

Collaboration in Teaching Practice (T.P.) in ODL: Practices and Issues of T.P. Leaders at Zimbabwe Open University

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ABSTRACT

In Open and Distance Learning, Teaching practice (T.P.) is a critical stage in the training of prospective teachers and teachers with initial teachers' training, as it is a process of producing a master teacher. At Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU), there is a department of teacher development and T.P. or Practicum is a strategy by which students in this department are developed. Many mechanisms are put in place to make T.P. a beneficial experience to trainee teachers such as peer/ micro-teaching, student supervision and assessment. Such activities call for collaboration between training institutions and schools and among lecturers at regional campuses. At ZOU, the key managers of T.P. are the T.P. national programme leader and regional coordinators. T.P. leader initiated collaboration is insignificant. In trying to perform some of their roles, these leaders seem to face some problems which make collaboration with other lecturers, mentors and students problematic. At times T.P. managers face some role clashes with those above them. A study was conducted to determine conceptions of T.P. leaders' of their roles at ZOU in promoting collaboration in T.P. activities and to get their views on challenges they faced in their attempt to uphold the collaborative nature of T.P. related activities. An open-ended questionnaire was e-mailed to each of the T.P. regional coordinators and the same questionnaire was administered physically to those who had not responded to the e-mailed questionnaire. The study established that T.P. leaders were of the mind that in trying to promote effectiveness of team work in T.P. activities, the key roles of the T.P. leaders were being resource mobilisers, planners of team activities and researchers in T.P. In trying to promote effective collaboration in T.P. participant's highlighted challenges such as delayed provision of resources like finance, lack of T.P. vehicles and lack of team work spirit by some colleagues. The study recommended timely and adequate provision of resources and running of regional-based workshops on the essence of expected collaboration in T.P. activities, inter alia.

Keywords: *Teaching practice or practicum, collaboration, teaching practice leaders*

1. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) is the only state Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institution in Zimbabwe. It was established on 1st March 1999, through an act of Parliament, Chapter 25:20. Initially the University operated as the Centre of Distance education at the University of Zimbabwe before its transformation to the University College of Distance Education. After this transformation, ZOU was granted its own charter to operate as a fully fledged university. There are four faculties offering services in ODL to the nation and to students beyond Zimbabwe borders. The faculties are; the faculty of Arts and Education, Faculty of Commerce and Law, Faculty of Applied Social Sciences and Faculty of Science and Technology. In each faculty there are departments. ZOU students are drawn from ten regions as well the virtual Region which caters for students outside Zimbabwe. The teacher development department operates under the faculty of Arts and Education. Teaching Practice is one strategy by which students in this department are developed.

Student teaching practice is an important stage in the professional development of teachers. It provides an opportunity for pre-service teachers to apply the knowledge and theories learned on campus to the real classroom. Student teaching has been called the most challenging,

rewarding, and critical stage of teacher education [3] and it is generally agreed that the student teaching experience is the key for teacher preparation programs [3]. Because it is so important, teaching practice should be conducted in such a way that student teachers can continuously learn new knowledge and skills and develop professionally. Teaching Practice is a core course in teacher development at Zimbabwe Open University. Unlike in conventional teacher training colleges teacher trainees at ZOU spent short periods being in conduct with their lecturers and they receive their instruction mainly through tutorials and provision of modules. For teaching practice to be helpful to students there is much need for collaboration between ZOU and other partners. Teaching and learning in the past have been considered to be an individual affair, nonetheless, it is increasingly becoming clear that effective teaching and learning may be better facilitated when it is social, that is involving others doing the same or similar practice [5] citing Lieberman and Mace, 2008). In the same vein, the development of teachers through practicum requires collaboration by various stakeholders.

For instance there is some collaboration in the supervision of students doing T.P. by school staff and lecturers at ZOU. Collaboration can take other forms if properly planned and supported, especially by the teacher

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development department. While there are several levels of leaders in T.P. at ZOU, Regional Teaching Practice coordinators are some of the leaders who can influence the ways by which collaboration can be promoted as students do their T.P. In trying to promote collaboration in this aspect, regional T.P. coordinators tend to face some challenges. While there is ample literature (e.g. [7]) on the two main forms of collaboration valuable during student teachers practicum namely: among student teachers themselves and between student teachers and their cooperating teachers in the placement schools focusing on merits, demerits and variables affecting these two forms of collaboration positively and negatively, it seems as if not much has been researched on the roles of T.P. leaders in ODL institutions in promoting collaboration in T.P. linked activities, issues they might face in trying to promote effective collaboration. It was against this background that the study was conducted.

2. THE STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The development of teachers through practicum requires collaboration by various stakeholders. However, T.P. leader initiated - collaboration seems not to be prominent. There seem to be some challenges associated with the T.P. leaders' role in promoting effective collaboration which make collaboration problematic. Such issues can affect the quality of collaboration, student teacher practicum and of the teacher produced. The purpose of this study was to determine views of T.P. Regional Programme Coordinators at Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) of their roles at ZOU in promoting collaboration in T.P. activities and get their minds on what they thought could be done to resolve issues related to T.P. collaboration.

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study was guided by the following questions:

- In which Teaching Practice related activities could collaboration be promoted in Open and Distance Learning?
- Which roles should be performed by Teaching Practice Leaders at Regional campus in an effort to promote collaboration in Teaching Practice?
- Which factors promote effective collaboration in T.P. associated activities?
- What impediments are there to effective collaboration in Teaching Practice related activities?
- What improvements are necessary to promote effective collaboration in T.P. associated activities at the Zimbabwe Open University?

4. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

It was hoped that the enriched understanding of roles of leaders in promoting collaboration in Teaching Practice and issues involved would make significant

contribution to knowledge within teacher education in Open and Distance Learning by providing useful information about collaborative practice efforts geared towards the professional development of student teachers. It was hoped that leaders in Teaching Practice particularly those in ODL could use the study as a platform to reflect on their practices and strategies in heightening collaboration in Teaching Practice. The unveiling T.P. collaboration-linked challenges could be a basis for addressing them through efforts of stakeholders. Researchers also hoped that insights gained through the study could stimulate further study.

5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

5.1 Design

The qualitative design was employed to conduct the study. The focus of qualitative research is the nature or essence of things [1]. Teaching Practice Regional coordinators at Zimbabwe Open University were identified for a situational case study.

5.2 Sample

The target population was all lecturers at Zimbabwe Open University coordinating Teaching Practice in all the ten Regions (except the Virtual Region) of Zimbabwe. Ten regional T.P. coordinators participated in the study and they were chosen for participation by virtue of their job description.

5.3 Instruments

In the study, an open ended questionnaire was sent via e-mail to the participants but only four of the participants filled out the sent questionnaire through e-mail. In order to involve the other six participants the researchers physically administered the same questionnaire at a marking venue where the participants were assembled and this ensured a hundred percent return of the instrument.

5.4 Limitations

The study was just a case study of the Zimbabwe Open University regional campus and so its findings are not generalizable to other Open and Distance learning institutions. In addition the sample was rather small.

5.5 Conceptual Framework

The concept Collaboration

Collaboration has become a buzzword often invoked to solve issues. Functionally collaboration "brings a broad range of stakeholders together to take responsibility over a long term to address issues that matter to them" McKieron, Kim and Lasker, 2000 cited by [5]. Collaboration is working with others for example in terms of planning, observations and discussions aimed at learning from their experiences [5]. It takes commitment from all stakeholders. Collaboration is a continuum of approaches taking a variety of forms, involving direct interaction between at least two

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parties voluntarily engaged in a shared decision making process as they work toward a common goal, sharing expertise. The general framework of collaboration involves clarity of the purpose for collaboration, which involves developing a vision after discussing at length what is at stake, goals and objectives identification, finding common grounds and prioritizing goals and objectives. Two main forms of collaboration are identified in literature as very valuable during Teaching practice, namely collaboration amongst student teachers and collaboration between student teachers and their co-operating teachers in the placement schools [5].

6. LITERATURE REVIEW

[5] cite a study by Britton and Anderson in Press which reports about student teachers who collaborated during a practicum in a model called peer teaching. This involved pre-observation discussion amongst student teachers, observing each others' lessons during which the observing colleague took notes, then conducted post – observation conferences with the observed peers, followed by discussions. The student teachers then analyzed both the teaching and the observation notes and the way forward (ibid.). They then would interchange roles and repeat the exercise a number of times. Students were supported by supervisors at college [5]. The study established that student teachers were able to learn through the principles and practice of peer-coaching with ease and peer-coaching enabled them to develop a deeper understanding of pedagogy and this in turn improved their practice considerably over the practicum semester (ibid and <http://www.academicjournals.org/err/PDF>)

Studies by (Nokes et al.,2008;Hsu,2005 and Numrich,1996) all cited by [5] found out that paired placements enhanced student teachers practicum through discussions on shared teaching and observations of each other. A study by Wilson and I'Anson (2006) cited by [5] conducted in the U.K. which evaluated the success of a model of teaching practice which uses micro-teaching as a collaborative prep for practicum reported that the former student teachers found the experiences in peer teaching as instrumental in reducing the complexity of T.P.

Studies by Atay (2007) and Darling- Hammond (2006) cited by [5] established that in programmes where collaboration between student teachers and cooperating teachers was well structured and emphasized, there was very powerful impact on students' teacher development as students were helped to develop in efficacy. They also found out that collaboration could cause harm if collaboration in the supervision of students was not well structured by University based teacher educators. Poor coordination between University and schools led to conflicting views on guidance for student teachers. In a study by Shita, Saito and Fukuzawa [7],384 practicum instructors were surveyed to determine the criteria for

collaboration between practicum instructors and nursing school teachers. The study established that decision making, co-operativeness and information sharing were factors contributing to effective collaboration. The level of collaboration is also influenced by the following factors: frequency of meetings, training that respects the student's understanding, participation and guidance in conferences [6].

7. DATA PRESENTATION

7.1 T.P. Regional Programme Leaders Data

Ten T.P. Regional Programme Leaders completed the open ended questionnaire, four of them via their e-mail and six when the questionnaire was administered physically to them.

7.2 Question: In which T.P. related activities could collaboration be provided in Open and Distance Learning?

Responses to this question showed that respondents were of the view that collaboration could be promoted through a variety of activities as is shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: T.P.linked activities in which collaboration could be promoted for the benefit of student teachers in ODL

Stated T.P. related Activity in which collaboration could be promoted	No. of Responses
Teaching about T.P. before students go for Practicum	4
Micro and Peer teaching	4
Producing T.P. documents	4
Supervision and assessment of student teachers in ODL	10
Mentoring	8
T.P. workshops	4

Four out of the ten participants opined that collaboration in T.P.linked activities in ODL could be promoted in the following areas: teaching about T.P. before students embark on their practicum, micro and peer teaching and in preparing and producing T.P.documents.All the ten regional programme coordinators were of the mind that collaboration could be enhanced in the assessment and supervision of student teachers while it was indicated by eight participants that collaboration could be promoted through mentoring of students while they will be on T.P.

7.3 Question: Which roles should be performed by teaching Practice leaders at Regional campus in an effort to promote effective collaboration in T.P.?

The responses to the question showed that a multiple of roles were perceived as key to the promotion of effective collaboration in T.P.issues by T.P. leaders at

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regional campuses at the Zimbabwe Open University. Responses to the question were as is depicted in Table 2.

Table 2: Perceived T.P. leaders' roles in promoting collaboration in T.P.

Stated leaders 'roles necessary for collaboration in T.P.	No. of Responses
Work shopper	5
Effective communicator	4
Researcher on T.P. in ODL	6
Idea stimulator	3
Link between University T.P. and other ODL institutions	3
Resource provider	5
Supervisor and assessor of student teachers in collaboration with others	10

Basing on the opinions presented in figure 2, five times each it was indicated that the roles of T.P. leaders operating at Regional campuses were being work shoppers and resource providers. Roles of idea stimulator and link person between the training ODL institution and other institutions were stated thrice each. Six participants stated the role of researcher as being critical in collaboration in T.P. while ten were of the mind that the role of being supervisor and assessor of prospective teachers in collaboration with was important.

7.4 Question: Which factors promote effective collaboration in T.P. related activities?

The opinions of T.P. programme leaders are presented in Table 3 and Figure 1.

Table 3: Variables perceived as promoting effective collaboration in T.P. related activities

Stated factor	No. of responses
Resource availability	10
Effective communication	7
Good team spirit/cooperativeness	6
Knowledge in the area of T.P. and collaboration	6
Running of T.P. workshops	9
Opportunity	3



Fig 1: Variables necessary for effective collaboration in T.P.

Resource availability was indicated by all the ten participants as an important variable in promoting collaboration in T.P. associated activities. Nine respondents were of the opinion that the running of workshops was an important factor, while seven opined effective communication as crucial in promoting effective collaboration. Good team spirit and sound knowledge about student teacher practicum and the essence of collaboration were considered by six respondents as factors necessary in enhancing effective collaboration in T.P. related activities. Three were of the view that opportunity or good chance was an important factor in promoting collaboration in T.P. linked activities.

7.5 Question: What impediments are there to effective collaboration in T.P.?

Responses to the question were as is shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Impediments to effective collaboration in T.P.

Stated Challenge	No. of Responses
ZOU lecturer is overloaded with administrative and academic work	7
Lack of resources: funds, time, vehicles	8
Lack of cooperation from colleagues	5
Wide geographical distances between attachment schools	3

7/10 participants were of the mind that heavy workload of the T.P. leaders at Regional campuses was a form of challenge to effectual collaboration. Lack of resources including funds, time and vehicles was opined by

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8/10 participants. 5/10 lecturers stated lack of cooperation from colleagues and 3/10 respondents considered long distances between attachment schools as impediments to effective collaboration in T.P.related activities.

7.6 Question: What improvements are necessary to advance effective collaboration in T.P. related activities?

4/10 participants suggested involvement with all stakeholders in T.P. while 7/10 proposed provision of resources for T.P. activities while 3/10 suggested regular T.P. workshops. One respondent recommended the development of stronger lines of communication between various stakeholders in T.P.

8. DISCUSSION

8.1 In which T.P. related activities could collaboration be provided in Open and Distance Learning?

All the participants viewed supervision and assessment of prospective teachers in ODL as one activity in which collaboration could be promoted. Eight respondents viewed mentoring as a T.P. activity which could be done to aid collaboration in T.P. related activity. Probably supervision and mentoring were stated by all participants since collaboration in student supervision has a fairly long history in student teacher practicum. Teaching about T.P. before students go for practicum ,micro-teaching, running of T.P.workshops and production of practicum documents were the other T.P. linked activities in which collaboration could be fostered ,according to the participants. [5] in their study also established that were types of collaborative activities in T.P. Seemingly, the stated activities suggest that Practicum-embedded collaboration is the guiding principle in trying to establish what activities require collaboration in T.P.

8.2 Which roles should be performed by teaching Practice Leaders at Regional campus in an effort to promote collaboration in Teaching Practice?

Participants opined that the following roles ought to be performed in championing collaboration in Teaching Practice: supervisor and assessor, researcher on T.P. in ODL, resource provider, idea stimulator and effective communicator. All the given roles naturally require some working together. Some of the stated roles are in line with www.durp.hawaii.alu which points out that the roles of resource provider and researcher are critical in any form of collaboration. Nonetheless the extent to which these roles could be performed depend on the prevailing situations in an institution and on the attributes of an individual.

8.3 Which factors promote effective collaboration in T.P. related activities?

Resource availability (time, T.P.vehicles and money), running of T.P. workshops and good team spirit were considered as critical to operative collaboration. These

opinions are supported by [6] who say the level of collaboration is influenced by cooperativeness and information sharing, frequency of meetings and training. Three participants regarded opportunity as an important factor in enhancing effective collaboration in T.P. related activities. Good chance is vital to make collaboration possible[4].Sound knowledge in the area of T.P. and the concept of collaboration was stated as another factor critical to operative collaboration. This view is in line with Ferrier-Kerr (undated) who says to be successful collaborators must know the dynamics of the collaboration process and be prepared to cope with its challenges as well as reap its rewards.

8.4 What impediments are there to effective collaboration in Teaching Practice related activities?

Work overload on the part of ZOU lecturer, lack of resources and lack of cooperation were viewed as challenges to effective collaboration by the participants. According to [7], collaboration takes commitment from all stakeholders. Long distances between attachment schools were opined by the participants as a challenge to effective collaboration by the participants.

9. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Respondents regarded collaboration in T.P.as multi-faceted; touching on all T.P.embedded activities. In promoting productive collaboration some variables are necessary such as resource provision and sound knowledge of T.P. and the essence of collaboration. Lack of resources and cooperation are some of the perceived impediments to collaboration. For collaboration to be effective, T.P. leaders in ODLshould perform a variety of roles some of which are being researchers in T.P.and work shoppers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The researchers recommend the following:

- Running of T.P. workshops by Zimbabwe Open University which is geared to appraising T.P. leaders of their roles in promoting productive collaboration in Practicum related activities. Workshop activities should cover ground on the essence of collaboration in general and collaboration in T.P. in particular. They should prepare other stakeholders who also play a part in the T.P. collaborative work. Workshops should be frequent and continuous depending on opportunity.
- Timely and adequate provision of T.P. resources necessary in the promotion of sound collaboration.
- Good team spirit among all stakeholders in student teacher practicum.

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