

## Case Five: Something new and different: the key roles of *imithamo* and *abakhwezeli* in the University of Fort Hare's B Prim Ed programme

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### Editor's introduction

While most of the case studies in this book have been written by 'insiders' to the practices described and discussed, this case has been written by an 'outsider' who participated in one of several research projects which have investigated an initiative designed specifically to address local needs in one region in South Africa. The focus of the case is on **course materials** and **learner support**. In particular, the following are foregrounded:

- 5.5.6 Care is taken to understand the contexts in which learners live and work, as well as their prior knowledge and experience. This knowledge is used in the design of the materials.
- 5.5.7 Active learning and teaching approaches are used to engage learners intellectually and practically and to cater for individual needs.
- 7.1 Learners are encouraged to create and participate in 'communities of learning' in which the individual learner thinks and solves problems with others engaged in similar tasks.

In 2004, the materials described and discussed in this case study won the NADEOSA Courseware Award for collaboratively developed material.

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### Introduction

The first page of the first module in the University of Fort Hare's Bachelor of Primary Education (B Prim Ed) materials begins with the following paragraph:

Once upon a time, in a new country, there was a new project. And the people in the project were starting something completely new and different and special, something that had never been tried before and they were very excited. But there was a problem. When they used the old names and the old words, like

'modules' and 'tutorials', to describe new things that they were trying to do, it didn't work. Everyone had their own ideas about what these old words meant. And they couldn't shake off these old ideas no matter how hard they tried. (University of Fort Hare, Umthamo 1, 1998:1)

A two page account, written in the genre of a traditional tale or fairy story, describes the process of deciding on new names and new practices for the project of designing and implementing an in-service teacher education programme for primary school teachers in the Eastern Cape.

The project had its origins in a feasibility study undertaken in 1995 by the University of Fort Hare (UFH), the Eastern Cape Education Department and the University of South Australia (UniSA) under the leadership of Basil Moore of UniSA. This study yielded expressions of interest in professional development through distance education programmes from over 5000 teachers.

Quality  
Criterion

3.1

The programme is developed in terms of a needs analysis based on an audit of existing courses and programmes, market research, liaison (where appropriate) with industry and professions, national and regional priorities, and the needs of learners.

In South Africa it was a time of transition in regard to teacher education qualifications and so work on the B Prim Ed curriculum began in earnest only in early 1998 with the first modules offered to teachers in the second half of that year. As has often been the case with distance education initiatives in South Africa, curriculum designers and materials writers did not have time to develop the entire curriculum prior to its delivery to the first cohort of students. Alan Kenyon, the initial academic co-ordinator (the programme is now managed by Liz Botha), described the programme development process in these words: *Invent things as you go. Solve things as they immediately hit you* (SAIDE, 2003: 27). While this description might suggest an 'ad hoc' approach to curriculum design and materials development, this was not the case. The programme had been carefully conceptualized and decisions made that its focus would be on the following:

- Providing award-bearing and accredited courses that are commensurate with South Africa's new curricular thrusts;
- Addressing the scarcity of trained teachers in maths, science and technology education, language teaching and its use across the curriculum, school management and early childhood development;
- Introducing and modelling the training of teachers in multi-grade teaching, a situation that faces many of our province's primary teachers but is mostly not addressed in their development;
- Enhancing the classroom performance of teachers through researching and propagating comparative best practices - generic and learning area specific, determined both locally and internationally;
- Impacting whole school development through teacher learning activities and programmes. (Distance Education Project: Input to Fort Hare Institutional Plan, quoted in SAIDE, 2003: 14)

In terms of the South African National Qualifications Framework (NQF), a B Prim Ed is a four year 480 credits programme. However, as the Fort Hare programme was designed as an in-

service initiative, 240 credits are derived from teachers' pre-service qualifications and classroom experience. The programme comprises eight semesters of part time study (i.e. teachers make a four year commitment, accumulating 60 credits per year).

## The decision to use *imithamo*

One of the innovative decisions that was made at the outset of the materials development process was that instead of using one lengthy course book or study guide for each module each semester, students would work with a total of eight booklets in each semester. The name *umthamo* (plural *imithamo*) was decided on for each of these 'bite-sized chunks' - 36 to 48 page texts designed to be used for 40 notional learning hours. One of the findings of research on the programme is that there have been several advantages to this decision. Firstly, students have reported that the *imithamo* are 'user-friendly' - less intimidating than one large book and easier to transport to work and to contact sessions. Secondly, the booklet format has facilitated the introduction of one topic in each of the four key learning areas (Literacy; Numeracy and Mathematics; Natural Sciences; Technology) and one in each area of Core Educational Studies (Learning about Learning; Helping Learners Learn; Schools as Learning Communities; Learning in the World) each semester. The booklets have enabled the offering of an integrated curriculum in which aspects of Literacy or Numeracy or Science or Technology

or Learning Theories can be worked on during one semester rather than sequentially in different semesters, as would be the case if a whole course in one of these areas were to be 'delivered' in one text. Writers of one *umthamo* frequently refer readers to content and activities in other *imithamo*.

Thirdly, use of small booklets has made it possible for designers and writers to respond more easily to feedback on early booklets and to introduce some changes to later ones. For example, writers found that additional explanatory or signposting icons needed to be added to the booklets.

On the advice of colleagues from UniSA it was decided that in the final year, only eight of the originally envisaged 16 booklets would be produced and that students would be required to re-visit and reflect on earlier *imithamo* as part of the process of consolidating their learning from the overall programme.

While the logistics of distributing so many separate booklets could be a problem for some distance learning programmes, in general it has not been problematic in the UFH programme because students are required to attend fortnightly Saturday morning contact sessions at which the next booklets in the sequence are given to them. Initially there were occasional difficulties when booklets did not reach a particular contact session venue in time, but it has been possible to address these in various ways.

Quality  
Criterion

5.5.8 Content is presented in the form of an unfolding argument, rather than discrete bits of information that have no obvious connection.

Quality  
Criterion

5.5.9 The various elements of the course materials and different media are integrated, and the integration is clearly signposted.

Quality  
Criterion

5.7 The materials development plan includes provision for evaluation during the developmental process in the form of critical commenting, developmental testing or piloting.

## Designing and producing the *imithamo*

The curriculum development team consulted widely - particularly with academics from UniSA, the Open University (United Kingdom) and the South African Institute for Distance Education (SAIDE). The initial academic co-ordinator, Alan Kenyon summed up advice from the Open University UK which guided the materials development process:

Write to the target audience. Don't worry about the academics. If you look after your target audience and lead them along, you're going to astound the academics anyway. More of the same isn't going to fix it. (SAIDE, undated: 27)

With this advice in mind, the team decided to do the following:

- Affirm teachers as experienced in the classroom, in community and family life;
- Foreground the local;
- Offer an integrated curriculum with explicit links between one umthamo and another;
- Guide and support a process of change in classroom practices;
- Assist teachers to theorize old and new practices and to become reflective practitioners.

Throughout the programme students are referred to as teacher-learners, a name which is intended to give recognition to their professional experience while indicating that there is learning to be done as they engage with the imithamo.

The emphasis in this learning is on pedagogic content knowledge (Shulman, 1986;1987) rather than on subject or learning area content knowledge. In the materials a distinction is made between in-text activities and key activities which must be submitted for assessment.

Quality Criterion	6.1	Assessment is recognized as a key motivator of learning and an integral part of the teaching and learning process.
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Both kinds of activities occur at regular intervals in the materials (usually every four to five pages) and are carefully scaffolded. While answers to the in-text activities are not provided, many are followed by related discussion which provides feedback to the student. The majority of both the in-text and key activities are classroom focussed. Some of the in-text activities require teachers to write in **learning journals** which they are to keep for the four years of the programme. Others require the production of evidence of work done by teachers and their learners in the classroom. The latter is to be submitted as part of a **portfolio of evidence** of professional growth which is submitted for assessment at the end of each year.

Quality Criterion	6.4	There is a range of formative and summative assessment tasks and methods which ensure that all learning outcomes are validly assessed.
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While all teacher-learners study the same modules, there are often different activities for teachers working in different phases. According to Viv Kenyon, the leader of the Language, Literacy and Communication curriculum team, the activities have been designed along a continuum from relatively straightforward in the first year to much more challenging in the final year. In an interview in 2000 she described the activities as being at four 'levels':

Year One is about describing what is being done and providing evidence of this. Year Two is about 'unpacking' the above and asking questions such as: Why is it like that? Why did it / did it not work? How could I do it differently? Year Three will require teacher-learners to become more 'critical' and start to bring in more theory. By the end of Year Four, the teacher-learners should be fully able to question, justify and improve their practice using theory as a tool. (SAIDE, 2003: 28)

Another of the innovations in the UFH B Prim Ed materials is the focus on the 'local'. There are frequent references to Eastern Cape place names and to people likely to be known to the teachers. Some of the *imithamo* include articles from Eastern Cape newspapers. Much of the content, especially in regard to explanations of how to plan and execute particular classroom activities, has been trialled in local schools and so there are references to school names and to teachers who participated in the trials. The materials include numerous instances of code-switching from English to isiXhosa - the language assumed to be the

home language of the students. This code-switching both affirms the local and provides opportunities for writers to explain complex concepts. The writers also provide glossaries of terms and concepts with which readers may be unfamiliar and write in an accessible, if sometimes very directive, style throughout.

Quality  
Criterion

5.5.5 The language level of the materials is appropriate for the target learners and the materials assist learners with the particular difficulties that learning-through-reading and learning at a distance require.

One of the ways in which the UFH materials differ from many other examples of Southern African distance learning materials is in extensive use of photographs - in colour on front and back covers of the *imithamo*, in black and white at intervals in each text. Many of these photographs show learners at work in Eastern Cape classrooms. Van der Mescht (2004) makes the following observations on the photographs of learners and their classroom 'world':

These learners have been photographed showing the kind of distance that teachers usually keep from their pupils as they move around the classroom. This suggests a social distance and level of emotional involvement that teachers are familiar with. Closer would be an invasion of privacy for the learner. These medium shots allow the reader to see the co-operative learning of learners in groups. Teachers would want evidence that all or most of the learners are focusing on their work, and the photographs provide that evidence (2004:93).

This world appears more real as it is a bit battered and poor, with raw brick interiors and old desks and chairs. Some subjects do not have school uniforms. The home-photography, snap-shot quality parallels this sense of unpolished reality: subjects are not posed and black and white reproduction gives surfaces a grainy, rough texture. The combined effect of subject and production is to suggest that lessons promoted in this course will work in the unvarnished poorer schools of the Eastern Cape (2004:95).

Quality  
Criterion

4.13 Where appropriate, experiential learning opportunities are designed into the course.

Some photographs focus on teachers at work on an activity and demonstrate to teacher-learners how to implement a new practice. In some places line drawings are also used for giving such guidance.

In research which investigated the responses of 64 teacher-learners to the UFH materials, they expressed their approval of the photographs both because they valued the guidance

offered for activities and because they could identify with the classroom contexts in the photographs (SAIDE, 2003: 47-48). Many of them expressed their appreciation of writers who understand the contexts in which Eastern Cape teachers and learners live and work. Of course this very strength for these teacher-learners could be a weakness if the same materials were to be used in other parts of South Africa as they could be viewed as alienating by students who are not Xhosa-speaking and not from the Eastern Cape.

## The role of the *abakhwezeli*

The Xhosa word *umkhwezeli* means 'someone whose job is to keep the fire burning just right so that the food in the pot cooks well'. This is the word chosen by the UFH curriculum development team to describe the role of tutors who facilitate the fortnightly Saturday morning contact sessions and who mark key activities submitted for assessment. At the Saturday sessions teacher-learners report and reflect on activities which they have tried out in their classrooms and receive guidance from an *umkhwezeli* for their continued engagement with the current *imithamo* or initial work with new *imithamo*. The majority of the *abakhwezeli* are teachers or principals from schools in the local area or lecturers from former colleges of education in the region. They attend quarterly centralized training sessions and are paid a stipend for their work. In response to questions from a SAIDE researcher about their reasons for taking on this demanding task, the opportunity for professional development was more frequently expressed as the main reason than was the money earned.

Quality Criterion	7.6	Tutors are selected and trained for their role of mediating learning from course materials.
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Some of the *abakhwezeli*, together with additional staff from the Eastern Cape Education Department, also visit teacher-learners in their schools to provide support to their classroom and whole school change initiatives.

Data from interviews with 40 teacher-learners indicate that they felt their learning was supported by the ways in which content and activities are presented in the *imithamo*. However, 38 of the 40 believed that they would not be successful in the programme without support of the contact sessions (SAIDE, 2003: 54). Osei-Agyakwa and Botha report a similar finding from their questionnaire-based survey of teacher-learners in the same programme, with 'face-to-face sessions which give teacher-learners an opportunity to share and discuss' placed first in their list of five factors that support learning (2001:13). As almost all the *abakhwezeli* are Xhosa-speaking they can assist teacher-learners who may be struggling with the academic literacy demands of materials written in English (though as indicated above, writers include glossaries of terms which they consider may be new to teacher-learners and write in an accessible style). Important as these contact sessions are, they may have one unintended negative consequence: teacher-learners can often get the 'gist' of what is required to complete the assessed activities without careful and critical reading of an *umthamo*. If they do not do such reading, then they miss out on much of the richness of the materials. Close reading could be encouraged by making it central to some of the assessed assignments and by explicitly guiding teacher-learners in how to further develop their academic literacy.

## Conclusion

The enrolment of approximately 1400 teacher-learners in the programme at one time suggests that it is popular with Eastern Cape teachers and that it is meeting a need. The UFH B Prim Ed has succeeded in (i) opening access to professional development for teachers with limited qualifications and (ii) providing opportunities for learning of high quality through carefully developed materials and through learner support in the form of both contact sessions and school visits.

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