ONLINE TUTORING: A TUTOR’S REFLECTIONS

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This presentation is about my experiences and reflections as a “pioneer” online tutor within an open distance learning (ODL) university. It describes reflective perspectives and strategies used in reviewing, analysing and evaluating my practice as I transitioned from face-to-face teaching to online tutoring.
Online tutoring has become a popular mode of instructional delivery in higher education.

At the University of South Africa (UNISA), one of the mega universities in the world, online tutoring is increasingly being used as a support service to enhance students’ learning.
UNISA ONLINE TUTORING

- UNISA’s online tutoring is delivered through the university’s learning management system (LMS).

- Before the inception of online tutoring, education was primarily delivered through the distance learning mode involving study material delivery by post.
BENEFITS OF ONLINE TUTORING IN ODL ENVIRONMENTS

• A two-way interactive platform to enhance student-teacher and student-student interactions;

• Has potential to reduce communication gap between distance education students and teachers.

• Has significant implications for effective teaching practices, satisfying educational experiences and motivations.
CHALLENGES

• My challenge, as a pioneer online-tutor, was how to create the necessary meaningful and impactful learning experiences in a virtual learning environment.

• According to Anderson, Rourke, Garrison and Archer (2001) teaching online courses is extremely challenging and complex.

• Therefore there was great need for me to change my pedagogical approach as I transitioned into the new role.
Finlay (2008), suggests that practitioners should reflect on their practice, i.e. learn through and from experience to gain new insights of the practice.

With a profession as challenging as online teaching, reflective practice framework was deemed appropriate.
WHAT IS REFLECTIVE PRACTICE?

• A process of studying one’s own practice to gain some understanding of that practice, and improve one’s knowledge and skills (Finlay, 2008, p.1).

• It involves critical and deliberate examination of one’s practice.

• It provides a structure for innovative thinking in order to integrate theory and practice.
Two types of reflection:

(a) **Reflection-on-action** or **retrospection**: reviewing, describing, analysing and evaluating one’s practice to gain insight to improve future practice.

(b) **Reflection-in-action**: evaluating one’s “experiences and responses as they occur” (Finlay, 2008, p.3)
Two commonly used models of reflection:

• This presentation considered Kolb’s experiential learning because it provided a better structure for reflections.
• Some modifications were made to the model to suit the author’s context.
MODIFIED KOLB’S (1984) EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING THEORY

A four-stage cyclic theory:

- **Stage 1: Experiences**: A situation that one experiences and reflects upon.
- **Stage 2: Reflections**: More reflections and many questions.
- **Stage 3: Conceptualisation**: Practitioner draws upon literature and theories to design course.
- **Stage 4: Implementation**: Implementation of strategies and methods designed in Stage 3
STAGES OF REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

1. Experiences
2. Reflections
3. Conceptualisation
4. Implementation
Kolb’s (1984) theory helped me answer the following questions:

• What knowledge and skills did I learn from an online tutoring workshop?

• Then what? – What actions do I need to take to apply the skills learned?

• Can I conceptualise what I have learned to understand my practice?

• Can I put my ideas into practice?
METHODOLOGY

• Self-study methodology (Turner, 2010; Samaras and Freese, 2006) was employed to guide the reflective. It involved:

1. Self questioning process (Situated inquiry)
2. Process of drawing upon different views and stances to make sense of my new responsibility and gain knowledge and skills.
3. Data gathering processes.
RESULTS: STAGE 1: EXPERIENCE

• A two-week long online training workshop that introduced the participants to university’s LMS; online theories; online student characteristics; and assessment.

• The workshop was a heuristic process that allowed me to learn through discovery.

• A process of re-examining my assumptions in trying to understand the present and the future practice
STAGE 2: REFLECTION

Reflective Questions were asked and covered:

• Alignment of online tutoring with appropriate pedagogical foundations.
• New understandings gained to improve future practice.
• Required standards of proficiency.
• The differences between traditional teaching methods and online methods.
• The social context (Gunawardena1995) of online communication.
To create order in my theoretical framework, the Community of Inquiry Theory (COI) (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2000) was used.

COI outlines the processes of online learning through the development of three interdependent components: Teaching, Social and Cognitive presences.

• Constructivist and collaboration theories were also considered.

• To create constructivist learning experiences, Bloom’s Taxonomy’s six levels of learning were applied when designing activities, to cover content at different levels of cognitive demand.

• Both original and revised levels of the taxonomy were considered.
ORIGINAL AND REVISED BLOOM’S TAXONOMY: COGNITIVE DOMAIN

- EVALUATION/CREATING
- SYNTHESIS/EVALUATING
- ANALYSIS/ANALYSING
- APPLICATION/APPLYING
- UNDERSTANDING/COMPREHENSION
- RECALL/REMEMBERING

Bloom (1956) and Anderson (2001)
STAGE 4: IMPLEMENTATION

- Lessons were designed and posted to the discussion forum.
- Although the tutor and students were separated in time and place, real time internet mediated instruction was delivered to show my presence and to allow the students to interact with the tutor, the course content and among themselves.
STAGE 4: IMPLEMENTATION

• Students were encouraged to engage in live chats but that never happened.

• Students were able to view the lessons and participate in discussions at their convenient time. The evidence of this was the posts they sent.
LESSONS LEARNED

• Online students are able to choose when and how they would interact with the course content, their tutor, and their fellow students.

• The discussion forum platform is not storage for documents and web links - It is a space to create teaching, social and cognitive presences.

• Distance education students should not be forced to adopt one learning approach.
LESSONS LEARNED

• Online discussions within distance learning environments are heavily dominated by the tutor.

• Tutors should respond to posts timeously.
CONCLUSION

• The journey has improved my professional development.

• It has also provided a framework to help other tutors and lecturers understand and capture their experiences to improve their practice.
THANK YOU

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