

Utilizing Service Learning as tool to mentor Accounting pre-service teachers

Abstract:

In South Africa, Dos Reis (2012:157) found that pre-service teachers lacked the pedagogical content knowledge required to teach Accounting. In addition, the study found that pre-service teachers do not receive adequate mentoring during their internship. In most cases the pre-service teachers were unable to scaffold information to facilitate the learners' understanding. For example, omitting to provide adequate information when a new topic is introduced or when a homework activity is given, linking previous knowledge to new knowledge and the inability to pitch a lesson at the learners' level of understanding. Moreover, pre-service teachers omitted to provide sufficient information when a new topic is introduced or when a homework activity is given, linking previous knowledge to new knowledge and the inability to present a lesson at the learners' level of understanding. Shulman (1987:14) argues that teachers should understand what they teach in order to comprehend what they teach to critically engage learners.

This research aims to explore how Service Learning can be used as a tool to mentor pre-service teachers learning to teach Accounting. This study argues that Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) should be at the forefront of mentoring programmes for pre-service teachers to ensure that all their graduates are effective professionals. The study found that although Service Learning is underutilized as a tool to mentor pre-service teachers in South Africa, it does yield positive results and challenges.

Background

Currently in the Faculty of Education, Accounting pre-service teachers in their second and third year of study are evaluated during teaching practice by lecturers that are not necessarily a specialist in the subject. Feedback by the lecturer is therefore not related to the

pedagogy of accounting education but to posture, confidence, lesson preparation and presentation. Students in their fourth year of study are in fact evaluated by the subject specialist (lecturers) in their respective subject majors. Lecturers are required to evaluate the students twice in a particular subject during the six months of their internship. I therefore argue that the latter requirement from the lecturer is not sufficient to provide ongoing feedback between the lecturer and the mentor teacher regarding the students' performance and progress during teaching practice. Furthermore, Accounting pre-service teachers are assigned a mentor teacher regardless of the mentor being experienced in teaching accounting or qualified to teach accounting.

Although Service Learning is underutilized as a tool for mentoring pre-service teachers in for B Ed: FET programme, the researcher took the liberty of implementing a pilot accounting intervention programme from February – November 2013. A study conducted by Quick and Siebörger (2005:4) identified intensive collaboration between schools and HEI's as a priority to ensure positive outcomes for students work integrated learning experience. The researcher ensured that a detailed programme was given to the pre-service teachers and participating school regarding the structure and objectives of the Accounting intervention programme.

Dreyer (1998:111) contends that education systems globally cannot afford to neglect the standard of training teachers as this has an effect on their education system as a whole. Empirical studies (Mohono-Mahlatsi and van Tonder, 2006; Maphosa, Shumba and Shumba, 2007) related to South African context concluded that although mentoring is useful, there is still room for improvement in the manner in which it is implemented by Higher Education Institutions.

Although mentoring is widely advocated to enhance professional development it also comes with its strengths and challenges. Tomlinson (1995:45) states that mentoring can cultivate

motivation and promote commitment amongst mentees. Echoing this sentiment, Hamilton (2003:27) says mentoring can enhance mentees self-esteem, boost their morale and can gradually speed up their transition into their new role as teachers

The conceptual framework for this study draws heavily on the work of Tomlinson (1995:47) who argues that there are four basic forms of student learning activity and mentor assistance namely: (a) pre-service educators learn from others teaching (b) pre-service educators learn through their own teaching attempts (c) pre-service educators learn through progressively collaborating with other teachers and (d) explore central ideas and broader issues.

It is within this particular context that this study sought to explore the dynamics of Service Learning in the context of mentoring pre-service teachers learning to teach Accounting. This study is motivated by the lack of in depth empirical studies conducted in Service Learning and mentoring initiated by Higher Education institutions.

Context

The project forms part of the B Ed: FET (EMS) curriculum. A total of 150 Accounting students from 1st to 4th year participate in the project. The researcher (lecturer) co-ordinate the Accounting intervention programme and provide the students with a topic to teach according to the CAPS document provided by South African Education Department. The pre-service teachers are required to present the lesson to the researcher/lecturer before it is presented at the school on a Saturday. During the lesson presentation, the researcher coach the students how to teach the topic. Groups of three to four students are given an opportunity to teach the learners on a Saturday from 09h00 -12h00. The lecturer was present at each session conducted on a Saturday to ensure that the programme runs effectively.

The Accounting intervention programme was conducted at a school located next to the university. The principal of this school was requested permission by the researcher to implement the programme and consent was given. Sixteen sessions per annum was offered on a Saturday. Hence four Saturdays of tuition was offered per term. Approximately 180 learners from Grade 9 to 12 attended the programme.

Methodology

The research methods used in this study were reflection journals and field-notes. Reflection journals can provide the teacher educator with a valuable tool showing how pre-service teachers perceive and experience teaching practice while learning to teach (Mills, 2007:69). Pre-service teachers from second to fourth year of study were requested to complete a reflection journal after they have conducted their lessons at the school.

Fraenkel and Wallen (1990:380) state that field-notes assist the researcher to form a detailed account of what he/she has heard, seen, experienced and thought in the process of collecting and reflecting on data. The researcher recorded field-notes while mentoring the pre-service before they embarked on the Accounting intervention programme.

Analysis

The reflection journals was analysed according to reductive analysis. The researcher applied reductive analytical procedures to the data collected to reduce the confusion of particular context within the study, to ensure it is applicable to the research (Tuckman, 1994:12).

To facilitate the analysis of the data a software programme called Atlas.ti was used. Yin (2009:128) emphasises that using computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software does not analyse the data but merely acts as a tool to assist the researcher with data analysis.

Using Atlas.ti the researcher needs to understand that the software programme does not have the ability to comprehend the meaning of words. The strength of the software programme however is to structure, retrieve and display the activities conducted by the researcher (Henning, Van Rensburg and Smit, 2005:137).

Findings and discussion

Findings of the reflection journals revealed that pre-service teachers perceived mentoring before they presented their lesson at the school as helpful and as a result boosted their confidence, *“we as student teachers were familiar with the content that needed to be taught, due to the proper foundation that was laid down at campus. Referring to the manner and method in which our lecturer explained the respective topics. The lesson presentation that was presented at campus to our lecturer and fellow students boasted our confidence”*.

South Africa has eleven national languages however the language of instruction at schools and universities are exclusively in Afrikaans and English (Joubert, 2010:39). Several pre-service teachers reported that although the medium of instruction at the school is English and the learners first language is IsiXhosa, the learners struggled to understand the Accounting concepts, *“there was also a language barrier as it is an English medium school, yet some of the learners struggled to understand and grasp the concepts*. The pre-service teachers indicated even though some of the group members were able to translate the concepts, it took away valuable teaching time, *“translation in isiXhosa consumes a lot of the teaching time and it also disadvantages the learners”*. On the other side of the coin, pre-service teachers felt that *“having different language speakers also helped a lot as we were able to respond in the learners’ mother tongue if anything was unclear”*.

The pre-service teachers were of the opinion that working in a group to prepare and teach a lesson gave assisted them to cope with classroom management, *“we worked well together as a team, presenting the lesson and dealing with learner discipline”*. Certain pre-service teachers revealed that not all the group members contributed equally to the lesson preparation and suggested that the lecturer

introduce a strategy that ensure that all the members give an equal contribution, *“one cannot force people to work together as a group, but try to make use of methods that would acquire the input of each and every member”*.

Findings of the field-notes suggest that pre-service teachers struggled mainly with pedagogical content knowledge. Accounting, unlike other disciplines, has a peculiar nature. It is highly structured and cumulative. In other words, new knowledge in Accounting is almost always built on prior knowledge. Data revealed that certain pre-service lack content knowledge and are therefore unable to explain the application of a particular topic in detail. In addition, it appeared that pre-service teachers focus more on the preparation of posters and powerpoint presentations as opposed to studying the content before presenting the lesson.

To improve the pre-service teachers’ pedagogical content knowledge, the university mentor/researcher advised the pre-service teachers to refer to the basic Accounting principles to illustrate for example why an account is ‘debited’ or ‘credited’. Moreover, pre-service teachers should learn to teach in small chunks and challenge the learners’ thinking through continuous questioning. Lastly, to link real-life contexts to concepts taught in Accounting, as this could link the learners’ prior knowledge to new knowledge.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to explore how Service learning can be utilized as a tool to mentor Accounting pre-service teachers. Even though the data highlighted that the pre-service teachers’ confidence were boosted to teach Accounting, challenges such as dealing with the learners’ language barrier and working in groups were also revealed. It is therefore imperative that these challenges be addressed while mentoring the pre-service teachers before they embark on the Service learning project in 2014.

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