Explicit research skill development in pre-service teaching modules in a Bachelor of Education degree

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Explicit Research Skill Development in Pre-service Teaching Modules in a Bachelor of Education Degree

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Introduction

The development of research skills has come to the fore in the debate regarding research capacity at universities in South Africa and globally. In South Africa, the National Plan for Higher Education (2001) placed emphasis on the development of postgraduate research outputs and highlights the fact that Higher Education has a critical and central role to play in contributing to the development of an information society in South Africa both in terms of skills development and research. One of the objectives of the National plan is that the quality of academic programmes, including teaching and research, be improved across the system. The ultimate aim of the National Plan is to meet, through well-planned and co-ordinated teaching, learning and research programmes, national development needs, including the high-skilled employment needs presented by a growing economy operating in a global environment.

The context in which this research project takes place is a Faculty of Education at a University of Technology, in the Western Cape Province of South Africa.

This university celebrates its tenth anniversary this year and as such is classified as a developing university within the context of the South African university structures.

Historically, the Faculty of Education existed as a Teachers Training College, where research was not seen as a priority, but rather that the emphasis in the course was placed on the practical application of knowledge.

This research project speaks to the gaps which exist in the teaching of research skills in the various courses and aims to bring the teaching-research nexus closer together, in order to achieve the aims of the National Plan. This project also serves to propose a research skill framework which will address the articulation gap that exists between undergraduate and postgraduate research outputs.

The purpose of this project is to explore how the Research Skill Development Framework (RSD) can be used to explicitly develop research skills of pre-service teachers (undergraduates) at a University of Technology. The conceptual framework for this project (the RSD framework) has been developed by Dr John Willison and his team at the Centre for Learning and Professional Development at the University of Adelaide and has been trialled at various institutions in Australia. The RSD framework is designed primarily as a conceptual tool for diagnosis and planning, promoting understanding and interpretation of both potential and realised student research skill development.

According to Willison (2012: 915) there are very specific advantages for lecturers who are able to integrate the RSD approach in their course modules.

Methodology

This study made use of a single, intrinsic, exploratory case study methodology in order to answer the following research questions:

- Does the RSD raise awareness of research skills in pre-service teaching modules?
- What are the lecturer’s perceptions of the RSD framework?
- Furthermore, it needs to be determined if the lecturers experienced any problems with the design and alteration of their assessments in order to accommodate the RSD.

The participants were conveniently selected and worked on a voluntary basis on the project. There were 6 participants who were all lecturers in the General Education and Training ‘Bachelor of Education degree.

Firstly, RSD is useful in developing, finding and evaluating skills. Secondly, RSD is useful in developing the skill of research question framing, thirdly, the RSD develops research skills which are useful for employment, fourthly, research skills which are useful for subsequent study and research are developed and finally, the RSD has had gains for academics.

It is then proposed that the Research Skill Development framework, when used as a conceptual model, can explicitly and incrementally develop undergraduate research skills, allow faculty members to adapt research skills to their own disciplines and is highly flexible. It has enabled the modification of assessments so that they fit the agenda of explicitly developing research skills (Willison, 2009:14).

Findings

- The findings of this study indicate that the use of the RSD framework in the design of assessments does raise the awareness of research skills in pre-service teaching modules.
- Lecturers indicated that they thought that research skills were primarily related to reading skills but that the RSD framework provided an outline on which to build the explicit research skills they wished to develop.
- It also made them more aware of different research skills.
- The personal successes related by lecturers were related to filling voids in their teaching, providing structure to research and motivating students to conduct research.
- Some of the challenges faced by the lecturers included the fact that students ignored the rubric.
- That creating a rubric from scratch is difficult.
- It is time consuming in an already full curriculum.
- And that translating the document into Afrikaans/Xhosa is difficult.
- Generally speaking, all the lecturers involved in this project indicated that the implementation of the RSD framework into their assessments and teaching practices was a positive experience and that the students also benefited from the experience.