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TEACHING ASSISTANTS' COMPETENCIES AND THE COMMUNITY OF INQUIRY AT AN OPEN DISTANCE LEARNING INSTITUTION

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on qualitative research conducted in one department at an Open Distance Learning Institution. The participants were 21 e-tutors/teaching assistants (TAs) who facilitated an online compulsory module for certificate and degree seeking students in Education called "*Being a Professional Teacher* (BPT)". It is a bridging course aimed at students who wish to register for a degree in education for the first time. The TAs who facilitated the BPT programme had tacit assumptions about the pedagogy (classroom based) they would use in the online environment. To help both the TAs and their trainer, the researcher conducted this initial research with a focus on the skills/competencies needed by the TAs. Through the lens of competencies, it was possible to place the study within a larger inquiry into the question about their teaching practices in an online environment. Adaptation, modification and deconstruction of teaching practices require change, which takes time and reflection. In low context communication environments, such as an e-learning environment, that change is expected to be rapid. The rapidity of change is dependent on socio-cognitive and socio-affective development of the persons who must change. The TAs did adapt quite rapidly. The three presences needed for a Community of Inquiry to be successful, namely teaching, social and cognitive presences were indicated as developing through a discussion of the competencies the TAs started with, developed during the teaching of BPT and what they still needed to acquire in the future.

Keywords: Teaching Assistants, competencies, teaching presence, social presence, cognitive presence

INTRODUCTION

This paper reports on qualitative research conducted in in one department at an Open Distance Learning Institution. The participants were e-tutors or teaching assistants (TAs) who facilitate an online compulsory module for certificate and degree seeking students in Education called *Being a Professional Teacher* (BPT). It is a bridging course aimed at students who wish to register for a degree in education for the first time. There are six compulsory assignments in the module. Assessment is summative as a Portfolio of Evidence (PoE) and requires the students to reflect on the assignments and the module. The formative assessment is applied to the six assignments in the course of the programme through the myUnisa Platform, group discussions, blogs, threads, creation of own PowerPoint presentations, videos, and so on. The module lasts for a semester, that is, seventeen weeks. Students submit a portfolio to reflect on the module, from learning units 1 to 5. They are also asked about their experiences, what competencies they acquired, liked or disliked about the module. In addition, they are asked about their interaction with their TAs, the lessons learnt from their TAs. This portfolio is used as their summative assessment. The researcher is responsible for coordinating the module and evaluating the TAs

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of the BPT module. In an effort to practise quality control over the module and its facilitators in the light of best practice this research was undertaken.

There were 18,000 students enrolled in 2018 for the course. The administration devolves upon the administration assistant who waits to be advised of students' registrations. Because the university allows a prolonged registration period, the division of the students into groups happens continuously. The students are allocated to groups of 200 in the care of a TA. However, because of the extended registration period, groups begin working at different times.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Practical Teaching Problems

For a Community of Inquiry (CoI) to be developed as an ideal for the online asynchronous course, the three presences, teaching, social and cognitive, must exist as suggested in the literature (de Noyelles, Zydney and Chen, 2014). To support cognitive presence, social presence is vital because it enables group cohesiveness and with that purposeful communication, a prerequisite for knowledge construction. Cognitive presence is explained as the degree to which participants' co-construct knowledge through their reflective inquiry (Zydney, deNoyelles and Seo, 2012). Teaching presence is understood as the process of design, facilitation, and direction, which creates the social interaction, needed to promote meaningful learning. The TAs do not participate in the design of the course. They facilitate, direct and provide support to students.

The CoI, the TAs must ideally engender amongst their students during the seventeen weeks is compromised by several factors. The prolonged registration not only interferes with assignment schedules, but also creates difficulties for the TAs in facilitating and guiding the students in their role as a teaching presence. Students do not start on the module at the same time. Students can access the module, once their initial registration fees have been paid, to the university. Only then, a group is assigned to a TA. The ratio of TAs to students (200:1) is seem ideal for any distance learning tuition. The enormous intake of students in the College of Education at UNISA has been identified as one of the problems leading to teaching and logistical difficulties for those who must instruct them as TAs.

The emphasis in this paper is on the competencies of the selected TAs, which vary widely. All were computer literate and had content knowledge, but their attitude to their roles as teachers/facilitators varied widely as did their online pedagogical strategies and their assumptions about students were largely tacit. To inquire into the larger question of which of their teaching practices they needed to deconstruct or modify and adapt to the new teaching context, the researcher began by asking about the experiential element of their own learning, namely their competencies. The further larger question to be researched beyond their teaching practices is about their new teaching strategies at the socio-cognitive and socio-affective levels (Develotte 2009).

Conceptual Issues

The social environment constructs an individual's identity as a learner by enabling them to construct knowledge (Garrison 1997, 1998; Gergen 1995; Maturana and Varela 1992; Piaget 1977; Vygotsky 1978). Therefore, in the socio-constructivist perspective our cognition happens individually but is shaped and developed in our social, cultural world. From individual

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experiences, our knowledge of the world arises; our collective knowledge, which is ordered and organised, on cultural lines is importantly transmitted primarily through language (Wolff 2003; Clandinin, Huber, Huber, Murphy, Orr, Pearce, and Steeves 2006; Resane 2016; Janus 2018). This is true for the TAs themselves as well as the students they teach. Our social and discursive environment both influences and conditions our understanding of the world (Lévi-Strauss 1985). It seemed likely that TAs who have a change in teaching environment from face-to-face experiences into an online one would wish to find adequate strategies to adapt to this change.

However, as Schön (1983; 1987) has earlier pointed out teachers might not bring their tacit professional "frames" to consciousness in their professional practice and may be unaware that reality is not simply a given. As a result, they might not feel the need to adjust their values, strategies and problem-solving capacities to new contexts but keep using a "normative template" which has proven to be serviceable (Kinsella 2008, 397). To make adjustments in their previous strategies for the new pedagogical reality and the new learning environment might be difficult. Much depends on background and personality, the socio-cultural attitude to learning. The socialisation process to the new environment will be at very different rates as the new pedagogical environment develops new identities and the TAs means of socialisation to it will be at different rates and in different ways (Kinsella 2008).

Online teaching and learning are textual (and in English) or as Develotte (2009) calls it graphico-scriptural. Because attitudes to language, facility in using it and the range of registers appropriate to learning and teaching are so various, this cross-cultural variable is of great importance (Liu, Liu, Lee and Magjuka 2010). Ku and Lohr (2003) found that poor language competencies amplified any other cultural problems for online students. When the language of tuition is not first language, many difficulties arise when interacting online (Gunawardena, Nolla, Wilson, Lopez-lslas, Ramirez-Angel and Megchun-Alpizar 2002). Ku and Lohr's (2003) research showed that in asynchronous online learning environments difficulties with language can be improved by using written communication as the main form of communication. It is useful to use Hall's (1976) distinctions between low context and high context communication in relation to students the TAs work with (Gundykunst 1997).

Low Context and High Context Communication and Learning

The communication style in a low context culture is about explicit communication and much of the information in a message is clarified and defined using specific language. In low context cultures, language is as specific as possible. The nature of computer-mediated communication, such as that in the UNISA BPT course, is about encoding/decoding communication. The communication is electronic, not visual (face-to-face) so meaning must be carried by the language itself. In low context communication the goal of the communication is the focus; productivity is valued with the result that non-verbal elements are not seen as significant in the process. Opinions, ideas and information are exchanged in low context communication. Privacy is valued. Change is expected to be rapid and thinking is expected to be from the specific to the general. It is the style of industrialised countries with European roots such as Great Britain, the United States, Australia (Hofstede 1991).

A high-context culture, in contrast, favours implicit communication and nonverbal cues; meaning arises out of the environmental context of the communication. For a message to be adequately understood in high context communication there needs to be a great deal of background information. Examples of high context cultures are those in Asia, Africa, the Arab

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world, central Europe and Latin America (Hofstede 1991; Riley 1992; Schnell 1990; Pence and Wulf 2009).

Online education has the characteristics of low-context cultural communication. By this is understood that there is a use of explicit and direct messages and the meanings are contained mainly in the transmitted messages (Hall 1976). This is in contrast with high-context communication with which many students are familiar. In this latter kind of communication, implicit and indirect messages are used, and the meanings are embedded in the person or in the socio-cultural context. The effects for students who come from high context cultures into the low context culture of online education might be disorientating because of a lack of cues that they would expect. The cues when communicating face-to-face or deriving from places or from events are sorely missed (Westbrook 2014). For the TAs to mediate learning materials from a low context perspective to a high context communication body of students requires awareness of the complexity of the communication process.

In a review of the literature on learning behaviours, Morse (2003) found that there is a considerable difference between those in low context and those in high context cultures. We derive our attitudes to education and language based on ethnicity and culture, not nationality and our attitudes to learning and teaching are themselves learned (Morse 2003). There is the expectation in a low context learning environment that learning outcomes are most important, that students must contribute, explore and/or develop, that their learning is active, and they are at the centre of it. In low context, learning there is an emphasis on "deep" learning. It is expected that students will develop personal skills, and attitudes and the much sought after lifelong learning approach. The TAs might not have considered this. The wide variety of learning tools and assessment instruments used in low context communication include assessment as a feedback instrument, group assessment, teamwork, reflection, evaluation, etc, and these might be new to students. The lecturer/student relationships are much less formal in online situations than traditional classrooms. The teacher is conceived as a guide/facilitator/mentor in the learning process (Morse 2003).

High context learning is what most TAs will have experienced in mid twentieth century face-to-face classes in South Africa into the 1990s. In this type of learning, the teacher embedded in a hierarchical system had all the knowledge, which the students simply received and reproduced.

Competencies and The TAs

Competence is a hotly debated concept and the literature on it is plentiful; since the term was introduced in the 1960s, it has not lost its capacity to provoke argument (Libman and Zuzovsky 2006). In the 1960s and 1970s (a time when there was no extensive access to the internet), to be competent as a teacher was to have practical skills in the style of behavioural psychology descriptions (Harris 1997). The skills most salient were teaching methods and classroom management (Huizen, Oers and Wubbels 2005). A teacher was judged competent when exercising these skills to teach his/her subject. However, by the 1980s researchers such as Wood and Power (1987) distinguished between competencies and competence. The many different categorisations of competencies exemplified in the literature reveal that TAs are thought to perform countless roles and are therefore expected to possess a wealth of competencies to facilitate learning (Dennis, Watland, Pirotte and Verday (2004); Varvel, 2007).

Pantić, Wubbels and Mainhard (2011) claim that in addition to the behaviourist perspective skills, intangibles such as professionalism, knowledge, understanding and morals

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and values are quite as important, to describe teacher competence. There are necessary skills and techniques for teaching, but teachers are also engaged in an ethical, "normative profession focused on developing valued knowledge, skills, and so forth, with the goal of improving people's lives" (Pantić *et al.*, 2011:172). For Pantić *et al.* (2011) competence as a concept is broad. Behavioural competencies, similar to life skills, for instance, in relation to problem solving and personal affairs, differ from functional competencies. The latter relate to the teacher having both knowledge of and skill in performing what is needed for effectively accomplishing deep learning. Professional competencies are related to abilities and attitudes that enable the teacher to perform to expected standards (Garrison and Anderson, 2003).

In an online setting the debates about competence have continued. The literature on competencies for e-tutoring or online facilitation is extensive (Cornelius and Higgison, 2000; Conrad, 2004; Denis, Watland, Pirotte, and Verday, 2004; Bawane and Spector, 2009). Yuksel (2009) has provided a valuable summary of competencies, which complement Diehl's (2016:10ff). Diehl had reworked Hilke's (2012) study of competencies. In that latter study competencies identified in the literature up to that date (2012) were categorised according to Institutional context, Institutional design, Technologies, Pedagogy, Assessment, Social presence, Discipline expertise (Diehl, 2016:3).

In his investigation, Reid (2002) recorded more than 500 competencies, classified them and grouped them into technical knowledge, content expertise, process facilitation, evaluation and course management. Salmon (2000) had previously classified competencies into understanding online processes, technical skills, online communication skills, content expertise and personal characteristics. Shank (2004) used his personal and research experience as well as knowledge of instructional theories and organised his list into five categories, including administrative, design, facilitation, evaluation and technical. Dennis, et.al (2004) generated their list of different types of online competencies as pedagogical, communicational, discipline expertise and technological. The suggestions proposed by UNESCO (2005) bring these ideas together and include content and pedagogy, collaboration and networking, social and technical issues.

Turbill (2002); Reid (2002); Bowane and Spector (2009) found that e-tutors facilitating online learning relied heavily on their face-to-face experience. Conceição (2006) emphasises the fact that teaching online demands an understanding of the content, how to present the content, how to provide a learning environment using technology and how to take advantage of the unique learning opportunities in online learning environments. The flexible way of accessing the learning environment is liberating for students and provides a good platform for TAs to encourage students to take control of their own learning. However, in computer-mediated learning, with the emphasis on collaboration, student-student support and inquiry there is a need for a different pedagogy than the face-to-face styles. The need for higher order learning among tertiary students who are part of a critical community of inquiry (CCI) demands that TAs respond in new ways (Garrison, Anderson and Archer 2001). Citing John Dewey (1859-1959) Garrison, Anderson and Archer (2001, 7) explain it, "(re)constructing experience and knowledge through the critical analysis of subject matter, questioning, and the challenging of assumptions" is typical of the ideal CCI. These are difficult tasks to encourage students to undertake when relying on face-to-face classroom strategies. Questioning and challenging assumptions are behaviours in classrooms, which are not often encouraged, in the South African context.

The CCI model used by Garrison (2009), deriving from computer conferencing, is a valuable way of describing an ideal pedagogy for e-learning (Figure 1).

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Figure 1: A pedagogy for e-learning: Based on Community of inquiry model (n.d).

The social presence in a CoI or a CCI such as the TAs and the students would ideally have, centres on adequate communication (by whatever means), collaboration and a sense of group cohesion. For the students their sense of having a valuable learning opportunity and being able to express their views would encourage collaboration and the TAs must manage this initially. A great problem in an online CoI is reduced visibility and anonymity (Derks, Fischer and Bos 2008). To offset this phenomenon Stenbom, Hrastinski and Cleveland-Innes (2016) suggest that emotional presence be added to the three elements of the original CoI and not subsumed into social presence. This was based on work published earlier (Cleveland-Innes and Campbell, 2012) and they made use of Pekrun, Goetz, Titz, and Perry's (2002, 92) phrase *academic emotions* which are those associated with "academic learning, classroom instruction, and achievement".

When discussing the cognitive presence in a CoI/CCI it refers to the way a central challenge/question is presented through the design of the material. This question can become the element that arouses curiosity and the desire to resolve it on the part of the learner. The design of the module or programme needs to emphasise the challenge/question for the students. If this is not the focus of the design, there might be a lack of critical thinking in the students' responses. As the TAs are not responsible for the design of the materials for the module, in their communication with the students they would need to make the challenge/question clear. For the students a sense of curiosity should lead them through a cycle of exploration, a hypothesis for the solution and then a resolution, which enables deep learning. The means by which the cognitive element is achieved is through information sharing, the connection between ideas and the application of new ideas. Cultural contexts whether high or low have a serious impact on these ideals.

In the CoI/CCI the students create opportunities to define and initiate discussion topics, to share personal meaning and to focus discussion, experience the teaching presence but this means the TAs have to guide and facilitate the interaction. Zydney et al. (2012) found that there was a danger that peer facilitators did not engage in dialogue. Taking cues from the materials, their own experience and any new ideas, the TAs need to act as guides, building understanding actively and motivating the learning in the CoI.

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The research undertaken was to answer the questions, "What competencies did the TAs begin with?"; "What competencies did they develop during the semester?"; and "What competencies do they want to acquire in future?"

RESEARCH DESIGN

The design of the research needed to make the most parsimonious use of everyone's time because of the overwhelming numbers of students. Each of the TAs manages at least four groups and each group consists of at least fifty students. The decision to use online questionnaires was the solution to the problem. The questions were straightforward.

For the researcher who guides the TAs, her own cycle of effective learning (after Kolb, 1987) follows four stages of reflection and is integral to the research. In this paper the concrete experience of training, guiding and having the TAs report back on their teaching was the background to the questionnaire/s. The researcher's own observation of and reflection on that experience is summarised in the discussion section. The abstract concepts, that is the analysis of the experience and the generalizations (conclusions) drawn are presented in the conclusions of this paper. There is also a brief review to test the hypothesis for future situations when the TAs will be trained, guided and will interact with the researcher once again. This cycle of learning and reflection will result in new experiences.

As part of the ongoing iterative training of TAs to deliver the best teaching they can in the asynchronous module BPT it was thought valuable to question a group of TAs to find out what their opinion was on their competencies including the baseline skills needed to facilitate learning. Having established that they reflected on their competencies, the next step will be to ask questions about their understanding of the context of their students and their own competency fit with them and to ask them to participate in a follow up of the iterative Total Quality Management (TQM) exercise for the module. This will be about what strategies they envisaged, need changing for more effective facilitation and deep learning amongst the students.

Collins and Berge (1995; 1996) looked at various conditions and the various categories of competencies presented in the literature, collated, and identified the following four as the necessary competencies required for TAs to perform their work. They were:

i. Pedagogical competencies having, to do with subject knowledge;
ii. Social competencies which relate to communication and interacting with students and taking care of their online 'netiquette' as well as motivating and encouraging them to participate online;
iii. Managerial competencies including managing students' work, their interactions, assessing, marking, posting announcements and controlling discussions and
iv. Technical competency, the ability to use a computer and the tools involved in the course, such as internet, emails, drop box and so on. The researcher used the above-mentioned categories as a guide to the discussion, which follows her findings. A fifth competency was included after Pekrun, Goetz, Titz and Perry (2002) who introduced the term *academic emotions* which are those associated with academic learning to the discourse. Emotions as a central part of the learning process is beginning to be researched (Dirkx, 2008; Sutton, 2004; Sutton and Wheatley, 2003).

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RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Online qualitative investigation was used to determine the competencies the TAs had, those they acquired and those they still wished to acquire to facilitate online learning. Respondents in online qualitative research are more likely to express their deeper feelings and understanding than during traditional interviews (Hanna, Weinberg, Dant and Berger, 2005). In this environment, they are less constrained to express their views and more willing to state their opinions directly than in traditional interviewing (Pincott and Branthwaite, 2000; Stucki, Urwyler, Rampa, Müri, Mosimann, and Nef, 2014). Particularly in a sensitive area such as reflecting on their own capacity to perform their job well, it was useful to avoid direct interactions with the TAs. During the entire period of the TAs facilitation of BPT the researcher had been observing them and responding to their queries and concerns as the module coordinator. This fact added to the sense that the intrusion of an online questionnaire was not intimidating given our working history.

Participants

The participants in this study were drawn from the forty-two TAs who have been facilitating the module from its inception. They have gained at least three semesters' experience to facilitate the course. The participants willingly volunteered to participate in the study (Vos, Strydom, Fouche and Delport, 2012). Of the forty-two, only twenty-one responded within two days and showed willingness to participate in the study. Seven of the TAs have a teaching experience of more than twenty-seven years as high school computer studies teachers in face-to-face settings. Five are retired technical college lecturers with twelve years' high school English language teaching experience including sixteen years communication studies experience. Two of the facilitators has completed a Masters' degree in Technology Education as a major and three are currently busy with their Doctoral studies in Curriculum Development while teaching part-time at a private school. Their experience is face-to-face teaching. All facilitators have background knowledge in education studies - an advantage as it was used to provide background understanding and knowledge of the module. Five of the participants had an advanced training and knowledge of the use of computers. All of them have been trained by UNISA to facilitate online modules. The online training lasted for 2 months. They submitted a portfolio for assessment (PoA) of their learning, understanding and readiness to facilitate the module.

Data Collection

The research was informed by a review of pertinent literature, online observation and interaction during three semesters while the TAs taught and online interview data. The review of literature and data collected from that source was iterative throughout. According to Hinterberger and Scheuner (2012) e-observation gives insight into e-learning processes that escape direct observation. They suggest that the researcher collects peoples' statements about past activities or about intentions and treats these statements as actual behaviour. These kinds of data were collected in a non-intrusive way, in real-time as the researcher responded to the inquiries of the TAs over the period (Hinterberger and Scheuner, 2012).
In this study further data were collected by gathering statements students made to their respective TAs. The researcher observed, and collated announcements posted to students. The

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researcher used an observation sheet to categorise the student queries, messages, discussions and announcements posted to students as well as responses from both sides – students and TAs. The third phase involved the interaction between the researcher and participating TAs. At different points of our interaction and exchange of e-mails, the researcher requested participating TAs to list at least ten competencies they had before engaging in the online course. Competencies were described as capabilities and strategies used in teaching the online module. The lists were returned in two days. Three days later, the researcher requested them again to list the competencies they had acquired during the facilitation of the course. The final list was requested at the end of the semester, asking them to identify competencies they still needed to acquire to ensure they managed their work with confidence and performed efficaciously. Data were collected at different times to give the TAs space and time to think of competencies acquired at different periods while facilitating the course.

E-mail interviewing helps the researcher to reach people who are not easily accessible and/or are geographically far apart and it is cost effective (Meho, 2006) too. The qualitative e-mail interviews were preferred because the strategy was convenient for both the TAs and the coordinator of the module as they were able to exchange multiple e-mails. The exchanges and e-mail interaction took three weeks, an asynchronous exchange. The e-mail interview process provided in-depth information, which was freely volunteered, was not shared with, viewed or influenced by other participants.

All TAs involved in this course are responsible for assessing students work, providing feedback, guiding them on how to go about each assignment and the learning units. Learning units consist of the content, activities, tasks and all information about the module. It is their responsibility to encourage students to participate in online discussions and encourage them to submit all assignments throughout the course.

DATA ANALYSIS

The qualitative data were organised by codes. From the initial codes a list of categories was grouped under higher order headings. This reduced the number of categories so that similar or dissimilar categories could be together (Burnard, 1991; Neal, Neal, VanDyke and Kornbluh, 2015). Finally, abstraction by means of formulating a general description of the topic or question was performed. Categories were named by using content-characteristic words. In the first phase, the data were categorised into three sections, in terms of competencies – *Before*, *During* and *Still to acquire***.**

During the second phase, the observations and online interviews with the TAs were analysed by theme and these data fed into the categorisation and process of abstraction, which informs the discussion. In phase three the competencies as identified in the literature, namely, pedagogical, technical, psycho-social and managerial (as a summary) (Goga, 2010), and emotional appeared in the responses of the TAs. The listed competencies related to the tasks TAs performed in the online course. The observations of the researcher confirmed what the TAs said.

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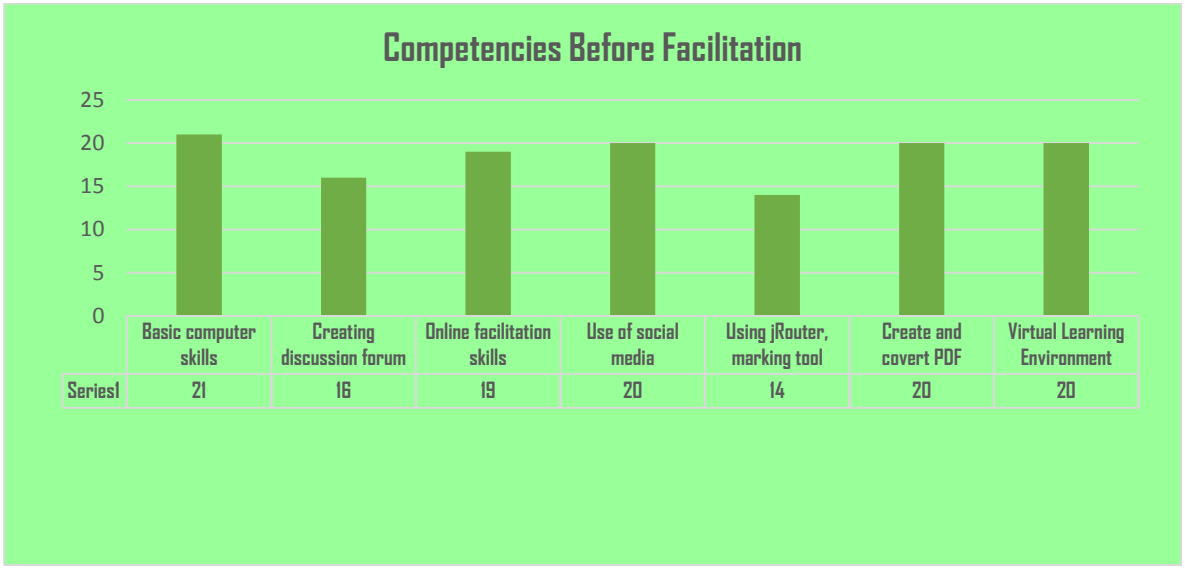
RESEARCH FINDINGS

The results of the data analysis are divided into three sections, namely prior skills, competencies expanded during engagement with the module, competencies still to acquire (Charts 1, 2 and 3 illustrate the competencies at various stages.)

i) Prior skills

From their PoEs submitted after 2 months of training by the researcher, following the training, it was evident the TAs had computer skills and this was a requirement to be competent in the use of internet, e-mails, social media and Microsoft tools such as PowerPoint and Excel. One of the TAs also showed knowledge of Virtual Learning Environments (VLE) but did not elaborate. A VLE is distinguished from a computer micro world. In the latter students as individuals are said to inhabit a self-contained computer-based learning environment. In contrast, in a classroom-based learning environment technology are used as tools to support classroom activities. One of the TAs said in an email, "I offer computer courses at my school; I therefore have the knowledge and skills as far as this are [sic] concerned". The TAs all had a background in education, understanding what it meant to be a professional teacher and familiar with marking and assessing students' work. The TAs admitted to relying heavily on their face-to-face classroom teaching experience. None distinguished between technology as a tool in a classroom context and the self-contained computer-based learning environment of the programme. Some were familiar with discussion forums. About half of them felt they were competent in facilitating learning, using social media and online marking tools. Most were unfamiliar with rubrics. None was familiar with low and high context communication and learning, nor had they reflected on changing their strategies to suit the new environment.

Chart 1: Competencies before Facilitation



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ii) Competencies Expanded during Engagement with The Module

Inquiring about the TAs' tacit professional "frames" (Kinsella, 2008) and whether they had made them conscious in their professional practice, there was evidence that they had begun to think about their pedagogical skills - respecting diverse learning abilities, assessing student work, encouraging active learning. Whether there was a consciousness about these competencies in relation to the higher order of strategies was not clear.

In terms of technical skills their previous competence in using computer programmes and the internet programmes served them well in using the jrouter, the assignment marking tool software and the Grade book. The gradebook is an online portal used by TA and lecturers to report and record discussion marks for students. The TAs reported that they had become more confident in technical (creating PDFs) and pedagogical (respecting diverse learning abilities, assessing student work, encouraging active learning) competencies. Scaffolding style of learning took place.

Whatever their strategies were in the new pedagogical environment, and they appeared to be various - according to habit, disposition towards change, personality, background, socio-cultural attitude to learning - the socialisation process happened at different rates and in different ways. For example, interaction between TAs and the coordinator were frequent in the beginning as many TAs were unsure of what to do and asking questions like “How do I create a discussion forum or is it my responsibility to encourage students to participate in social media?" However, with time communication improved and were able to provide feedback to student without seeking confirmation to the coordinator of colleagues. They were able to guide students to interact with the module.

Their awareness of their teaching presence increased. They could give prompt feedback (guiding) so as not to lose touch with the students - an especially important response in the low context communication environment of online teaching. Another such competency was posting announcements prior to the beginning of each unit. Enforcing netiquette in the online environment was a competency to support low context communication as the language itself must carry meaning and the goal of the communication is the focus. Because opinions, ideas and information are exchanged in low context communication, netiquette is valued. Privacy is important, this is another feature student had to acknowledge through appropriate language use, and the TAs learned to manage students' interactions. Given that the BPT programme lasts only seventeen weeks and this time is curtailed by administrative hitches, the rapidity with which the TAs had to adjust to the new learning environment was consonant with low context communication. They reported that they rapidly needed to acquire the role of leader in leading and controlling online discussions, facilitating complex online communication and being in constant contact with students and faculty. From thinking about classes as the recipients of teaching, they had to arrange groups for online collaboration with each other and themselves to develop a teaching presence in the CoI.

The interactions of the TAs with students had improved and they were encouraging students to participate in discussion forums, motivating, supporting their social and emotional well-being, and so establishing social/emotional presence. In an e-mail exchange, a TA said, “I started as an empty vessel in the first semester and I had to learn on the job". Another TA said, “I am now confident, this has given me the skills and knowledge and I understand my role as an online facilitator”. The coordinator of the module can verify that the TAs after the first semester had developed more competencies because she received fewer questions related to

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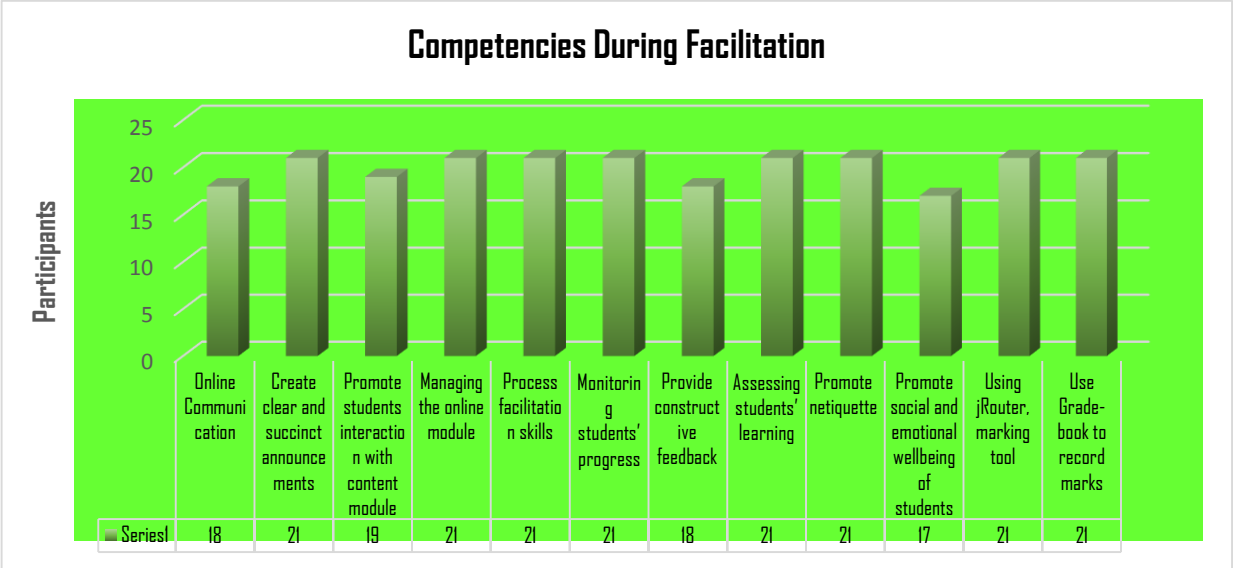
their uncertainty. The coordinator understood this as an increase in the confidence of the TAs towards greater competence.

Chart 2: Expanded Competencies



iii) Competencies to Acquire

For most of the TAs still-to-acquire, competencies were not skills, which did not exist, but rather competencies they were not confident in and felt they needed guidance. In terms of technological competencies, the TAs struggled with corrupt files, a quicker way of using the jrouter for marking (an inconsistent system at the institution), learning the process of sending student marks to the outbox to the student system, posting announcements to all the groups at the same time. Pedagogical competencies still to be acquired were in terms of giving individual rather than general feedback as the numbers and time constraints were difficult. They needed easier ways and/or less time-consuming strategies of marking and posting discussions and being prompt to reply.

Social and emotional competencies to develop were described as the skill of reaching out to students. Managerial competencies still to acquire were related to ways to encourage students to read announcements.

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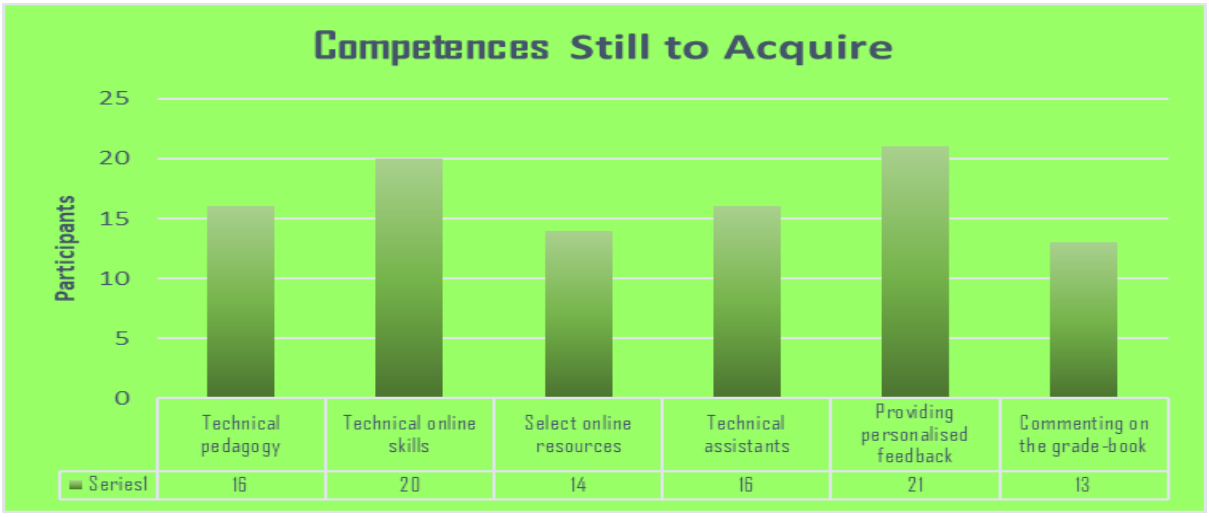
Chart 3: Competences to Acquire



DISCUSSION

Taking the CoI illustrated in Figure 1, as a starting point, the educational experience facilitated by the TAs for their students was supported by their teaching presence as they facilitated, led and controlled complex online discussions by developing the competencies they had. At least half of the TAs had reported that they came into the programme with the competency of facilitating learning although it was face-to-face. The TAs' educational background and teaching experience played a significant role in understanding that they had themselves become learners as they facilitated the module. Confident of their earlier attained pedagogical skills, the TAs approached the students' and their own interactions at technical and psychosocial levels as the Table 1 reveals in the second column with a typical mix of several levels at the same time. For instance, although the first column shows primarily technical expertise competencies, the second column has comments like, "motivate and support the social and emotional well-being", along with PDF creation and the use of online marking skills.

Communication emerged as a theme of importance and that paradoxically, despite the numerous ways used to communicate. Behind the generalisations expressed in column three, "Reaching out to students", "communicate with students and faculty" set in the midst of practical issues such as posting announcements simultaneously, and "ways to open corrupt files", is a real pedagogical issue well disguised. That issue is the felt need to overcome the distance and interact directly as in face-to-face teaching and learning. This is reinforced by an example from column two about the competencies acquired during the course, namely, "motivate and support the social and emotional well-being", "encourage active learning". The cognitive presence in the CoI, is marked by twenty of the twenty-one participants and shows they were beginning to recognise that a strategy change was needed to induce deep learning, even though it was stated in the language of competencies/skills.

As the module is fully online, marking is also conducted online as indicated earlier. However, marking is sometimes delayed by myUNISA going offline, which affects the marking process of TAs. The inconsistent and unavailability of the jRouter has the ripple effect. It delays marking as TAs have to wait until the system is restored, marks cannot be sent to the outbox to allow students to view their progress or how they performed in a particular assignment.

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CONCLUSION

The TAs who facilitated the BPT programme had tacit assumptions about the pedagogy they would use in the online environment. In order to help both the TAs and their trainer, the researcher conducted this initial research with its focus on the skills/competencies needed to inquire into the larger question about their teaching practices in an online environment. Adaptation, modification and deconstruction of teaching practices require change, which takes time and reflection. In low context communication environments that change is expected to be rapid. The rapidity of change is dependent on socio-cognitive and socio-affective development of the persons who must change. The TAs showed a rapidly changing response to the e-learning environment.

Setting the discussion of competencies of e-facilitators in the context of the three presences teaching, social and cognitive needed for a CoI with good learning outcomes for the students, was a means of amplifying the significance of the listings of competencies in the literature. The sample of twenty-one participants was too small and would need to be greatly increased to begin to make generalisations. As a first step in a addressing the need for wider discussion on the pedagogy of online teachers, the area of competencies was a solid beginning. Impelled by the constraints of time, distance and huge numbers of students, for the TAs to start reflecting on their strategies of teaching, a suitably simple beginning was at the level of tangible competencies.

The pedagogical shifts needed amongst the teachers of students who go into the profession of teaching is merely one of an enormous number of areas in which interventions are needed to ensure that top rate teachers emerge from the university to undertake their daunting tasks.

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