

# Enhancing the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Open Distance and eLearning

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## Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to outline the processes of developing the professional development programme meant to enhance the scholarship of teaching and learning in an Open Distance eLearning (ODEL) institution. This process is guided by Kolb's experiential learning theory which describes research focusing on reflection on everyday professional life, and in which the context of teaching and learning takes place. Researching the ways in which academics teach or facilitate learning and the way students learn will help us understand what works in our practice and how to improve it. We believe that this professional development programme will assist academics to continually reflect on their practice in order to improve teaching and learning.

**Keywords:** Scholarship of teaching and learning; experiential learning; Open Distance eLearning

## Background

Research has shown that successful organisations constantly reflect on their practice (Boyer 1990; Hills and Swithenby 2010; Kember and Gow 1992; Kolb 1984). Therefore, researching on the ways in which academics teach in higher education and the way students learn will help us understand what works in our practice and how to improve it. In higher education, Boyer(1990) refers to this type of research as "Scholarship of Teaching and Learning" (SoTL) which assists universities to build a pedagogical research agenda meant to improve teaching and learning practices. We argue that SoTL works best when academics make their work and practice public so that it is peer reviewed, critiqued and published. This type of research is also called practitioner research (Hills and Swithenby 2010); or action research (Gray, Chang and Radloff 2007; Kember and Gow 1992; McMahan 1999); or pedagogic action research (Cormack, Bourne, Deuker, Norton, O'Siochru and Watling 2014; Norton 2009).



<https://booksup.co.za/index.php/unisapress/catalog/category/WP>  
Working Paper | July 24, 2020 | 6 pages

<https://doi.org/10.25159/66>  
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However, all these terms are used to describe research that focuses on reflection on everyday professional life in the context in which teaching and learning takes place.

The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) is relatively new; however, it has now evolved into an established form of continuous professional development for academics in higher education (Boyer 1990; Shulman 2000). The active scholarship of teaching or practitioner research provides the lecturer with an opportunity to reflect on what he or she may have been doing for many years. It supports the academics' professional, social and practical roles as a teacher (Shulman 2000). The study into teaching and learning, according to Boyer (1990) and Shulman (2000) requires a new epistemology that acknowledges the importance of the reflective practice to better understand their professional practice and student learning. The understanding of teaching practice is even more critical in distance education institutions where students and teachers are in separate spaces.

In addressing the need to equip staff with skills and capacities to perform in an ODeL environment, the University of South Africa (Unisa) put a number of initiatives in place to ensure sustainable staff development. As one of the largest universities in the world and a dedicated open distance institution, it advocates for a flexible approach that enables students to choose what to learn, when they should learn, and where and how they should learn. With the development of new teaching and learning practices, and the constant change in delivery methods, Unisa has fully evolved away from the correspondence, print-based model to multimedia models of teaching delivery to interactive teaching and learning approaches as dictated by new technologies. The institution's aim is therefore to have well trained academics to facilitate innovative teaching and learning, guide students and empower them with the ability to manage and solve real-life world challenges. Much of the literature suggests that student achievement depends on improvement in teachers' knowledge and skills (Boyer 1990; Gibbs and Coffey 2004; Hills and Swithenby 2010; Shulman 2000).

Training becomes even more critical in ODeL institutions because many academics enter into the university teaching profession without training in teaching. When faced with their teaching role, they tend to emulate their teachers and therefore teach the way they were taught at contact universities. This approach leaves ODeL academics with a number of conceptual issues regarding learning facilitation in the ODL and virtual environment. The outcome is poor teaching practices, which also affect students' learning. Therefore, the question of training and using an appropriate framework to train ODeL academics to acquire the relevant skills and knowledge to design, coordinate and implement appropriate ODeL academic teaching and learning programmes as well as conducting research on their practice is central to quality teaching.

Research has shown that lecturers' participation in staff development courses positively impacts their teaching skills and their ability to reflect on their teaching practice (Cormack *et al.* 2014; Gray *et al.* 2007; Kember and Gow 1992). Gibbs and

Coffey(2004) note further that staff development programmes affect student learning in the sense that trained lecturers and students are bound to adopt a deep approach to teaching and learning respectively. In the context of this study, such lecturers are likely to teach innovatively while their students are bound to also learn innovatively. For this reason, one can argue that no area in open distance elearning is more crucial than that of equipping academics with skills and competencies needed to perform in an ODeL environment.

## ODeL Research Initiatives

The transition from the predominantly print-based correspondence mode to technology enhanced innovative teaching requires new skills and competencies from staff. In 2012, Unisa entered into a three-year partnership with the University of Maryland University College in the United States of America to train staff. Additionally, an agreement was signed in 2018 between Unisa and the University of Oldenburg in Germany to continually offer programmes on ODeL capacity development. In the initial programme, Unisa staff members were required to enrol and complete a Certificate in Technology in Distance Learning and e-Learning from the UMUC prior to enrolling for a Masters of Education in Open and Distance Learning (MEd in ODL) through the College of Education. However, many of the staff who enrolled for the UMUC certificate did not complete the masters' programme. This was a problem because the masters' programme was to contribute knowledge to Open Distance eLearning related field.

Since Unisa is an ODeL institution, the scholarship of teaching needs to develop through ODeL research. This means that everything that Unisa does in relation to research, teaching and learning, and community engagement should follow ODeL principles of accessibility, flexibility and student-centredness. Globally ODeL is growing and changing like a “mythical hydra” leading to a growing need to understand the impact of these developments on ODeL practice and scholarship. To address this need, the Institute for Open Distance Learning (IODL) set out to produce research and provide ODeL research capacity development programmes. To ensure that Unisa staff members are equipped with the appropriate knowledge and skills to carry out ODeL research, the IODL embarked on a number of initiatives including the Searchlight Research Project (SRP). This initiative originated to cultivate ODL research within the university and to enhance research performance across the university, according to the Unisa Strategic Plan (2015-2030).

Research in ODeL is meant to assess the efficacy of our practice in order to initiate appropriate interventions designed to improve teaching and learning at a distance. On this basis, Unisa expects both its academic and administrative employees to engage in the scholarship of teaching and learning in order to understand their environment and to improve their practice based on solid empirical evidence. To address the need for reflective research, it is important that staff members get support through what Hills and

Swithenby (2010) refer to as a practitioner research programme. The aim of all these research initiatives is to assist staff to engage in research related to their everyday professional life. In addition to facilitating capacity development workshops, the IODL developed an Open Education Resource (OER) on ODeL research. This resource forms the basis of the study material used in conjunction with the Searchlight workshops. Through this programme, staff members follow the course and the resource to enable them to reflect on their teaching. This experience offers the opportunity to combine practice and research. In so doing, it is vital to provide a step by step approach on the process followed by IODL to merge the two programmes.

### Kolb's experiential learning theory

To achieve this goal, Kolb's experiential learning theory is used since it is based on a "learning through reflection" framework (Kolb 1984). This type of learning focuses on the process whereby knowledge is created through transformation of experience. According to Kolb (1984), a student should go through four stages of learning where a student acquires knowledge through each new experience. We believe that experience can only become learning when the individual engages with that experience through action or reflection (Hills and Swithenby 2010). Kolb's (1984) phases of learning starts with concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation.

Table 1: Kolb's experiential learning theory

<b>Phases of learning</b>	<b>Explanation</b>	<b>Research Programme Intervention</b>
Concrete experience	The teaching space provides the information that serves as the basis of reflection.  Students are intertwined with their day to day experiences.	<b>Orientation to ODeL research stage</b>  Why do you teach and what is your teaching practice?  The first assignment is based on the observation of practice in relation to the successes and the challenges of practice.  Identify the problem within the practice.
Reflective observation;  Reflection in action	Observing practice by engaging with the teaching and learning processes, questioning previously held assumptions to developing new ways of doing things.  The goal is for the	<b>Reflection stage:</b> review teaching practice.  Upon the completion of the first model, the student will then reflect on the coursework in relation to his /her practice.  Include concepts that best address his / her problem and

	individual to find meaning behind the experience.	what s/he needs to solve. Write a reflection on his / her practice in relation to the literature.
Abstract conceptualization.	Information received from reflection is assimilated to form abstract concepts. Engagement with the theoretical and contextual knowledge. Identify recurring themes, problems and issues that will help with new learning experiences.	<b>Development stage</b> The student will be expected to submit a paper that covers theories and ODeL concepts and how these address his / her research objectives . The student is expected to identify methodologies that address the objectives.
Active experimentation.	Transforming and modifying teaching and learning practices.	<b>Application stage</b> Use theories and collect and analyse empirical data to achieve the research objectives. The goal is to test different concepts in new environments to find out if these improve practice.

## Conclusion

Experiential learning theory is used to guide the process of including both coursework (resources and workshops) and research. We believe that it will also improve skills for conducting research, for publishing and for presenting at conferences. The intent is that this process will bridge the gap between research and teaching. In addition, this will help develop the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning especially in the developing countries such as South Africa where there is a dire need to professionalise teaching and learning at universities.

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