring Programme on Student Performance

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Abstract

The University of Venda introduced an academic mentoring programme in 2012. The introduction of the programme was in response to the results of a national study that was conducted by Scott, Yeld and Hendry (2007). The study was replicated at institutional level and it yielded similar results that indicated that at least 30% of undergraduate students drop out at the end of their first year. Using Margaret Archer's morphogenetic framework, this paper seeks to assess the impact of the programme on students' performance. The key question asked in this study is: 'What impact has the mentoring programme made on the academic performance of students in the Department of Communication and Applied Language Studies?' This department formed part of this study because the module lecturer was among the first few who exercised her agency by consciously volunteering to join the programme with the hope that it would improve pass rate. The pass rate improved from 80% to 92% the first time the programme was implemented and it has been high ever since, while the students in that department have continued to embrace the programme. Both qualitative and quantitative methods were adopted for this study. Qualitative data consisted of an open-ended questionnaire which was used to collect data from forty-five mentees. Interviews were also conducted with ten mentees, three student mentors, the Media Studies (MST 1541) lecturer and the educational development practitioner (EDP). From the forty-five questionnaire respondents, only ten mentees were also interviewed to confirm responses that were given in questionnaires before the researcher had reached saturation point. Quantitative data were collected through a comparison of module results for 2012 and 2013. The MST 1541 classes in 2012 and 2013 were taught by the same lecturer, who confirmed minimal changes in terms of content and teaching methods which could have influenced the improved pass rate in 2013. The study concludes that the mentoring programme contributed to improving student success. However, the study only focused on one causal mechanism, namely mentoring. It is therefore recommended that a broader study be conducted to evaluate the impact of additional causal mechanisms. Furthermore, the researchers recommend improved monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to curb the inconsistencies and irregularities reported by the mentors, mentees, lecturer and educational development practitioner.

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Keywords

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Introduction

This paper seeks to assess the impact of a student mentoring programme on student performance among first-level students at the University of Venda (UNIVEN). The study explores departmental conditions and the student success rates before and after the introduction of the mentoring programme in the Department of Communication and Applied Language Studies (CALS). UNIVEN is a rural-based, previously disadvantaged institution, which mainly caters for the formerly marginalised black population in the Limpopo Province of South Africa (Mabika, 2015). The University of Venda's Centre for Higher Education Teaching and Learning (CHETL) reported that at least 53% of the students who wrote the 2011 examinations would be repeating a module or two of their first-year modules the following year (Masehela & Ndebele, 2016, p. 117). The institution attracts mostly first-generation students who come from disadvantaged schooling backgrounds from peri-urban and rural communities. These students face financial challenges, underpreparedness, a lack of exposure to various technologies, poverty and a range of emotional burdens which can significantly affect their academic participation and performance (Krause, 2005). However, in its effort to deal with some of these challenges, UNIVEN introduced an institution-wide academic mentoring programme in the second half of 2012. This programme was accepted by some lecturers and rejected by others who felt it added more work to their already heavy workloads (Masehela, Ndebele, Sikhwari & Maphosa, 2014).

This paper aims to share the experiences of a lecturer who was a member of the department before the introduction of the programme and who later became one of the first academics to participate in the programme when it was eventually introduced. The paper also shares the experiences of an educational development practitioner (EDP) who participated in the programme since its inception and worked directly with the lecturer concerned in implementing the programme in CALS. Students who also participated in this programme during its inception completed a questionnaire for this study. Using Archer's morphogenetic framework, the paper seeks to establish if mentoring was one of the causal mechanisms that impacted on the performance of students in CALS. Archer's non-conflationary framework adopts the analytical dualism approach to analyse data that contributes to the success or non-success of the mentoring programme. Thus, the structure, culture and agency are analysed separately to explore the status quo of student performance in the department.

The question posed for this study was: 'What impact does the mentoring programme have on the academic performance of students in the Department of Communication and Applied Language Studies?' Data were collected through questionnaires, interviews, the EDP, the module lecturer and module results. Quantitative data which were comparatively analysed were collected from the lecturer's 2012 and 2013 records in the department of CALS.

This paper provides a brief background of the need for support programmes in higher education in the recent past both globally and in the South African higher education landscape. The paper further introduces the theoretical framework that underpins this research, namely social realism which is rooted in the critical realism philosophy of life, and discusses the reasons for choosing this framework. This is followed by the methodology used to analyse the data.

Background

Habley (2004) found that students' interactions with faculty, staff, advisors, peers and administrators directly influenced undergraduate retention. To this end, Tinto (2004) suggests that, to improve undergraduate retention, all institutions of higher education must offer easily accessible academic, personal and social support services. This perspective is not only relevant to the experiences of the global North. Norodine-Fataar (2011) found that the mentoring programme offered at the Fundani Centre of the Cape Peninsular University of Technology served a dual focus, that is, academic and social. Du Preez, Steenkamp and Baard's (2013) study also confirms that the promotion of active interaction amongst students, faculty, staff, advisors, peers and administrators which is further enhanced through the introduction of mentoring programmes can impact positively on student retention.

The growing body of literature on High Impact Practices (HIPs) clearly supports student mentoring, stating that there is a link between engaged learning and successful degree completion (Kuh, 2008; Brownell & Swaner, 2009; Kuh & O'Donnell, 2013; Wellman & Brusi, 2013). HIPs are defined as undergraduate opportunities that have a positive association with student learning and retention which further share several traits: They demand considerable time and effort, facilitate learning outside of the classroom, require meaningful interactions with faculty and students, encourage collaboration with diverse others, and provide frequent and substantive feedback (Keup, 2015).

The Theoretical Framework: A Critical Realist Ontology

This study explores Margaret Archer's (1995, 2003) theory of social realism, which is grounded in Roy Bhaskar's (1979) philosophy of science known as critical realism. Bhaskar argues for a stratified ontology that takes account of an ultimate reality that exists independently of human action and thought. Bhaskar (1979) argues against a flat monistic view of reality by advocating for three levels of reality, namely the Real, the Actual and the Empirical. The level of the Real is where structures and mechanisms are placed and it is at the bottom stratum. This is the level where planning takes place. After that, events emerge at the level of the Actual. The impact of the planning that took place at the bottom of the ladder is realised at this second level. However, agents who participate in the event experience the effects of the event differently, either positively or negatively, at the level of the Empirical.

Critical realists attempt to recognise the subjective nature of knowledge and argue for the presence of underlying deep mechanisms and enduring structures within a social world. This philosophy of science sees reality through neither the positivist lens nor the

constructivist lens (Sayer, 2007, p. 2). We now turn to explain why social realism was used in this study.

Why social realist methodology or ontology?

First, social realism draws on Bhaskar's notion of a stratified view of reality, outlined above. Bhaskar's critical realism asserts that the world is composed of three strata or layers, that is discourses, structures, powers and tendencies at the level of the Real; events at the level of the Actual; and experiences and impressions at the level of the Empirical (Bhaskar, 1979; Patomaki & Wight, 2000; Sayer, 2007). Therefore, for the purposes of this study, the researchers were interested in unearthing the tendencies at the level of the Real which contributed to the outcome of an improved academic performance at the level of the Empirical.

Secondly, social realism allows for an exploration of the way change occurs, or does not occur, over time. It does this through the use of Archer's (1995) morphogenetic framework, which allows social researchers to analyse the interplay between 'the people' (i.e. human agency) and 'the parts' (i.e. structure and culture) in any social milieu. In the case of this study, we used Archer's framework to explore what could have led to the improvement or non-improvement of student performance after the introduction of a mentoring programme in the Department of CALS. In this study we examine student performance before the introduction of the mentoring programme, using 2012 results and analysing departmental practices at that time. This is then followed by a comparison of the MST 1541 2012 and 2013 results and an examination of the departmental practices after the introduction of the mentoring programme.

Thirdly, social realism requires us to adopt analytical dualism, which involves the artificial separation, for the purposes of analysis, of 'the parts' (structure and culture) and 'the people' (agency). The rationale behind the separate analysis of the parts is so that each domain has its own unique emergent, autonomous and efficacious properties and powers that can or cannot bring about change. Social realism avoids the epiphenomenal character prevalent in other social theories, for instance empirical and linguistic realism, where "… either the 'parts' or the 'people' are held to be the ultimate constituents of social reality to which the other could be reduced" (Archer, 2000, p. 5). Therefore, in this study, Archer's framework adopts the analytical dualism approach to analyse data and to explore the parts and the people's contribution to the success or non-success of the high-impact practice programme with specific reference to the mentoring programme in CALS. This approach to exploring conditions allows researchers to dig deep down to the root cause of the situation.

The Context of Study: CALS at UNIVEN

CALS is housed in the School of Human and Social Sciences at UNIVEN in Limpopo Province of South Africa. UNIVEN is a historically disadvantaged institution, which draws most of its learners from the lowly rated rural and township high schools around

Vhembe District and surrounding areas (Mabika, 2015). 'Lowly rated schools' refers to poorly funded public schools which normally draw learners from the poor black rural and high-density townships. This is confirmed in the *Report of the Ministerial Committee for the Review of the Funding of Universities* (Department of Higher Education, 2013, p. 14). The higher education system in South Africa shifted after the attainment of democracy in 1994, opening up access to all. This resulted in burgeoning enrolments in the underprepared institutions. It is reported that the University of Venda in 2002, boasted an enrolment figure of a total headcount of 7 783 students (Department of Education, 2004, p. 41), while the same institution boasted a total headcount of 14 147 students in 2015 (University of Venda Annual Report, 2015, p. 43). Yet infrastructure and staff complement did not match the growth. The year 2017 shows further growth of enrolment in this institution. In addition to this, the study that was conducted by Scott, Yeld, and Hendry (2007) on behalf of the Council on Higher Education (CHE) identified poor throughput rate as a national challenge which requires the higher education system to work together as a collective to address the challenge; this was done through the introduction of the Quality Enhancement Project (QEP) (CHE, 2014, p. ii). Statistics for the poor national throughput rate in higher education are shared by Schoeman (2014) as follows: only 15% of SA university students graduate, only 25% of students in "contact institutions" graduate in the required time, only 35% of the total intake and 48% of contact students graduate within five years.

In light of these poor throughput rates, this study also acknowledges the following as key conditions in exacerbating poor performance and attrition of students: academic under-preparedness of academic staff and students; transition or adjustment problems; career choice uncertainties in students and inadequate financial support. Wadesango and Machingambi (2012, p. 118) add that academic achievement is closely tied to socio-economic status, and that being raised in a low-income family often means having fewer educational resources. They further point out that, in spite of resilience and the will to be successful, low-income families face additional challenges such as limited access to health care and nutrition, which could contribute to lower academic performance. In addition, students' lack of what Bourdieu (1977) calls "cultural capital", aggravates a student's underpreparedness for higher education. Cultural capital is the assumption that children from working-class families do not have the privilege of acquiring the skills and knowledge that they would require at university from their parents because they are first-generation students. Therefore, student mentors can act as role models for junior students who might not have academic roles models.

There are also fears that digital illiteracy is rife among students from poor rural communities in South Africa due to lack of access to digital technologies. Poley, Cotton and McAlpin (2000, p. 1) argue that there is "a growing problem of the digital millennium with increasing polarization between the information haves and have nots". They further argue that, as technology continues to develop, the gap between the information haves and have nots continues to widen. Wadesango and Machingambi (2011) further note classroom absenteeism as another major contributor to poor performance in higher education.

With the intake of the above-mentioned student body in the Department of CALS at UNIVEN, the challenge is aggravated by the nature of the discipline and the staff component of the department. The department is multi-disciplinary; it was originally the Department of Linguistics but later incorporated Media Studies and became the Department of CALS. Most students who enrol at the School of Humanities register for the Media Studies programme. However, the greatest challenge for this very popular degree programme is the lecturer to student ratio. Lecturers in the Media Studies programme are overwhelmed by the large numbers of students. The lecturer/student ratio is approximately 1:120. The department has six full-time lecturers, including the head of department, one part-time lecturer for Media Studies and one for Linguistics.

The Significance of the Study

Given the context of UNIVEN, it is clear that there is not only a need for student support and development programmes in this institution, but there is also a critical need to critique these programmes at close range to ascertain their relevance in this context. Although student mentors at UNIVEN are selected on merit and undergo training the researchers saw the need to give a critique of how the mentoring programme was unfolding in the Department of CALS. While the research questions in this study will assist the researchers to unearth the impact that the mentoring programme might or might not have made on student performance, the study will also serve as a reflective tool for the lecturer in the study and other lecturers, as well as the development practitioner and other practitioners. Since student support initiatives at UNIVEN are relatively new measures, reflective and reflexive practices are critical in order to move towards innovative practices that speak directly to the context instead of being influenced by pragmatic practices that have worked in other institutions. According to Barry Stierer (2008) reflective practice is the act of scrutinising and critiquing one's teaching habits. Stierer argues that the philosophy of personal effectiveness in teaching is a very important component in professional development. Teaching in higher education could even go beyond reflection to reflexivity. Luckett (2001) argues for an epistemologically diverse curriculum which encourages reflexive competence, that is, knowing how one knows that which one knows, and how one got to know it. Therefore, it is important for one to put forward one's role as a teacher rather than simply acknowledge one's command of the content only.

Tinto (2012) argues that student success is strengthened by assessing performance of both academics and students in ways that allow them to change their behaviour, in order to keep improving success rates. In their quest to professionalise their teaching practices, it is important for academics at UNIVEN to base their practices on research-based evidence as advocated by Stierer (2008). Hence, this study selected Archer's social realist ontology to serve as a lens through which to critique the interplay between students, academics, academic developers and the structures that the institution has put in place to improve student performance. Following is a section that shares literature on peer mentoring, what it entails and the impact it has on student performance in higher education.

Literature Review

Peer mentoring

Mentoring is interpreted differently in different contexts. Du Preez et al. (2013) define peer mentoring within the academic context (module mentoring) as a process whereby reciprocity and equal status abide, and both the mentor and the mentee exchange knowledge, ideas, support and interest to the benefit of both parties. These authors advance the importance of reciprocity and equality between the mentor and mentees since in this context they both occupy the same position, that of student. In that sense, they both stand a chance of learning something from each other or from the interaction itself. Langhout, Rhodes and Osborne (2004) propose four styles of mentoring: (1) moderate mentors (conditional support and moderate levels of structure and activities); (2) unconditionally supportive mentors (highest level of support with moderate levels of structure and activity); (3) active mentors (highest level of activity combined with the lowest degree of structure); and (4) low-key mentors (highest support and lowest activity). Leidenfrost, Strassing, Schabmann, Carbon and Spiel (2011) add three more peer-mentoring styles, namely the motivating master mentoring, informatory standard mentoring and negative minimalist mentoring. The motivating master mentor performs well academically, is committed to mentoring sessions, and provides informational and motivational mentoring, while avoiding negative mentoring. Informational mentors focus on providing information without being asked for it, while negative minimalist mentors are ignorant of the content and fail to answer any questions. For further research at UNIVEN around mentorship, it would be beneficial to investigate the kind of mentors who are likely to be recruited in this institution. In addition, the University of Venda pays its mentors a stipend, which adds to their motivation to do the task. The question could be: What kind of mentors will the institution recruit when there is no stipend attached? More on the kind of mentors at CALS is shared in the data analysis section.

The authors of this paper examine the impact of mentoring in a rural historically disadvantaged university in South Africa. Given the history of the country and its academic support practices, the first phase of the academic development movement, as noted by Pavlich and Orkin (1993, cited in Boughey, 2010, p. 4), emerged as a result of historically white liberal universities admitting small numbers of black students in the early 1980s due to "relaxed state apartheid policies". Other than that, academic student support practices in higher education institutions were not common except for student counselling services. As a result, current academics know and understand very little about student support practices, especially those that are regarded as high-impact practices.

What is academic mentoring?

Landolt (2012) and Masehela et al. (2014, p. 369) define mentoring as an informal face-to-face communication process, over a predetermined and sustained period of time, between a person who is perceived to have greater relevant knowledge, wisdom, or experience (the

mentor) and a person who is perceived to be less knowledgeable (mentee). In addition, a mentor is knowledgeable in a specific academic area of expertise and should share that knowledge and skills with their mentees (Landolt, 2012). It is further argued that effective mentoring is more than a question–and–answer session, but involves various informal methods of sharing information through dialogue, and the development of an ongoing relationship of open learning where the mentor and the mentee face and resolve challenges as a team.

However, Eby, Rhodes and Allen (2007) see the end result of mentoring as key to defining mentoring. They define mentoring as a way to help reduce school dropout rates, increase academic achievement, promote self-identity and a positive self-image, reduce risky behaviours, and facilitate career development. These views are also shared by academic developers at UNIVEN. They see mentoring as more than just improving academic performance of students, but also as concerned with assisting mentees to cope with their psychological and social challenges. Mentors, in this institution, are also trained in life skills in order to be able to provide lay counselling to their mentees. However, these mentors are encouraged to refer their mentees to professional student counsellors as soon as they detect serious psychological issues in their mentees.

Research Methodology

To address the research problem, which seeks to assess the issue of change/non- change after the introduction of the mentoring programme at UNIVEN, the study adopted qualitative and quantitative approaches. Quantitative data comprise of two subsequent MST 1541 classes (2012 and 2013), while qualitative data were collected using in–depth interviews with ten student mentees. Seventy mentees were given questionnaires and, of those seventy, forty-five were completed and returned. Furthermore, student mentors and the lecturer of the selected module, as well as the EDP, were interviewed. The morphogenetic approach was used to evaluate the change that occurred (or lack of change) as the department transitioned from a period before and after the introduction of the mentoring programme.

Population and purposive sampling

The study used purposive sampling. Ashley Crossman (2017) defines a purposive sample as a non–probability sample that is selected based on characteristics of a population and the objective of the study. The choice of participants in this study was selective as per Crossman's description of purposive sampling. The module lecturer taught this module prior to and after the implementation of the mentoring programme. The mentors were in the pilot programme in 2013 and at the time of data collection they were honours students in the department. The mentees were in their third year of study when data was collected. The study focused only on 2013 mentees and mentors. The lecturer, who has been teaching this cohort of students since 2010, is still teaching the module, while the EDP is still facilitating this programme in CHETL. When the study was conducted, six of the eleven mentors from CALS, who were first trained in 2013, were still at UNIVEN

completing their honours degrees, while seventy of the 2013 mentees were doing their third and final year of study in the Department of CALS. Some of the mentees are now mentors in the department, which has made data collection for this study possible.

Out of the six mentors who were still at UNIVEN, only three mentors agreed to participate in this study. The other three declined to participate because they were finalising their honours mini-dissertations at the time of data collection. However, all seventy mentees agreed to participate in the study. Forty-five completed and returned the questionnaire. Ten of the mentees were interviewed. The MST 1541 lecturer and the EDP were both interviewed.

Data collection

Qualitative data collection

Interviews: This study adopted in-depth interviewing for data collection from the various population groups selected for this study. In-depth interviewing is a qualitative technique of data collection which uses open-ended questions and probing to solicit details from the information-rich selected population. Interviews are labour-intensive and produce a lot of information, which makes it difficult to collect data from a large sample (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006). Interviews rely on a small sample, sometimes as small as one, and because of that the results cannot be generalised beyond the selected sample for the study (Masehela et al., 2014). Participants who were interviewed consisted of the EDP, the lecturer, three mentors (who comprised of two males and one female) and ten mentees (consisting of five males and five females). All the interviews were conducted in English and audio recorded.

Questionnaire: An open-ended questionnaire was handed to a total of seventy students who were mentees in this module in 2013. Forty-five questionnaires in total were returned and analysed for this study.

Quantitative data collection

Quantitative data were collected through a comparison (by percentage) of MST 1541 module results for 2012 and 2013.

Data Analysis: Results and Discussion

Analysis of qualitative data: interview and questionnaire data

Using analytical dualism – the temporary separation of structure, culture and agency as proposed by Archer (1995, 2000) – interview data of the three mentors were analysed using the critical discourse analysis approach of Norman Fairclough (1989). As discourses are analysed, the culture of the department in question is understood. Discourses were extracted from the data. In the next section, the discourses that were uncovered from the data, including the analysis of these discourses, are provided. The culture and manner in which agency was exercised by the mentors, mentees and lecturer is unearthed in the following analysis.

- The discourse of responsibility:

  <u>Why do you think mentoring was helpful to your mentees</u>?

  "Mentees became more involved and their marks also improved." (Mentor C)

Mentors A and B conceded that their mentees become more confident and active in their sessions.

Agentially, the programme taught mentees to take responsibility for their learning. The programme strengthened their agency. Archer (2000) argues that human beings have the power to exercise agency in any context irrespective of the challenges of the time. All the mentees who were interviewed in this study agreed with this assertion. Most of the mentees pointed out that their mentors advised them to prepare for their main lectures beforehand because that would make it easier for them to actively participate during class discussions with their lecturer. The culture of low pass rates (80%) gave way to that of high pass rates (93%) as revealed by the differences between the 2012 results, before adoption of mentoring, and the 2013 results, after the introduction of the mentoring programme. Young (2015) reported a similar outcome in a study conducted in a South African university where students had to explain 'Why Peer Leadership Works'.

- The discourse of 'proximity':

  <u>How was your relationship with your mentor helpful to you</u>?

  "… it was even easier for me to ask questions when I did not understand …" (Mentee A)

  "Interacting with the mentors was a means of understanding [sic] the given module on a more generational level, it facilitated understanding." (Mentee F)

The discourse of proximity re-emerges in the mentees' data. Culturally, students are freer working with their peers than with their lecturers. They find peers more approachable. Students feel more comfortable communicating with mentors compared to the power differentials that exist between students and lecturer. Mentee m10, during the interview session, also alluded to the same view when s/he said:

> *"I gained more from my mentor than I did from my lecturer and I also learned how to participate in class because I got the opportunity to be open between my peers."*

These mentees' responses from the questionnaires and interviews confirm the mentors' claims that student-to-student relationships make the learning process less intimidating. Various scholars assert that mentoring success depends largely on the proximity of the members involved (McCuaig, Hare & Monsen 2014; Sambunjak & Marušić, 2009; Frazier, 2007). Proximity means that students feel more comfortable and motivated when they work with their peers during a learning process. One respondent in Young's (2015) study showed appreciation for 'proximity', stating the following: 'I have had difficulties in my first year without guidance, I felt the need for an African child to be assisted is highly in demand if not imperative. Making change in the black (race) community, as I run most of my sessions in isiZulu.' In the interview with the module lecturer, she confirmed that, since she deals with large classes, the mentoring programme creates an opportunity for a much more effective interaction with her students:

"Some of the students require individual attention but this was difficult as the numbers continued to increase each year. This in a way resulted in me failing to effectively utilise the various assessment methods, particularly formative assessment. Prior to the introduction of mentoring, I mainly focused on summative assessment only. This later improved when mentors were introduced. I used the small groups to introduce formative assessment. I would give my students an assignment in class. They would submit their first draft to the mentor who would go through it using a marking memo which I would have prepared and give as much feedback as possible on the scripts and during their sessions. Students would now go and rework the assignment before submitting it to me. I would now assess and give them a mark which would be recorded. Thus we merged mentoring and lecturing together in order to achieve better results." (Lecturer)

The mentoring programme also impacted positively on the assessment practices by the lecturer.

• The discourse of freedom:

  <u>What was your relationship with your mentees</u>?

  "I am free to express my views without fear because I am confident of my capabilities because my lecturer and the EDP have fully prepared us for the task."

A culture of free-spiritedness was inculcated during mentoring sessions. Mentors felt free, Mentor B avers, and this claim is in line with Cuseo's (1991) observation that peer leaders are empowered to exert influence in a less intimidating way than staff or faculty. This is similar to the claim made in the discourse discussed above. Mentees m4 and m9 also asserted that they felt more relaxed and less intimidated to participate in their discussion with their mentors since they were fewer and the mentor was a student like them. Mentee m6 said he felt more secure making a mistake in these small groups than in a large class full of people.

• The discourse of reflectivity:

  <u>What was the best part of being a mentor</u>?

  "It helped me to reflect on what I have learnt in my first year. I also learned new things through our discussions with my mentees."

The mentoring programme brought another learning perspective to the mentors which might not have transpired had they not been involved in the mentoring programme. Joseph Joubert (1994) argues that "to teach is to learn twice". Furthermore, mentoring sessions allowed both mentors and mentees to be themselves and to operate in an informal environment, while mentoring also made mentors feel good because they were being given an opportunity of becoming motivating master mentors as alluded to by Leidenfrost et al., (2011): "… it gave me a chance to impart knowledge to juniors."

Mentors also see themselves as carriers of knowledge, a feeling that builds self-esteem and self-confidence.

• The discourse of lack of commitment:

  <u>What is the downside of being a mentor</u>?

  "Attendance was sometimes poor and this was discouraging. They usually attend when they are facing an imminent challenge. e.g. Tests." (Mentor B)

The nature of mentoring, that of being a flexible, non-compulsory activity for students, makes it open to abuse. Mentees do not feel obliged to attend sessions. Tinto (2012) argues that there is nothing optional for students if the institution is serious about student success. Archer (1995) rightly argues that institutional structures condition human action. Therefore, if the institutional structures do not make student support programmes compulsory, not all students will be equally committed to the programmes. In this instance, the interplay between structure and culture is seen to be influencing agency. The mentees here are seen to be taking the programme for granted.

- The discourse of mentor commitment:

  Were you able to commit to mentoring duties at all times?

  "*The mentees need us all the time, which was not possible at times since we were also students who would be busy at times.*" (Mentor A)

Mentors raised an important structural matter in this study. Mentor A argues that there is a need to revisit the method used to select mentors, because some of the mentors were not dedicated in their work as mentors and even their performance as mentors was not satisfactory. An important suggestion by the mentors is advanced here. This point tallies with what the authors have raised above concerning future research on mentoring at UNIVEN. Mentors also suggest that mentoring sessions should be included in the main timetable slot so that mentees can take it seriously. However, it is interesting to note that, despite this challenge, student performance improved in 2013 from 80% to 92% (see details of analysis in the next section).

- The discourse of 'epistemological access':

  What benefits did you obtain from attending the mentoring sessions?

  "*I managed to understand how to tackle questions during the exams and express myself.*"

Students understood concepts and themes better. Mentee m2, pointed out that:

  "*… attending mentoring sessions where we revised a number of past tests and examinations helped me to understand how things were done in varsity. It helped me understand how test questions were set and how to answer them.*"

The epistemological access discourse confirms the claim made by different scholars that epistemological access does not come naturally to students: they have to be inducted into this academic literacy (Boughey, 2010; Boughey & Niven, 2012). This implies that students from both poor schooling backgrounds and well-resourced backgrounds need to be inducted into the academic culture. The difference could be that those from well-resourced schools and families might possess in them greater cultural capital as expounded by Bourdieu (1977).

- The discourse of excellent relationship:

  What was your relationship with the mentor?

  Mentors and mentees had relationships that were relaxed and friendly:

> *"She was patient, she treated us like we were her little brothers and sisters. We were a family, an academic family …"*

This approach proved appropriate for students. However, the approach itself might pose risks such as encouraging intimate relationships between mentor and mentees, abuse of power by mostly mentors, losing focus during session by turning session into an informal chat session. These risks are shared during mentor training with the mentors in order to enable them to avoid the risk of turning the relationship into something beyond the mentor–mentee relationship.

- The discourse of building self–esteem:

  How did you benefit from mentoring others?

  Mentoring boosts an individual's self esteem:

  > *"It helped me gain confidence in steering my views."*

Mentee m7 stated that the open discussions during the mentoring sessions allowed the shy students to come out of their shells which also boosted their confidence to participate in class discussions. Hobson, Ashby, Malderez and Tomlinson's (2009) study revealed that mentoring is helpful in boosting the confidence of mentees because in its nature it is able to provide emotional and psychological support.

- The discourse of student support for senior students:

  Do you think the mentoring programme for first year learners is sufficient?

  Most of the students see the importance of student support and feel that they would have done better in second and third year if they had received similar support.

  > *"My second year … marks were not satisfactory at all and I believe that if I had been mentored I could have done better."*

  > *"We have a lot of content which we do not understand. We seek mentoring especially in the 3rd year."*

However, some students are against the idea of attending mentoring sessions at senior level, arguing that first–year mentoring is enough to prepare them for senior phases.

> *"I gained enough confidence and studying skills which have sustained me in my 2nd and 3rd level hence I think mentoring should be limited to 1st years,"* opines Interviewee m8.

The discourses shared above (A to J) are indicative of the potential positive changes that mentoring can bring to an institution. However, there are also challenges associated with the implementation of such a programme. The following discourses indicate that for the programme to improve some issues need to addressed.

- The discourse of incentivising:

  Do you think mentors should be given stipends for their services?

  In addition, mentors in CALS propose that the incentive for mentors should be increased as currently it is not worth the effort required. (At UNIVEN, mentors are paid R1 000 per month.) The module lecturer is also in support of this view:

"In addition, the incentives are too little considering the important service the mentors are offering."
(Lecturer)

This view is supported by the result of a study conducted by Du Preez, Steenkamp and Baard (2013, p. 1232) at Stellenbosch University in South Africa. This study found that mentors felt that the incentives linked to mentoring were not worth the effort. However, some mentors realised that it was not just about the money but that it also benefited them and helped them to relearn the basics in their subjects. This is in support of Joubert's (1994) notion that "to teach is to learn twice".

- The discourse of time management:

  <u>What other distinct benefits did you gain from the mentoring programme</u>?

  "I learned to be punctual."

Mentees confirmed that they took responsibility for their learning through the mentoring programme. They learned to manage their time better and to take the initiative instead of waiting for someone to motivate them.

Mentee m5, during interviews, said the following:

"Juggling time between class activities, mentoring and other personal social activities made me realise I have to come up with a logical and systematic time management plan."

This quote confirms that, in the process of engaging with mentoring sessions, mentees saw the necessity of managing their time effectively. Jackson (2009, p. 434) outlines key steps for successful time management as follows: (1) set realistic goals; (2) get organised; (3) delegate; (4) relax and recharge; and (5) stop feeling guilty. These are some of the aspects covered during mentor training. Similarly, these are covered during time management workshops offered to first years at UNIVEN.

- Discourses of challenges:

  <u>What were some of the weaknesses of the mentoring programme</u>?

Although there are discourses that may discourage students from committing themselves to the programme, they are not strong enough to dissuade the students and lecturers from partaking in these programmes. Both mentors and mentees feel that there are not enough resources to support the programme. This frustration is also shared by the module lecturer:

"There is a lack of venues for mentoring sessions."

It is unfortunate that the institution was not designed to accommodate co-curricular programmes from the beginning. As a result, students are encouraged to hold mentoring sessions under trees or anywhere else on campus grounds due to a lack of venues.

"The mentors should get more materials, study materials and prepare a lot."

"… it shouldn't be a one-way process. Provide venues to build a support structure for the mentoring programme." (Lecturer)

Interviewee m6 also bemoaned the lack of space as affecting their participation in mentoring sessions. They said:

"Having no fixed venue affected my attendance sometimes; if my battery is flat I am not able to communicate with my mentor or other mentee in my group hence sometimes I missed my meeting because I could not locate my group on time."

Another challenge raised by mentors was that some mentees showed commitment only during assessment periods.

"Most of us took mentoring for granted since it was still a new thing to them and did not show up most of the time but when there was a test they showed up in numbers."

A similar finding was noted in a similar study of the same context by Masehela et al. (2014). It was established that mentees were irregular in their attendance of mentoring sessions.

However, in an interview, Mentee m3 owned up, saying:

"… I only realised mentoring sessions were equally important after failing our first test which most students who took mentoring seriously from the beginning passed."

Analysis of quantitative data

Data analysis for quantitative data which is basically a comparison of the 2012 and 2013 results for MST 1541:
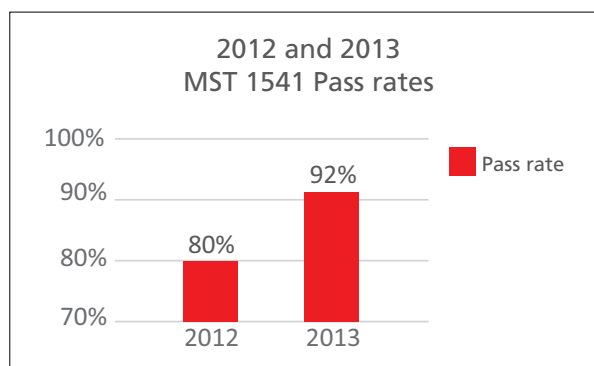

Figure 1: Pass rates for 2012 and 2013 in MST 1541

Between 2012 and 2013, the MST 1541 class was taught by the lecturer who participated in this study. The lecturer revealed that she utilised similar course content and used almost the same teaching methods for both years. However, in 2013 she implemented the newly introduced student mentoring programme as an additional teaching method. The study revealed that, although mentoring is still facing various challenges, it can contribute to improved student performance at UNIVEN. This is supported by the pass rates of first-year students in CALS. The pass rate increased from 80% in 2012, prior to the introduction of the mentoring programme, to 92% in 2013, after the introduction of the programme. The mentors, mentees and even the lecturer involved attributed this to the significant role that mentoring played in changing the pass rate of the under-prepared first-year students at UNIVEN.

Recommendations

Lecturer recommendations

The selection process of appointing mentors has to be tightened so that only the committed and most dedicated mentors are drawn into the programme. There is a need for the Academic Development Unit to develop a feedback form for mentors and the mentees to complete at the end of each term. This will help the lecturer and the unit to improve this service. Furthermore, there is need for office space for student support and development work.

Analysis of EDP data

In the EDP's role, a lot goes on at the level of the Real (Archer, 1995) to constantly improve the programme. The mentoring programme at UNIVEN was developed according to supplemental instruction principles. Supplemental instruction is an attitude to learning in which learners are self-driven by curiosity and their willingness to exchange thoughts and ideas with other students (Malm, Bryngfors & Mörner, 2011). Therefore, the UNIVEN mentoring programme encourages the mentor-mentee relationship to be driven by exchange of thoughts, ideas and self-drive. The principles of the social integration theory in Tinto (1975) also guided the shaping of this programme. For senior students to become mentors, they have to undergo training which includes the topics of basic understanding of mentoring in an academic context, and teaching strategies. These two topics are dealt with in a one-day session. There is a follow-up session on life skills provided by the student counselling unit from CHETL. After students have undergone these two training sessions, they then qualify to receive a certificate.

Nonetheless, there are challenges that EDPs continue to face. The matter of monitoring and evaluating mentoring sessions is still difficult to do. However, lecturers are encouraged to take responsibility for this since they are the owners of the modules. Two interns have since been employed to take responsibility of monitoring and evaluation of the programme, and they make sporadic visits to the sessions. Each mentor is required to submit a personal mentoring timetable to the monitors.

Ethical Issues

Students participated in this survey willingly. They were all asked to sign a written consent form. There was no form of punitive measure taken against those students who chose not to participate in the study or those who changed their mind after signing the consent form.

Conclusion

This study examined the impact of the mentoring programme in the Department of CALS at UNIVEN with the following research question: 'What impact has the mentoring programme made on the academic performance of students in the Department of Communication and Applied Language Studies?' It emerged from the study that mentoring

is a required and highly appreciated programme by mentees at UNIVEN. It is contributing positively towards imparting academic and cultural capital to students involved in this programme. However, the current structure of a non-compulsory mentoring programme is not proving completely successful as students fail to attend until they realise its value in their learning.

There is an urgent need to convert the newly created temporary staff positions for monitoring and evaluation into permanent ones. Given the positive reaction by both students and lecturers, and the results of this study regarding the effectiveness of the programme, permanent positions for monitors and evaluators of the programme should be created. Lastly, this study, although limited in analysing one causal factor, does suggest that a mentoring programme can impact student performance. However, a broader study should be conducted to compare the impact of this factor in conjunction with others to confirm whether pass rate improvement can be attributed to mentoring only or a combination of factors.

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