

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Developing advising pedagogy through self-study: An innovative approach to professional growth

Kuvandudza dzidziso yekurayira vadzidzi vemayunivhesiti
kuburikidza nekuzviwongorora pabasa: Zhiratsva yekukudza
unyanzvi bwomurayiri

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ABSTRACT

In this study, we explored the potential of self-study methodology in facilitating academic advisor professional growth. Despite its extensive use in teacher education, to our knowledge, self-study is yet to be applied to academic advising. An academic advisor documented her advising experiences over a twelve-year period. Guided by the tenets of self-study, the academic advisor in collaboration with a critical friend, critically examined her experiences. The self-study methodology created space for intentional and systematic examination of the advisor's practice, a process that has led to the emergence of innovations in her practice. These innovations included deeper engagement with students' curricular structures, their sociocultural contexts, and individual learning habits. The advisor's practice evolved from a generic, one-size-fits-all model to a more contextualised and relational pedagogy grounded in pedagogical content knowledge (PCK). This study highlights how intentional reflection on disorienting dilemmas and practitioner knowledge enabled the academic advisor to personalise support and foster student agency. It further illustrates the value of relationality in advising, where learning is co-constructed rather than prescribed. Ultimately, this research confirms the transformative potential of self-study in academic advisor professional development.

KEYWORDS

Academic advising innovations, advising pedagogy, professional growth, self-study

PFUPISO YETSVAKURUDZO

Mutsvakurudzo iyi, takawongorora mikana iripo mukusimudzira kukura kwehunyanzvi hwemurayiri wevadzidzi vamayunivhesiti (academic advisor) kungagoneswa nekushandisa

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nzira yekuzviwongorora pabasa (selfstudy). Kunyangwe nzira iyi ichizivikanwa uye ichishandiswa zvakananya mudzidzo yevadzidzisi (teacher education), sekuziva kwedu, haisati yashandiswa zvakadai pamaitiro okurayira vadzidzivemayunivhesiti. Mutsvakurudzo ino, murayiri mumwe chete wakanyora nhorowondo yezviitiko zvekurayira vadzidzi veyunivesiti kwaakayitamukati memakore gumi nemaviri. Achishanda pamwe chete nasahwira unokurudzira kuwongorora kwakadzama (critical friend), sezvinotarisirwa kana munhu achiwongorora mashandiro ake, murayiri uyu wakawongorora zviitiko izvi. Kuzviwongorora kwemurayiri uyu kwakapa mukana wekutarisisa marayiri aayiita vadzidzi vake nenzira ine chinangwa uye yakarongeka. Izvi zvakabudisa mawonero nemayitiro matsva mukuraira kwake. Mayitiro matsva awa ayisanganisira kuwedzera kuda kuhwisira marongerwo edzidzo dzevadzidzi, magariro netsika dzavo (sociocultural contexts), pamwe chete nezhiba dzokudzidza kumwe noumwe wavo. Nokuda kwemawonero matsva awa, kurayira kwake kwakashanduka kubva pakupa vadzidzi rayiro yakafanana, kuenda kurayiro inofanirana nemudzidzi umwe noumwe, uye inovaka vukama pakati pomurayiri nomudzidzi. Kurayira kutsa uku kwayitsigirwa neruzivo rwemadzidzisirwo ezvidzidzo runonzi pedagogical content knowledge (PCK). Tsvakurudzo iyi inoratidza kuti kuwongorora zvakadzika zviyitiko zvaayisangana nazvo mukuita basa zuva nezuva nenzira yakarongeka kwakabatsira murayiri uyu kugadzirisa rayiro yaanopa vadzidzi uye kusimbisa kuzvimirira kwavo mukudzidza. Zvakare, tsvakurudzo iyi inoratidza kukosha kwekurayira kunotanga nokuvaka vukama pakati pemurayiri nemudzidzi, uye kunobuda mukutaurirana kwavo vari vaviri, kwete kurayira kunogobva kumurairi. Pakupedzisira, tsvakurudzo iyi inobudisa simba rokushandura nokusimudzira unyanzvi hwemurayiri riri mukuzviwongorora pabasa.

MANZWI MAKURU

Vandudzo yekurayirwa kwevadzidzi vemayunivhesiti, dzidziso yekurayira, kukura kwehunyanzvi hwekurayira, kuzviwongorora pabasa (selfstudy)

Introduction

This article reports on a self-study in which I, Constance, reflect on my twelve-year journey as an academic development practitioner for undergraduate students. In keeping with the self-study methodology, I use the first-person singular (I) to relate my experiences and, Eunice, (second author) is a critical friend. Together, we highlight the innovations that came up through collective critical reflections (Jacoby, 2024; Mezirow, 2009) on my day-to-day encounters with students during learning skills development sessions. I was first appointed as a Learning Skills Lecturer in 2013. My role involved teaching learning skills through both class-based sessions, small group, and individual consultations. In 2014, I was re-appointed with a new title of At-Risk Coordinator. The new appointment was part of the university's plan to establish and develop teaching and learning centres that would track and support first year students, specifically, those who would have been identified as at academic risk. Further, in 2018, the title of At-Risk Coordinator was changed to Academic Advisor, which is the term found in the literature to refer to student academic development practitioners

(e.g. De Klerk, 2021; Moosa, 2021). As can be seen, my role underwent three title changes in five years. However, in all the three roles, I provided the same student academic development service which has now run a course of twelve years.

Larson et al. (2018) define academic advising as applying “knowledge of the field to empower students and campus and community members to successfully navigate academic interactions related to higher education” (Larson et al., 2018, p. 86). Academic advisors help students navigate their curriculum and the requirements of their institutions. In the words of Wei (2022, p. 53), academic advisors help students “understand the meaning and value of education, the logic of the curriculum and their intellectual identities.”

Both local (e.g. De Klerk, 2021; Moodley & Singh, 2015; Tiroyabone & Strydom, 2021) and international literature (e.g. Drake, 2011; McGill, 2021), suggest that academic advising plays a critical role in student retention, satisfaction, and success. Even in South Africa, academic advising is not just another university function, but a social justice imperative (Moosa, 2021; Tiroyabone & Strydom, 2021). This is because successful completion by students, especially by those from low socio-economic backgrounds, is not just individual success but a success of the collective that changes the socio-economic circumstances and prospects of families and communities (Kilfoil, 2021). This is more so for health science students from rural communities, as successful completion by these students, from a social responsibility perspective, has the potential to add to the much-needed rural-based healthcare workforce (Mapukata, 2022).

As indicated earlier, the literature shows that the important role played by academic advising in improving the success chances of higher education students is already known both in South Africa and elsewhere in the world. What needs further exploration, is how academic advisors can track their own growth and development given their third-space positions (Whitchurch, 2015), which may not yet be in the regular professional growth opportunities and frameworks for universities. In this article, we explore the value of the self-study methodology as an approach to track an academic advisor’s professional growth, with a view to develop transformative academic advising practices. While self-study is widely used and promoted, and its value in education and teacher education is well known (see Samaras, 2011; Nyamupangedengu, 2024), to our knowledge, this method of inquiry is yet to be used in academic advising in South Africa. Our study, therefore, adds to the emerging South African literature on academic advising and will specifically contribute towards context-based advising approaches. The questions that guided this study are:

1. What is the potential of self-study methodology in facilitating academic advisor professional growth?
2. What innovations were brought about by critical reflections on my academic advising practices?

The methodology of self-study

Self-study is a study of the self by the self (Samaras, 2011). It is a form of practitioner research in which the researcher is also the subject of investigation; it involves the practitioner’s personal stories drawn from their own experiences often stemming from the challenges, frustrations, and dilemmas encountered in their respective fields

(Nyamupangedengu, 2024). In this study, Constance was the practitioner who reflected on her academic advising practices. She was the researcher and the participant, and Eunice was her critical friend as indicated earlier. This mutual critical friendship began as far back as 2012 when both of us were doctoral students and has continued to the present day (see Nyamupangedengu & Khupe, 2021). Initially, it was focused on Eunice's practice (as a self-study scholar). Then Constance also joined into the habit of journaling her experiences and holding ad hoc conversations about her academic advising experiences (including fears, doubts, dilemmas, dissatisfactions, puzzles and excitements, learnings and successes).

This practice was initially not intended for research, but to develop her professional practice. It was only after a few publications based on Eunice's practice (see Nyamupangedengu & Khupe, 2018, 2021, 2022, 2024) that Constance suggested applying the self-study methodology to her practice of academic advising; her many journal entries and reflections became the foundational data for this article. The study adhered to the ethical standards of self-study by critically reflecting on Constance's academic advising with a critical friend and interacting with the relevant literature (LaBoskey, 2004). According to LaBoskey (2004, p. 821), the interactive process "guards against the inevitable limitations of individual interpretation so affected by personal history." In addition, Constance's narratives provided exemplars of her academic advising practices. These exemplars are presented as exhibits to allow members of the academic advising and research community to judge the trustworthiness and validity of the observations and interpretations for themselves (LaBoskey, 2004).

In self-study, a critical friend is someone who can listen to a researcher's account of practice and critique the researcher's thinking and practices behind that account. Samaras (2011) describes critical friends as trusted peers who play a vital role in mediating, challenging, and supporting the development of new insights. Inviting colleagues to act as critical friends and engage in reflective dialogue about one's practice is central to the self-study methodology and ethical considerations as indicated above. This collaborative engagement not only broadens the scope of individual reflection but also mitigates personal bias and enriches professional growth through shared perspectives (Nyamupangedengu, 2024). Critical friendship in self-study requires extended time investment, which in our case was enabled by a relationship that extended beyond the limits of our professional lives. What began as a professional relationship became a social relationship, and that also created and sustained the dimension of mutual trust.

Another tenet of the self-study approach is that it draws from other methodologies to gain broader perspectives. In this study, therefore, we drew from narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Chand, 2024) and reflective practice. Narrative is a mode of inquiry that involves an intentional reflective process, allowing individuals to tell the story of their experiences through reflection (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Constance developed narratives composed of memories, experiences, knowledge, and reflections of her 12-year journey of academic advising. Through narrative, she actively constructed what Johnson and Golombek (2002) referred to as life stories. Below we describe the steps that we took to generate the narratives.

Generation of narratives

Generation of narratives involved reading Constance's journal entries and reflecting on them. We read through 23 journal entries and categorised them according to their content. We identified four broad categories, namely: (1) the necessity of teaching students how to learn, (2) novice practice, (3) planning a new course of action, and (4) what's in a name? Guided by these journal entry categories, Constance wrote the narratives. In addition to these categories, our reflections illuminated the subtle presence of components of pedagogical content knowledge (PCK), a construct that was introduced by Shulman (1986) to describe domains of teacher professional knowledge (Shulman, 1987). The domains are content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, knowledge of students, knowledge of context, knowledge of the curriculum, and knowledge of assessment (Rollnick et al., 2008; Carlson et al., 2019). Rollnick et al. (2008) and Carlson et al. (2019) explain these domains in detail.

Data analysis

Data for this study were examined through narrative analysis, a qualitative method that focuses on the individual as a unit of analysis (Josselson & Hammack, 2021). We read through Constance's narratives, exploring how she made meaning of her experiences rather than merely focusing on the description of the text. We wanted to understand and reflect on the meanings conveyed by the content of her narratives in the context of Constance's sociocultural and historical background. During the critical reflections, we would document insights and lessons learnt based on the meanings conveyed in the content. The idea was to track aspects of Constance's professional development that were enhanced by the tenets of the self-study methodology. We present these narratives below. While the narratives may sound informal, they are to be read as the participant's reflection on her experiences.

Narrative 1: Do university students need to be taught how to learn?

I started as a Learning Skills Lecturer in 2013. At the time of this appointment, I boasted twenty-four years of high school teaching and teacher education. Similar to my previous experiences in teacher education, I did not receive any training specific to this new role. However, unlike in teacher education where I had a professional learning community (Brodie, 2016), at that time, my faculty was the only one that supported students in this way. Therefore, I did not have a community through which to benchmark my practice, or more realistically, to share my ignorance, challenges, and fears. I had no background in health sciences. An added dilemma was that I was not even entirely convinced that university students needed to be *taught* how to learn (which I thought at that time was my role – teaching students to learn) when they had already reached university level. Besides, health sciences students are generally known to be the 'smart' ones; so, I assumed they had to be able to manage on their own. However, since I needed a job and I had gotten one, I resolved to – as it were – dance to its tune. Therefore, to plan my sessions, I searched the World Wide Web for ideas about the learning skills that undergraduate students would potentially require. I was surprised by the results of my

online searches. Some universities had whole web pages dedicated to student support, covering aspects such as study skills, time management, preparation for examinations, and other life skills. I even ended up stumbling upon books on the subject.

Insights: Initially, Constance had no knowledge of content, hence the search for content on the World Wide Web. In addition, her knowledge of the students was based on assumptions.

Lessons learnt: Drawing from this narrative, a learning skills practitioner needs to have the content and student knowledge domains of PCK. The learning skills practitioner's 'community' does not necessarily need to be only physical beings. We can engage with a scholarly community through literature and other online resources.

Narrative 2: Novice practice

My responsibilities involved serving students enrolled in seven degree programmes whose minimum completion times ranged between three and six years. As would be expected, the curricula differed by degree programme and year of study. However, I gave much the same advice to all students who came to me. Apart from those students who presented with psychosocial challenges and whom I referred for therapy, most students indicated that they had difficulties managing their workloads: days were long, there was too much content to learn and too many tasks to do. Many reported rushing through assignments, hardly ever feeling ready for tests and examinations, and being tempted to memorise stuff. I assumed that my students did not know how to study effectively and that they did not use time wisely.

Therefore, my interventions focused on addressing these ills by giving 'how-to' guides on organising study time and studying efficiently. Not once did it occur to me that just being in different degrees or years of study resulted in differences in the micro-contexts, in how students' days were structured, and in the curricula demands placed on them. Moreover, the students came from different schooling and socio-economic backgrounds, all of which could affect how they learn. While some students had the courage to point out what did not apply to them, others just sat through it all, probably out of politeness. And there were also those students who ticked all the right boxes but still felt overwhelmed by their workloads. At that point, not only did I begin to properly appreciate the large number of students who required help, but also my own lack of depth to assist them.

Facing my inadequacy was one thing; admitting it was humbling. I faced the disorienting dilemma (Mezirow, 2009) of either presuming the pride ascribed to me by appointment as a Learning Skills Lecturer, or symbolically falling on my sword, to allow for the transformation of my practice for the benefit of my students. This professional hard place motivated me to seek help. I shared my dilemmas with Eunice, whose work is based on self-study methodology. She reminded me of the importance of what I had already known from my teaching days: that it was not only content knowledge that was important. Knowing my students and their context was just as important in informing the ways of my advising. She reminded me how one size does not fit all. This and ensuing conversations with Eunice triggered a more conscious awareness of what was missing in my practice. I was motivated to explore and try out new approaches; I then started drawing on my knowledge and experience in teacher education.

Insights: This narrative shows that Constance lacked knowledge of students' curriculum and their micro-contexts, as well as pedagogical knowledge. The narrative also shows that Constance began to critically reflect on her practice, a process that revealed shortcomings. Her reaching out to Eunice points to the 'safe space' that critical friendship in self-study creates.

Lessons learnt: This narrative shows how more domains of teacher professional knowledge are critical in informing learning skills practitioners' practice. Learning skills development cannot be facilitated apart from pedagogical content knowledge. The self-study methodology is critical in enhancing individual as well as collective critical reflection and professional learning within a community.

Narrative 3: Planning a new course of action

After being challenged from the discussions with my critical friend, I began to prioritise learning about my students and their different curricula.

(a) Learning about the students' curricula

Following conversations with Eunice, I realised that the opportunities for learning were already present in the faculty, since I was a member of various curriculum committees. I just needed to be more intentional. I therefore leveraged my committee membership to make more collaborative connections with colleagues who taught and/or coordinated different courses. I requested course documents to learn about how the courses were organised, what information was available for students; what the expectations of students were, and what support was available within the teaching departments.

I got a better idea of the curriculum structures for the different degree programmes and for different years of study. I began to appreciate the varying teaching calendars, assessment schedules, as well as clinical requirements from the range of stakeholders who contributed to the total requirements for students. Some first-year classes had courses offered by three other faculties. Students had to adjust to the different ways in which the courses were organised, taught and assessed. I began to look for and tried to make sense of the timetables for different classes to have a sense of the structure of their school days. Most classes had full timetables with hardly any breathers. The collaboration with different teaching colleagues was educative. Apart from having a better understanding of students' workloads, I was now better positioned to understand students' learning-skill strengths and needs. I became informed enough to ensure that I was able to point students to relevant resources and to keep them accountable for their own role in learning.

Insights: In this narrative, we see Constance's intentional quest to learn about and use her knowledge of students, their context, curriculum and assessment in her practice – all of which are PCK domains. In addition, we see her intentionally interacting with colleagues in teaching departments who feed into her role in teaching learning skills.

Lessons learnt: As an Academic Advisor, Constance occupies a strategic position in connecting students to different facets of their curriculum (Darling, 2015; Moosa, 2021; Whitchurch, 2015), thereby actively contributing to their engagement. The academic advisor role requires knowledge of the various PCK domains and, as Tinto (2014) advises, student success cannot be left to chance.

(b) Learning about students – Breaking the ice

Although I could broadly get a sense of who my students were from their biographical data, I felt that the data would not be an adequate basis for understanding how they learnt and the extent of the help that they might need. Understanding who my students were within the teaching and learning space required a bit more strategy than just understanding their curricula. I therefore decided to use the one-on-one sessions to better understand my students' strengths and needs. Below are some of the strategies that I used. These strategies have become part of my repertoire over the years.

I began using the greetings more intentionally to connect with the students rather than simply as a polite gesture. I addressed them by name, in both emails and face-to-face encounters. I even began asking the meanings of their names, what language they spoke at home and outside class. My intention was to have each session be as conversational as possible. The small talk often invited a smile, or even a comment (later) from the student on how comfortable they felt in the session.

Insights: From this narrative, we see Constance applying her growing consciousness of the importance of knowledge of students. The foundational work of initiating conversations through greetings and personalising the session helped her not only to understand the sociocultural dimensions of students but also created a relaxed advising environment for them.

Lesson learnt: We are social, relational beings. Learning skills development should not be a technical exercise but a doubly relational one which connects the students to their sociocultural selves and to the university.

(c) Digging deeper

Only after understanding the student's sociocultural context would I find out what had brought them to me. I would listen to their account and seek any necessary clarifications. I would then follow up on their responses with more probing questions that encouraged students to identify strengths and weaknesses in their behavioural habits (learning, social, health) and what they could do better or differently (see Ndofirepi & Khupe, 2022). By using probing questions and follow-up prompts in my conversations with the students, I realised that I was facilitating students' self-reflection (Ndofirepi & Khupe, 2022). In many cases, I noticed that the students would realise that learning was not just a result of what teachers do, but also how the students themselves prepared for and responded to different learning opportunities.

Through this facilitated self-reflection, students often realised that what they initially described as the challenge they were facing, actually was a symptom of something else (Ndofirepi & Khupe, 2022). For example, feeling overwhelmed by their academic workload could be caused by bad sleeping habits. Unless the sleeping habits were addressed, no amount of study tips would solve the problem. This process helped me to understand students individually in terms of how they perceived their own challenges and how they approached their learning. I was now able to facilitate personalised learning skills development. For both me and the students, the sessions ended up not being about

giving and receiving advice but about illuminating the real causes that hid behind the usual ‘time management’ or ‘study skills’ problems.

Insights: In this narrative, the learning skills sessions transformed from being prescriptive to being a space in which to facilitate reflection.

Lessons learnt: When students understand the underlying causes of their manifesting challenges, they are more likely to be better able to address them effectively. Students can be encouraged to share their study habits during the learning skills session by using probing questions and follow-up prompts. This process creates a space for them to discover strengths in their behavioural habits and areas that require improvement. In this way, students develop action plans. When action plans are informed by the identified strengths and weaknesses, students develop a greater sense of ownership and are more likely to implement those plans and monitor their own progress.

Narrative 4: Learning about my role: What’s in a name?

(a) Learning skills lecturer

At a time when I had no content knowledge for my Learning Skills Lecturer role, I used the title itself to craft phrases for searching for appropriate content, for example “learning skills”, “learning skills for university students”, and “learning skills for higher education”. The results that I got from the search engines were therefore directly linked to my perception of the position in which I was appointed. Additionally, I understood being a “lecturer” to mean that I was more knowledgeable than my students. My perception of that title influenced both the *what* and the *how* of my teaching.

(b) At-risk coordinator

This position was created in line with the University’s aim to strengthen first-year support and retention. My new responsibilities involved the use of the university’s early warning system to track students with identified risk factors and to require their participation in appropriate interventions. From the onset, I resented this title. I did not like the labelling and deficit perspective that it implied. “At risk” is a common description in student success literature and is often defined in terms of low socio-economic characteristics and academic un(der)preparedness; therefore, it leads to low achievement and low persistence (see Bulger & Watson, 2006; Wahl & Falik, 2023). I could not help interpreting the terminology of “early warning systems” (which are only accessible to staff and not to students) to be symbolic of early warnings about natural disasters such as tropical cyclones, where the students represent the cyclone potentially threatening the university community.

(c) Academic advisor

When my university officially adopted the term academic advisor, I was very happy. It could have been the desperate desire to escape from the title of ‘At-risk Coordinator’. Without giving any thought to it, I decided that this was a great title and I readily embraced the change. However, in recent months, and because of my continued reflections, I have experienced a disorienting thought about whether the new title aligns with my practice at all. This title of Academic Advisor, which we adopted from the Global North, does not seem

to fully align with my developing understanding of my role, which is that of *facilitating* rather than *advising*.

Insight: This narrative shows the job titles that Constance had in her twelve years of advising influenced the interpretation of what she was supposed to do until she became fully immersed in reflective practice facilitated through self-study.

Lessons learnt: We should not take job titles at face value. Context matters; therefore, reflective practice through self-study should inform our roles and responsibilities within the job titles.

Learnings for practitioners

This study demonstrates the transformative potential of self-study methodology in advancing academic advising practice. Through sustained critical reflection and collaboration with a critical friend (Samaras, 2011; Nyamupangedengu, 2024), Constance shifted from a generalised, deficit-based approach to a more contextualised, personalised, relational, and student-centred model of academic advising. Eunice's knowledge and use of PCK (Rollnick et al., 2008) during conversations with Constance provided a language and framework that guided the understanding of Constance's professional development from the time that she immersed herself in self-study. For example, in her narratives, Constance started to refer to the importance of knowing students, context, content, curriculum, and pedagogical strategies. Therefore, we contend that PCK can be a useful framework within which to develop academic advising.

Drawing on narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Chand, 2024) and reflective practice (Fontaine & Wolfe, 2024), the study revealed how innovations in practice have emerged, not from formal training but from critically engaging with disorienting dilemmas (Mezirow, 2009), practitioner knowledge (Rollnick et al., 2008), and scholarly resources as professional learning communities.

Eunice witnessed key shifts in Constance's practice, including (but not limited to): recognising the diversity of students' curricular and sociocultural contexts; embedding pedagogical content knowledge into advising; and using one-on-one sessions to facilitate student self-reflection rather than simply delivering advice. These innovations illustrate the potential for professional growth that occurs when practitioners come together in collaborative critical reflection (Lubbe & Botha, 2020). However, such a collaborative critical reflection requires a willingness to be professionally vulnerable as practitioners acknowledge and allow for the interrogation of their knowledge gaps and assumptions, first by their critical friend and then followed by the professional community at large (Cuenca, 2020).

Additionally, the study highlights how job title conventions subtly shape practice and identity. In this study, the titles *Learning Skills Lecturer*, *At-risk Coordinator*, and *Academic Advisor* each carried implicit pedagogical assumptions that influenced Constance's engagement with students and institutional stakeholders. As Hamilton et al. (2025) argue, academic naming practices have pedagogical significance and can signal how institutions view students and how practitioners conceptualise their roles.

In sum, self-study served as a generative methodology to enhance advising pedagogy, aligning it with students' realities and repositioning academic advising as a relational, reflexive, and transformative practice.

Ethics statement

The authors confirm that university ethics requirements were met in the writing of this article.

Potential conflict of interests

The authors have no conflict of interests to declare.

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