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Emmie Smit* and Henriette van den Berg

Abstract: Purpose: The UFS’ Postgraduate School (PGS) aspires to enhance dynamic postgraduate education and career development, and to facilitate the development of twenty-first century doctorateness of doctorandi. International best practices work well for traditional doctorandi; however, non-traditional doctorandi need non-traditional interventions. The PGS accepted the challenge to develop a tailor-made extension of the existing programme. This paper is intended for doctorandi and postgraduate support units in this era of exponential growth in postgraduate enrolments and limited growth in academic staff appointments. Design/methodology/approach: In the first Action Research (AR)-cycle the PGS responded to negotiated requirements, and developed an e-mentoring programme that included components of group- and peer-mentoring. Then, the doctorandi identified an additional requirement. This led to the second AR-cycle and illustrated the value of AR’s participation and co-constructing. Theories, concepts and constructs of Developmental Action Inquiry, Action Research and Developmental Psychology support the design. Findings: The result was a self-mentoring programme that encompasses lifelong career ownership skills; research and scholarship; doctoral education; academic practice and development; as well as the discovery of literature that supports and furthers the passion of the PGS. Originality/value: The self-mentoring programme is generic and transferable, and only very basic MS Word and Internet access is needed.

Subjects: Action Research & Teacher Research; Computer Science; Higher Education

Keywords: action research; postgraduate; researcher development; online mentoring; metaphor; self-mentoring

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Emmie Smit’s research circles around her passion to make sense of phenomena and to address challenges by developing innovative interventions. She holds a PhD in Higher Education Studies; an MA in Drama and Theatre Arts; an MA in Urban and Regional Planning; and a postgraduate diploma in Arts & Culture Management. She was a postdoctoral fellow in Higher Education Studies at Aarhus University (Denmark) and currently is appointed at the Postgraduate School of the University of the Free State (South Africa).

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

This article narrates an intervention of the University of the Free State’s Postgraduate School (PGS) that enhances dynamic postgraduate education and career development, and facilitates the development of 21st century doctorateness of doctorandi. International best practices work well for traditional doctorandi; however, non-traditional doctorandi need non-traditional interventions. The PGS developed a tailor-made self-mentoring programme that encompasses lifelong career ownership skills; research and scholarship; doctoral education; academic practice and development.
1. Introduction
This paper is presented in three parts. Firstly, metaphors are applied; secondly, the process of the project is discussed; and finally, the theoretical basis of the project is unpacked.

2. The metaphor
I was sitting on the left front fin of Walking Fish in the cool mist of a large fountain in the garden in front of the UFS’ Postgraduate School (PGS). I was pondering the challenges of non-traditional postgraduate doctorandi, more specifically the future generation of distant researchers. Even though the development process of a Higher Education (HE) practitioner—some would argue a normal human being—into a professional researcher is a timely and individual process, emerging practitioners are pressured by their HEIs (higher education institutions) to increase their levels of qualification as well as their research output, thereby increasing the institutional competitiveness. Although academics understand the rationale, support the decision, and are motivated to reach these outputs, the achieved outcomes are often evasive or at best unsatisfactorily slow. I was visualising what the ideal intervention might be: How could the PGS strategically add value to doctorate development education, researcher development and learning community experience to enhance the fulfilment of its mandate?

An academic who focuses on teaching, often feels out of depth in a research situation because HEIs distinguish between teachers and researchers, as well as the resource and award allocation thereof. Academics are expected to proclaim that teaching and research are complementary and interrelated activities; however, they experience it as competing activities. HEIs identify both teaching and research as important, but not necessarily related functions. From the mission statement to the organisation of departments and the awarding of degrees (by the number of credits earned rather than the growth achieved), teaching and research opposes each other (Buller, 2011).

Cutting-edge research can seem to be a distraction from highly effective teaching [and highly effective teaching can seem to be a distraction from cutting-edge research]. That distraction begins to disappear once the institutional focus is on innovation rather than on all the different ways in which innovation might possibly be achieved (Buller, 2011).

Therefore it seems necessary for the teaching academic to move outside an area of practice where the individual is proficient, skilled and authoritative to the terra incognita of a novice; like being a fish out of water. A developing researcher soon realises that a major and individualistic adaptation is the only way to escape ruin as soon as he or she moves out of the water—but only temporarily—because the academic will have to commute between these two positions constantly. Artist Isolde Krams used the metaphor of a fish out of the water for her sculpture Out of Water (Figure 1). The fish is immobilised by being strapped to a rock bigger than itself, probably symbolising the teaching and administrative obligations. Deep wounds of previous immobilisation attempts are also visible. According to the fish’s body language, it surrendered and passively awaits the next assault on it.

Walking Fish (Figure 2) symbolises that adaptability is the key to survival. A Walking Fish’s determination and instinct becomes a parallel of the seemingly suicidal behaviour of venturing into new worlds with new ways of surviving and new ways of excelling. The choice to adapt and thrive reminded me of the powerful skills of HE practitioners to survive in the unfamiliar or less-familiar habitat of research and publications. With extreme effort Thomas Kubayi’s fish pushes forward with determination in its eyes. Its unexercised limbs strain to carry its body without the buoyancy of the water, slowing it down, but not immobilising the fish. The fin-to-limb transition of Kubayi’s fish enables it to commute between water and land—teaching and researching—not only walking away from a certain death to survival, but even to thriving in the new environment.

In the anything-can-happen atmosphere on the spring afternoon, these metaphors opened up worlds of alternative, proactive and resourceful lifestyles and creative options. I envisioned a strategic programme that would facilitate an intervention that would address both the desire of the HE practitioner as well as the HEI.
These possibilities, convenience and accessibility of virtual research capacity development free the practitioner from many limitations, but require proactive lifestyle interventions. In my experience, research is more than a practice or an occupation; it is a lifestyle of discovery and adaptation.

3. The process

3.1. The institution

Like other role players in the global HE sector, the University of the Free State, the PGS and HE practitioners are passionate about enhancing the functionality of learning environments by addressing the challenges of all stakeholders, and are committed to deliver the highest value while staying true to the unique values and core functions of the HEI and the community.

In support of the University of the Free State’s (2009) Academic turnaround strategy, the UFS’ PGS was launched on 20 May 2011. The School’s strategic plan embraces five overarching principles, namely to target the postgraduate students who need it most; to engage the emerging researcher
in novel and pioneering work; to develop a UFS profile for postgraduate education; to optimise the postgraduate experience; and to establish quality assurance mechanisms.

The existing initiatives are dynamic and relevant, are facilitated by leading national and international academics, and draw full-house attendance; however, the PGS is committed to attend to the access challenges of the doctorandi to the initial programme. In-house research confirmed the need of off-campus doctorandi for a tailor-made option of the existing initiatives.

3.2. The student

Although the initiative includes all future generation researchers, in both academia industry, public sector and elsewhere, this paper focuses on doctorandi. The average UFS doctorandus has non-traditional status. This person is employed full-time, is studying part-time, and needs to skilfully juggle the professional, personal, academic and social spheres of his or her life. Furthermore, this person is not on campus and is therefore not able to regularly attend scheduled developmental opportunities (e.g. seminars, colloquiaus, and workshops).

Non-traditional doctorandi’s needs are for a custom-made overarching professionalisation initiative that will enhance the existing postgraduate-education quality, research capacity development, career management, and student experience for the willing non-traditional doctorandi/future generation researcher, emerging researcher and established researcher (Evans, 2011).

3.3. The intervention is presented in two action research (AR) cycles

3.3.1. The first cycle

From discussions and surveys it became clear that an online mentoring project that could be co-constructed by the mentors and the mentees, and could distribute ownership to all the participants, would to a large extent fill the gap in development experienced by the doctorandi. This focus was on mentoring models where either the mentee or the mentor is centred, and is temporal, and for the specific purpose of obtaining a doctorate qualification (Poulsen, 2006).

The future generation researchers’ prerequisite for this initiative was unanimous—a 24/7/52 one-stop, flexible, user-friendly programme that could supplement the existing career development and postgraduate education programmes of the PGS, as well as other academic and research development initiatives within the UFS.

Only a mutually constructed intervention between the institution and the future generation researcher would accomplish both participants’ goals.

The purpose of the process was to develop a programme that would assist doctorandi to become independent all-round academics. Because research has proved that mentoring is extremely effective in developing new soft and hard skills and navigating diverse institutions, and because a mentoring relationship benefits the mentor, the protégée and the extended institution (Broder-Singer, 2011), it made sense that the PGS programme should be embedded in a mentorship programme.

The goal was to facilitate the development of twenty-first century doctorateness of doctorandi by facilitating the development in the domains of knowledge and intellectual abilities; research governance and organisation; personal effectiveness and engagement; influence and impact with individuals that take ownership of their own past, present and future (Vitae, 2013, p. 2). Doctorateness is the threshold to being an independent all-round academic. It includes both the condition and the action required to meet the condition (Kiley & Wisker, 2010; Trafford & Leshem, 2009). The process focuses on four areas, namely postgraduate education, research development, career management and student experience.
EmentUFS, an online peer and group mentorship programme, was developed to support, assist and nudge doctorandi towards self-mentorship. This strategic initiative provides a combination of online resources and opportunities for participants to take ownership and responsibility by empowering themselves to move even beyond their initial goals (of increased qualifications and research output) and to develop a fulfilling and self-challenged personal and professional life. Even before the initiative was developed 20 doctorandi, who are also future generation researchers and staff members on the distant QwaQwa campus of the UFS volunteered to participate as mentees. The initiative was therefore a construct of both the PGS, as well as the mentees’ colleagues who are from a variety of disciplines and fields.

A variety of online tools were selected according to how functional they would be to the process of achieving all the objectives. The rationale behind using this combination of tools is:

- Facebook
  - to build a cyber community
  - to connect and document communication
  - to post and share existing and new sources
- UFS Intranet
  - to distribute and archive material
  - to simplify document flow
  - to facilitate discussions
- UFS Groupwise
  - to obtain/share information
  - to be used only when other channels are not an option
  - to compile and access a database of email addresses
- UFS Webpage
  - to showcase the PGS (achievements, opportunities)
  - to house the database of all PG opportunities on campus
- Skype
  - to communicate face-to-face (discussions, lectures, seminars)
- YouTube
  - to make the PGS’ own recordings available on an effective and accessible platform.

The list is not written in stone and will change to serve the programme and the doctorandi throughout continuous evolvement of the ongoing repetitive process.

Participation and reflection initiated the process and was part of each phase of the process; however, when the programme outlined above was presented to the doctorandi for feedback, they were of the opinion that it did not meet their expectations of more personalised one-on-one mentorship. The PGS, committed to a co-constructed approach, agreed to revisit the design.

Back at the drawing board, the value of a more involved and personalised mentor was obvious, but so were the challenges thereof. These included the lack of adequate and suitable mentors and an ever-shrinking budget, situational vs. lifelong impact mentoring, and the issue of ownership of the doctorandi’s future.

The balance and demarcation between the responsibility of the doctorandi and the responsibility of the PGS might have serious long-term effects on the development of a future generation of researchers. Doctorandi not only have an obligation to master a variety of skills in the process of
producing a thesis, but also need to develop their academic identity (McAlpine, Jazvac-Martek, & Hopwood, 2009). These skills include intellectual ability and confidence; independence of thinking; enthusiasm and commitment; and the ability to adapt to changing circumstances and opportunities; as well as the scholarly components: the conceptualisation, planning and executing of a research project; the application, extension and creation of knowledge; and the publication thereof. The support of an individual and situational academic mentor has the potential of limiting the self-development of doctorateness.

3.3.2. The second cycle

The true value of the cyclical process of AR became apparent with the second cycle. By appreciating the action and research process, which requires a constant level of understanding, reflecting, synergy and reconsidering, and enhancement-mentoring towards lifelong, self-owned, intelligent and boundaryless careers (Poulsen, 2006, p. 251)—was reconsidered.

The traditional concept of a career placed a lot of responsibility on an institution to supply a lifelong career to talented and ambitious employees (Poulsen, 2006, p. 251). The traditional mentoring approach that supports this concept is that an esteemed and influential mentor takes care and advances the mentee—as a protégé under his or her guidance.

With the request for a personal one-on-one mentorship model, the participating doctorandi seemed to reach back to the traditional concepts of mentoring and career. However, the PGS never considered this type of dependence-forming mentorship. The PGS revisited its original stance on this programme and reaffirmed its commitment to the doctorandi to facilitate a mentoring process, but that it would not take up ownership of and responsibility for the doctorandi’s learning and, equally important, the opportunity to take ownership of the doctorandi’s own market value and career decisions. The League of European Research Universities (LERU) affirms that doctorandi are increasingly drivers of their own professional development and that the dependence on a supervisor is outdated (Myklebust, 2014). This requires that each doctorandus understands his or her own motivation, skills and ambitions in choosing the right opportunities (Poulsen, 2006, p. 252).

The Boundaryless Career Theory addresses the change of the external environment and internal motivation of researchers’ career development and advancement of employability (Arthur, 1994). It is based on the direction of the career, the concept of lifelong learning to improve employability, and career development management to maximise achievement (Xie, 2011). The ownership of all three of the abovementioned lies with the doctorandi, who will determine, re-determine, facilitate and manage lifelong career paths.

Further research into different mentorship models and their aims shifted the attention to self-mentoring. Self-mentorship—as a resolute process of mentoring one’s self when access to a mentor is limited—requires inner strength, vigilance, a proactive approach and a positive attitude (Bass & Faircloth, 2011, p. 228). Constructivist self-mentorship has the potential to facilitate development in the areas of the cognitive, the social and emotional, the physical and the memory that will be part of the experiences of the individual. This stance will allow an individual to develop personally and professionally through gradual accumulation of knowledge, as well as through the stages throughout the individual’s life. Thus, I-MentUFS came into being.

The project, as described above, is a strategic attempt by the PGS to improve a practice, through the design, development, implementation, reflection, and adoption thereof. The PGS desired to firstly increase understanding of what type of further developments of its programmes were necessary to mutually benefit the institution and the doctorandi (McNiff, 2002). This process of action and research includes research techniques to support the continual process through two AR cycles, and beyond in the future.
At this stage the PGS realised the value that an existing online self-mentoring programme might have. The PGS is familiar with the contribution of the Vitae programme to the positioning of UK researchers at the forefront of the European HR Strategy for Researchers and the transformation of the continual professional development of researchers. UK research councils and HE funding agents and other influential bodies also endorse the work and achievements of an online self-mentoring programme. This extensive suite of programmes enables participants to review their capacities, plan their professional development, and document evidence thereof (Vitae, 2013, p. 2).

4. The theoretical perspective

4.1. Methodology

Although non-traditional doctorandi are enriching the HE system with their life experience, dedication, determination, and often a deeper desire for learning than their younger counterparts, being this type of doctorandi is not without its challenges.

Many non-traditional doctorandi experience doubts and fears about their abilities because they are often isolated, and non-traditional students generally balance their studies with other commitments, including marriage, parenting, work and housekeeping. Emotional and academic cooperation with mentors and peers may empower non-traditional doctorandi, and contribute to their resilience. Accessible knowledge, improved connections, diverse questions and new ways to participate within a non-traditional doctorandi community need to lead to co-constructed innovation. Theory and practice that affirmed the value of an individual’s life experience, dedication, determination and desire, and that provided an opportunity for establishing lifelong ownership of personal and professional development pointed towards Developmental Psychology and Developmental Action Inquiry.

Within Developmental Psychology, the Constructivism paradigm theorises the learning and meaning-making ability of individuals. By systematically selecting, organising, and assimilating information with other knowledge, individuals will construct knowledge through cognitive processes of their own experiences rather than by memorising facts provided by others. Likewise, the non-traditional doctorandi create meaning for themselves or make sense of new information.

In addition, it is vital to discern between knowledge-building and learning. Learning is seen as an internal, almost unobservable process that results in changes of beliefs, attitudes, and/or skills. In contrast to learning is knowledge-building, which is seen as a process of creating new cognitive artefacts as a result of common goals, group discussions, and synthesis of ideas (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1994).

The insider-approach was already seen in the 19th century when Max Weber argued for a methodological anti-positivism creation of purpose and meaning to interpret and to understand one’s own actions (Merton, 1994), as well as those of the community. This appreciation for the variety of individuals participating in the process, and representing the community echoes the postmodern perspective of inclusion (Cloke, Philo, & Sadler, 1991, p. 171).

For the focus of this study, the community of doctorandi is the most important. The participants are all postgraduate HE practitioners and, consequently, are well acquainted with and skilled in the HE field. The participants are therefore internal experts with a wide variety of relevant knowledge and experiences who will enhance the creation of relationships and create a mentoring culture, which continuously promotes individual as well as communal employee growth and development.

Constructivism’s approach to novel solutions in real-life situations, and with metacognition as an analysing and self-regulatory skill of one’s own learning and its development, is largely found in William Torbert’s Developmental Action Inquiry (DAI) theory. This way of simultaneously conducting action and inquiry as a discipline practice increases the wider effectiveness of our actions. Such action
helps individuals, teams and institutions to become more capable of self-transformation and thus more creative, more aware, more just and more sustainable (Torbert, 1976). Each transformation represents a fundamental change and increase in the individual’s capacity.

DAI’s areas of intentionality, planning, performing actions and assessing outcomes address both the interior strategizing and exterior execution as part of a holistic and scaffolded process of deep engagement (Edwards, 2010, p. 76).

From the cyclical DAI theory developed AR-a process that includes action and inquiry, but with the application of recognised research techniques to produce the description of the effects of the changes to practice in the action inquiry cycle (Tripp, 2005).

Through the use of the action reflection cycles of expressing concerns, imagining possible action plans, implementing action plans, collecting data, evaluating the influences of action, revisiting the
concerns, and re-imagining and modifying action plans, the researchers answer the question of How do I improve what I am doing? (Cooperrider, Barrett, & Ludema, 2000).

The simple model illustrates the research process discussed in this paper (Figure 3). Each cycle has five phases, namely, identifying the issue; planning of action; act by collecting data; observe by analysing data; and reflect to adapt future actions (McNiff & Whitehead, 2005).

Participating individuals used action reflection cycles to express concerns about their own practice in postgraduate education and researcher development. These cycles of self-reflective practice include imagining possibilities in developing and implementing action plans, acting and gathering data, evaluating the outcomes, and modifying concerns, ideas and action. The explanations and experiences turned out to be life affirming, energising, and valuing the principles of the PGS and the participating individuals. Through the online and peer-mentoring processes the participants will generate new knowledge when observing and reflecting on their own and other participant’s practices (Whitehead & McNiff, 2006).

5. Conclusion

Many hours of discussions and reflections on the existing status quo of the non-traditional doctor-andi’s challenges to access developmental opportunities preceded and occurred throughout the research process. Many smaller interactive cycles were part of each of the two main cycles. This enabled identifying, planning, implementing, observing and reflecting of the establishment of the multimedia hub, the resource centre, the database of existing opportunities, and the strategising and trial of the mentorship programme. Without the participation of staff members who are also doctor-andi, the outcomes of this phase would not have been so rich and rewarding.

The ever-changing landscape of academe necessitates the continuous crossing of thresholds to doctorateness as it emerges. Doctorateness is the threshold to being an independent all-round academic. It includes both the condition and the action required to meet the condition (Trafford & Leshem, 2009). The process focuses on four areas, namely, postgraduate education, research development, career management and student experience.

Further research will involve the implementation of the full programme and will include at least one additional cycle. Another option is to explore assisted self-mentorship of a boundaryless research entrepreneur, who will seek not to be employed by a HEI. The metaphor of the flying fish who will free itself from employment by HEIs (Figure 4) will illustrate the research entrepreneur. The outcomes of this project can easily be duplicated and/or adapted by other institutions. The participation in the project had no known ethical ramifications for any of the participants.

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