ADDRESSING THE LEARNING NEEDS OF AT-RISK STUDENTS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF THE WESTERN CAPE

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ABSTRACT
This article reports on the findings of an action research pilot project called One-by-One. Six first-year students in the extended curriculum programme (ECP) at the University of the Western Cape (UWC), Bellville, South Africa, were mentored, supported and closely monitored during 2011 to overcome their low morale and fear of failure. The article draws on motivation theories, social theories of learning and student learning theories as the theoretical framework. These theories assisted with the focus of the project which was on developing and strengthening the students’ personal and collective agency capabilities. Data was collected through a questionnaire, written reflective journal entries and discussions in one-on-one mentoring and group workshop sessions. The significance of the project lies in the fact that it provided the staff with practical steps on how to develop and strengthen the students’ perceived self-efficacy in the learning process.
Keywords: cooperative learning, extended curriculum programme, first-year students, self-efficacy, motivation, supportive learning environment

INTRODUCTION

Most universities have a central student-support service to help first-year students with the transition from high school to university and other challenges they may encounter in the course of their studies. Universities with a large undergraduate student population, however, may not necessarily have the capacity to accommodate the vast number of students coming from diverse, social, cultural and economically under-resourced backgrounds (CHE 2009, 2010). Student support, retention and successful completion are important factors in the Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences (EMS) at the University of the Western Cape (UWC), Bellville, South Africa, where the majority of the undergraduate students are black South Africans. It was for these reasons that the previous dean of the faculty established an EMS Student Support and Research Unit (ESSRU) in 2006 with two full-time contract staff members. The mandate was and is to provide additional academic and moral support to all the first-year students in the extended curriculum programme (ECP). The ESSRU staff must also track and work closely with students who are identified as being at-risk of failure during their first-year in the programme. It was envisaged that putting a tracking process in place would assist and support especially at-risk students through mentoring, and providing life and study skills workshops and extra tutorial support classes, thereby giving these students a better chance of success in the learning process. This mandate thus underscored the view of many researchers that successful learning for black student cohorts in higher education is of the utmost importance for the country and the future of the youth (CHE 2009; 2010; Letseka and Maile 2008; Scott 2009).

The vision of the ESSRU staff is to build and sustain a structure that acts as a catalyst for the improvement of the general well-being of students in a supportive and caring environment. Its infrastructure makes provision for the implementation of various interventions that aim to promote the potential and academic growth of first-year students in the ECP and in so doing, enhance the academic performance of the students (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt and Associates 2005; Strydom and Mentz 2010).

From previous experience, the ESSRU staff knew that the students in the ECP not only needed extra tutorial support classes, but that they needed support with regard to their personal development and self-efficacy. However, the fact that students require this kind of support is not new. Many higher education institutions (HEIs), both nationally and internationally, recognise this need and are attempting to address it by providing first-year courses that focus on the students’ transition from high school as well as issues concerning the students’ affective domain (Cox 2005;
Hunter and Linder 2003; Strydom and Mentz 2010; Upcraft, Gardner and Barefoot 2005).

This article reports on the findings of one such intervention introduced by the ESSRU staff in 2011, namely, an action research pilot project called One-by-One. The intervention was decided upon after two lecturers in the ECP, one from the Quantitative Skills for Accounting (QSA 131) module and another from the Accounting (ACC 130) module, contacted the ESSRU staff and requested them to track and work with students who had failed all their formative assessment tasks in these two modules at the end of Term 1, 2011. The students were therefore identified as at-risk students by the two lecturers, and they asked the ESSRU staff to intervene and provide additional support to the students. Although 39 students were identified as at-risk by the two lecturers, the ESSRU staff decided to use only six of them in the One-by-One pilot project. The six students were mentored, supported and closely monitored during the remaining three terms in 2011. They were assisted to overcome their fear of failure and self-doubt (among other challenges) through one-on-one mentoring sessions; attending group workshop sessions; and keeping a reflective writing diary. The intervention thus focused on the students’ personal development and personal well-being in the learning process.

The primary aim of the action research pilot project was to create a structure for students to work together in a supportive and caring learning environment in order to improve their academic performance. The objectives were to strengthen the students’ confidence and motivational levels (Biggs 1999; Keller 1987), as well as to promote communities of practice (Wenger 1998) among the students through peer interaction and cooperative learning principles. The hypothesis was that improvement in these two areas could build and strengthen the students’ personal development and self-efficacy. In turn, students could become self-regulating and take charge of their own learning so that they would be motivated to work harder and achieve success. The research question was: How could the students’ perceived self-efficacy be strengthened and enhanced in order to increase their chances of passing at the end of the academic year? The ESSRU staff hoped that the One-by-One pilot project would provide valuable insights into improving students’ academic performance as well as practical steps that they could use and build upon for the benefit of all first-year students in the ECPs.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In order to achieve the aim and objectives of the study, and to find answers to the research question, the researchers constructed a theoretical framework that would include self-awareness, group interaction and peer-to-peer engagement in a conducive learning environment. One of the theories used was Keller’s (1987) motivation theory which focuses on four steps in the learning process, namely: attention, relevance,
confidence and satisfaction. Keller (1987) explains that students’ attention could be kept through perceptual arousal, which uses surprise or uncertainty to gain interest; or through inquiry arousal by stimulating curiosity through posing challenging questions or problems to be solved. Relevance, he argues, could be established through the use of tangible language and relevant examples, in order to increase students’ level of motivation. Keller (1987) further suggests that students should have confidence in themselves and this could be achieved through motivating and encouraging them by setting feasible objectives, performance requirements and evaluation criteria for them, and allowing them to grow and develop at their own pace. Lastly, Keller (1987) explains that student satisfaction could be achieved through regular feedback, reinforcement and incentives. These, in turn, could strengthen the students’ intrinsic and extrinsic motivational levels.

Wenger’s (1998) social theory of learning was also used as part of the theoretical framework. Wenger (1998, 4) argues that ‘human beings are social beings and this fact is a central aspect of learning’. Furthermore, a social theory of learning is based upon four components, namely: ‘learning as belonging, learning as becoming, learning as experience, and learning as doing’ (Wenger 1998, 4). He explains that these components ‘are deeply interconnected and mutually defining’ and that is why he uses the concept ‘communities of practice’ (Wenger 1998, 5). He further explains that the concept ‘communities of practice’ includes, firstly, meaning making, which is a way of talking about people’s (changing) abilities (individually and collectively) to experience their life and the world as meaningful. Secondly, it includes ‘practice’, which is a way of talking about the shared historical and social resources, frameworks, and perspectives that can sustain mutual engagement in action. Thirdly, it includes ‘community’, which is a way of talking about the social configuration in which people’s enterprises are defined as worth pursuing and their participation is recognisable as competent. Lastly, the concept of ‘community of practice’ includes identity, which is a way of talking about how learning changes who people are, and creating personal histories of becoming in the context of their communities (Wenger 1998, 5).

Finally, the student learning principles of Killen (2005, 2010) and Kuh et al. (2005) were also included as part of the theoretical framework. Killen (2005; 2010) talks about nine principles of successful learning, which he adopted from Brandt (1998). Four of the nine principles are directly applicable to this project, namely: (i) learning is developmental; (ii) much learning occurs through social interaction; (iii) a positive emotional climate strengthens learning; and (iv) the total environment influences learning. Together with these principles, Kuh et al. (2005) identify five benchmarks of effective educational practices in their discussion of what makes successful learning possible. Two of the five benchmarks – collaborative learning, and a supportive and conducive learning environment – resonate with Killen’s learning principles, Keller’s (1987) motivation theory, and Wenger’s (1998) social theory of learning.
The theoretical framework described was applied in the analysis, discussion and interpretation of the data, and in the intervention process. Keller’s motivation theory was used to strengthen the students’ personal development and motivational levels in the one-on-one mentoring sessions, while Wenger’s concept of ‘community of practice’ and Kuh et al. and Killen’s learning principles were used to create a cooperative and supportive learning environment in the group discussions and workshop sessions. The environment created (one-on-one mentoring sessions and group workshop sessions) thus allowed students to talk openly about their challenges. Also, they could share both their intrinsic and extrinsic fears, and motivate and encourage one another, thereby forming their own community of practice.

**Research methodology**

The One-by-One pilot project was designed as an action research pilot project because the researchers wanted to embark on ‘an enquiry, undertaken with rigour and understanding, so as to constantly refine practice’ (Koshy 2005, 1). In addition, an action research design facilitates the creation of new knowledge, based on enquiries conducted within specific and often practical contexts (Koshy 2005; McNiff and Whitehead 2009). At-risk students in the ECP were in need of an intervention which could assist them in their daily lives as first-year students who found it challenging to succeed at university.

The application of action research, however, goes further than improving the students’ situation and behaviour. It also allows for critical reflection and improvement of the researcher’s own practice (McNiff and Whitehead 2009). Elliot (2009, 31) argues that ‘teachers have a central role in generating practically valid educational research findings that can be cast in the form of an education theory’. Action research, therefore, could assist staff to understand real-life issues, with which students struggle, and to find ways in which they could assist and support students. In addition, because it is based on a continuous cycle of planning, acting, observing and reflecting, action research also allows for the implementation of interventions, and the monitoring and evaluation of such interventions on a continuous basis (Elliot 2009; Koshy 2005). Lastly, action research allows the researcher to become a research practitioner who creates new knowledge of his/her practice (thereby generating theory from practice) and it enables the researcher to explain the significance of his/her research to others (Carr and Kemmis 1986; McNiff and Whitehead 2009).

Adhering to the principles of action research, a research problem was identified. It was based on the fact that 39 students had failed their formative assessment tasks, and were thus at-risk of failing at the end of the first semester as well as at the end of the year. The plan of action was as follows: firstly, the researchers would meet with the two lecturers in order for the latter to identify the challenges the students had with the modules; secondly, six of the 39 students would be randomly
selected and invited to participate in the pilot project that would attempt to assist and support them emotionally and socially to overcome their challenges to learning; and, thirdly, the intervention plan would start at the beginning of Term 2, 2011 and the six students would be provided with support structures. These would include extra tutorial classes, bi-weekly, group workshop sessions and bi-weekly, individual mentoring sessions with the ESSRU staff. In addition, the students were expected to keep a reflective writing journal.

The one-on-one mentoring sessions provided students with the opportunity to talk freely about their challenges and concerns, while the ESSRU staff could discuss and guide the students through Keller’s four steps of motivation. Writing about their fears and anxieties in their reflective journals enabled students to express and reflect on their feelings and experiences in the learning process. Also, sharing their thoughts with their fellow students assisted in the meaning-making process and in identifying their mutual/social connectedness and identity (Wenger’s community of practice). The group sessions also provided students with a safe and caring environment, cooperative learning experiences and peer support opportunities, as they could listen, encourage and learn from one another (Killen 2010; Kuh et al. 2005; Wenger 1998). An evaluation of their progress was done at the end of the first semester, and again at the end of the second semester.

The group of six students met regularly with the ESSRU staff – twice a month on a one-on-one basis, and twice a month as a group in workshop sessions. The students also remained in contact with the ESSRU staff through the regular completion of a personal tracking form. The students kept in touch with one another through e-mail, sms and facebook. Each student received a flip file containing goal-setting sheets, a personal goal profile guide, a personal tracking form, a reflective journal and reflective writing exercises. The purpose in providing each student with a file was for them to document their feelings and learning experiences, and to monitor their own progress and development as the process unfolded.

Data was collected through a questionnaire which the students completed at the beginning of the pilot project, and through their personal stories, fears and anxieties, which they wrote about in their reflective journals. These entries were shared and discussed in the regular mentoring and group workshop sessions.

It should be noted that all 39 students who were identified as at-risk received extra tutorial support classes, but the six students who were part of the pilot project received additional support (the bi-weekly individual mentoring and bi-weekly group workshop sessions, as well as the keeping of a reflective writing journal and staying connected through social media).
Analysis of data and discussion

At the first one-on-one meeting with an ESSRU staff member, each student completed a questionnaire which posed eight questions:

1. Which modules do you find challenging?
2. Are you coping with the workload?
3. What do you do when you get home?
4. Do you relax more than you work?
5. By when do you normally start preparing for tests?
6. Do you live a balanced lifestyle?
7. Do you miss home?
8. Do you set goals?

The first question was asked in order to identify the modules that students found challenging, while questions two to six were asked to ascertain if the students planned and managed their time in order to live a balanced lifestyle. A ‘balanced lifestyle’ in this context means that students are able to plan and manage their time in such a way that they can devote the necessary time to the six dimensions of wellness as defined by Dr Bill Hettler (1976) and promoted by the National Wellness Institute in the United States (US). These dimensions are: physical, emotional, social, intellectual, occupational and spiritual (National Wellness Institute 1977). Question seven was posed to identify whether or not the students felt lonely and the last question invited feedback on setting goals that would motivate them to action.

Questions two to six related to Keller’s four steps in the learning process as discussed in the theoretical framework. Attention and relevance would allow the students to plan their time carefully; to draw up different time-tables for specific actions (e.g. not only having a class timetable, but also having a time planner with the due dates for all their assignments and tests, a daily to-do list, a study timetable and a personal timetable for their physical, emotional and social dimensions). In addition, if the students were to plan and manage their time effectively, they would not perceive the workload as ‘heavy’, instead, it would help to strengthen their self-confidence and in so doing, allow them to be satisfied with their lives as students. These questions also related to three of Wenger’s four learning components, namely: (i) learning as becoming; (ii) learning as experience; and (iii) learning as doing. In applying effective planning and time management skills in their studies, the students are ‘becoming, experiencing and doing’ which also resonate with one of Killen’s principles, namely, that learning is developmental. Question six linked to Wenger’s learning as belonging, and to Killen’s positive emotional climate learning.
principle. Question seven connected to Keller’s suggestion that students should have confidence in themselves by setting feasible objectives (or goals), performance requirements and evaluation criteria to measure their progress.

The answers to the first question indicated that all the students found the Quantitative Skills for Accounting (QSA 131) module and the Accounting (ACC 130) challenging, while one student also struggled with the Information Systems (IFS 131) module. For the second question, four students stated that they could not cope with the workload, while the remaining two students reported that they coped sometimes, but not all the time.

The answers to the third question revealed that two students had to cook and wash the dishes before they could start with their school work. Two students indicated that they first undressed, ate and then did their work, while two said that they relaxed, ate, watched TV and then went to bed, without doing any school work. For the fourth question, four students stated that they relaxed more than they worked. The remaining two students said that they worked more than they relaxed. Answers to question number five indicated that two students studied two weeks in advance to prepare for tests, and two reported that they started one week in advance. One student said that he started studying three days before a test while the remaining student indicated that she studied every day.

For question six, five students said that they had a balanced lifestyle, while the remaining one reported that she did not have one. The answers to question seven indicated that two students lived with their families. Two of the students missed being away from home, as they were not from the Western Cape. The remaining two students, however, said that they did not miss their families, even though they were also not from the Western Province, but from the Eastern Cape. Lastly, in their answers to question eight, all six students indicated that they set goals for themselves, but one student stated that he could not always achieve the goals he had set.

The fact that all the students reported that they found QSA 131 challenging was unsurprising because it was significant that they all had Mathematical Literacy as a Grade 12 learning area. Since the first cohort of students enrolled in the faculty in 2009 with Mathematical Literacy as a Grade 12 learning area, the lecturers teaching the quantitative skills modules have discovered that the students cannot cope with the work covered in QSA 131, the foundation module in the EMS Faculty (lecturers, personal communication, 5 March 2011). Having entered the extra-curricula programme with Mathematical Literacy and not Mathematics is one of the reasons the students were not admitted into the three-year degree programmes. Having a Mathematical Literacy Grade 12 pass is also the main reason, according to the lecturers, why students fail the module. Most of the students in the QSA 131 module thus needed extra tutorial support classes.

It was also unsurprising that students could not cope with the workload; this is a general problem which most first-year students experience, no matter which
degree programmes they are registered for (McGhie 2012; Price and Maier 2007). It is therefore important to provide not only academic support but moral and social support to students, as Johnson, Johnson and Smith (1995, 9) advocate: ‘The more pressure placed on students to achieve and the more difficult the material to be learned, the more important it is to provide social support within the learning situation’. The answers provided by students to the other questions were an interesting mix of setting goals, studying in advance and attempting to do the right thing (the students who indicated that they do their school work at home).

As pointed out above, students were failing their assessment tasks throughout Term 1. As a result, they became demotivated, started doubting themselves, and were beginning to lose hope of being successful in their studies. To address these negative feelings and perceptions, the ESSRU staff encouraged students to speak and write about their feelings and experiences in the one-on-one mentoring sessions and in the group workshops that followed. At first, the students were hesitant to speak freely about their emotional state, preferring to read what they had written in their reflective journals. But as they became more comfortable with the staff, they revealed their struggles, such as their fear of failure, fear of certain lecturers, and fear of not meeting their goals. Being financially in need was also reported as a challenge which they had to deal with. Not having sufficient financial support as a university student and the consequences thereof have been reported in numerous research studies (Bunting 2004; De Beer 2006; McGhie 2012; Scott 2009). Clearly, these students experienced multiple challenges to learning simultaneously.

Consequently, the first priority in the intervention process was to re-build the students’ motivation, self-esteem and self-confidence levels. Following Keller’s (1987) motivation theory, the ESSRU staff focused on attention, relevance, confidence and satisfaction in the sessions with the students. Keller (1987) suggests that students’ attention can be kept through perceptual arousal or stimulating curiosity and the use of real-life examples to promote relevance. This was done in the sessions through the use of different pictures which symbolised different issues and feelings. The pictures included a stop sign, a help sign, a U-turn sign, a pair of scissors, an eraser, a person emptying a bin, a person carrying an executive suitcase and a graduate. The students had to examine the pictures and identify the ones they thought best represented how they felt at that stage. Relating to the pictures assisted the students to reflect and write in their journals about their fears, their challenges and their own stories. Listening to one another helped the students to realise that they were not alone, that the other students had similar experiences and emotions. Such insights created a bond among the students and a feeling of belonging.

Most of the students could relate to the stop and help signs. Their affinity with these signs indicated that they realised that they could not continue in the way they were, that is, failing all their formative assessment tasks; they needed help. Examples of the journal entries were:
I am so depressed and not knowing what to do.

I am failing and that makes me feel stupid.

I am failing – I need help because I don’t want to fail.

The entries reflected how the students felt at the start of the project in the second week of Term 2, 2011. Following Wenger (1998), the students’ meaning making processes at that stage in their academic careers were negative; the students were demoralised and did not have much confidence in themselves. As a consequence of not having confidence in their abilities, failing the tasks made them feel ‘stupid’ and that was why they could relate most to those two signs. Clearly, the students were not satisfied with their progress and, therefore, were not motivated (Keller 1987). It could thus be inferred that the students did not have much hope that they would be successful in their university careers and because of that, they most probably doubted that they would achieve their goals and objectives (Keller 1987). When students experience the learning process as negative and feel ‘stupid’ because they are failing their subjects, such students will not have a sense of belonging, nor feel safe and secure in the learning environment (Killen 2005; Kuh et al. 2005).

Another student indicated that she could identify with the pair of scissors. She wrote:

I used the scissors because it allowed me to cut through the barrier of lack of education. I was the first one in the family to go to a university.

Relating to the pair of scissors and using them to ‘cut through the barrier of lack of education’ assisted the student to express her meaning making process – that which she was experiencing because of failure (Wenger 1998). ‘Cutting through the barrier ...’ also symbolises that she wanted the failure to end, and that she was ‘visually cutting herself loose from failure’ in order to improve her situation because she did not want to disappoint her family. It could be deduced that, for this student, ‘cutting through the barrier of lack of education’ gave her hope, and motivated her intrinsically to continue and to turn her situation around (Keller 1987). Being part of a community of practice (Wenger 1998), and receiving encouragement, moral and academic support from the staff, assisted her to achieve success as Killen (2005) and Kuh et al. (2005) advocate should happen for successful learning to take place.

In the workshop sessions, students were encouraged and motivated to set realistic short-, medium- and long-term goals (Keller 1998). In addition, they were provided with different study techniques, as well as effective planning and time management techniques. As the sessions continued and the students started to regain their self-esteem and confidence levels, their reflective journals entries changed from negative to positive:
I thought that it was a very productive session. I will definitely make use of the yearly, monthly and weekly calendars. I have already purchased a laminated A3 calendar and will slot in the test dates this weekend.

I appreciate every single thing from the programme so far. I trust that we will be receiving much more inspiring and motivational sessions like this.

The students were divided into pairs and they worked together, motivating and supporting one another. Wenger (1998) argues that human beings are social beings, and working together assisted the students not to feel alone; while sharing and discussing the work collectively assisted students with understanding and mastering the content.

The students’ goal profiles helped them to stay focused, as they had to find a quote for each term to motivate themselves. The personal tracking form was also designed to motivate them as they had to write down how they felt about their performance and then write an encouraging letter to themselves. The four components of Wenger’s (1998, 4) social theory of learning – ‘learning as belonging, learning as becoming, learning as experience, and learning as doing’ – formed the basis of the tracking form. It was important to strengthen the students’ identity because, as Wenger (1998, 5) explains, identity is ‘a way of talking about how learning changes who we are and creates personal histories of becoming in the context of our communities’. The listening to, sharing of, and encouraging one another grounded their ‘community of practice’ (Wenger 1998), while strengthening all three modes of agency (Bandura 2001). Bandura (2001, 13–14) explains that his social cognitive theory ‘subscribes to a model of emergent interactive agency’ which in turn differentiates among three different modes of agency, namely, personal, proxy and collective agency. Personal agency refers to the cognitive, motivational, affective and choice processes of individuals; proxy agency refers to the social conditions and institutional practices that affect people’s everyday lives; while collective agency refers to people’s shared belief in their collective power to produce wanted results and it serves the same role of personal efficacy beliefs and functions through similar processes.

The staff provided the students with regular feedback and reinforcement through e-mail and Facebook. The lecturers of the quantitative skills modules also used these means of communication to congratulate students who managed to pass the assessment tasks in the remaining weeks of Terms 2. The regular feedback and reinforcement kept students motivated, while their self-esteem and self-confidence levels were boosted (Keller 1987). Such messages also allowed the students to experience the university environment as friendly, supportive and affectionate. The fact that the ESSRU staff worked with the students on a personal level and knew each of them by name further motivated the students to improve and do well, not only for themselves anymore, but also for the sake of the ESSRU staff members. Applicable here are Killen’s (2005) learning principles with regard to much learning occurring.
through social interaction, a positive emotional climate strengthening learning, and the total environment influencing learning. Applicable also are the benchmarks of collaborative learning, and a supportive and conducive learning environment, which Kuh et al. (2005) argue for.

As the research project unfolded and the students’ levels of motivation increased, they started to write about their victories (the fact that they were passing their assessments) and how they felt about that:

I just want to thank you guys for everything you have done for me. I managed to pass all my modules through your help and support. You guys are really doing a great job. Keep up the good work.

I highly appreciate my sessions I had with you. It encouraged me to be confident and have faith in what I do. It also taught me to be satisfied with outcomes, whether academic or personal, to always strive to do my best at all times.

I would like to thank you for all the hard work you have put in to helping us. We appreciate all you and your team have done. I promise you that all you have taught us is not in vain.

When the students’ performance in Quantitative Skills for Accounting (QSA 131) and Accounting (ACC 130) were evaluated at the end of the first semester, all six students passed the two modules. During the second semester, the students continued to improve and gain confidence in their abilities. All six students passed all their second semester modules and were promoted to the next year of study. The hard work, extra hours and effort put into mentoring and supporting the students had paid off – the intervention was successful and the objectives were achieved. A student wrote in her final journal entry:

Thanks to ESSRU, it shows that someone cares on campus, that you are not alone at this institution. I thought that university was a cold place and was nothing but an institution of learning. You have proved me wrong!

Two important observations could be made from the findings. The first is that the students started to regain their self-confidence and self-esteem, and thus became motivated again. The second is that students were provided with a caring, safe space. Thus, a conducive and supportive learning environment, which Killen (2005) and Kuh et al. (2005) argue for, was created. Experiencing the learning process as safe and caring assisted with the students’ integration into the university environment (Tinto 1975, 1993, 2000) which contributed to their academic success.

The theoretical framework which the action research pilot project used assisted the team to achieve the objectives, namely: the improvement of the students’ attention, relevance, confidence and satisfaction levels in the learning process changed their perceived self-efficacy from negative to positive. As a result, students became self-
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regulating, motivated to work harder and to succeed (Keller 1987). In addition, providing a supportive and safe learning environment and letting students know that the ESSRU staff members care and are concerned about their well-being encouraged the students to do their best (Killen 2005; 2010; Kuh et al. 2005). Lastly, allowing the students to experience the learning process ‘as learning as belonging, learning as becoming, learning as experience, and learning as doing’ (Wenger 1998, 4), assisted them to overcome their challenges through peer learning and peer support, and thereby strengthened all three modes of agencies (Bandura 2001).

In contrast to the six students who passed QSA 131 and ACC 130 at the end of the first semester, the remaining 33 students who were not part of the pilot project, and who only received extra tutorial support classes, did not pass QSA 131 and ACC 130 at the end of the first semester. Nineteen of them passed the two modules at the end of the second semester; thus, they managed to pass the modules at the second attempt only; while the remaining 14 students were academically excluded because they failed the module again after the second attempt. Passing the modules at the second attempt was costly for the 19 students because they had to reregister for the modules at the beginning of the second semester and had to pay additional class fees as well. If they were part of the pilot project, this could have been avoided. In addition, it seems as if the 14 students who could not pass the modules at the second attempt, remained in their state of helplessness, which in the end, was detrimental to their study careers. The success of the pilot project thus supports the assertion that first-year, at-risk students in the ECP need both extra academic and affective support to strengthen their chances of success in the learning process.

Lessons learnt from the pilot project

The ECPs were introduced at universities to provide opportunities to students who would otherwise not have had access to higher education based on their Grade 12 results (DoE 2006; Kioko 2010). Therefore, being admitted to an ECP signals that such students would need extra academic support. However, when students fail, despite the provision of additional academic support, it becomes a real challenge for the institution and this is where action research projects, such as this one, can make a contribution towards improving the pass and retention rates. The research findings indicate that it is possible to change failure into success, not only through the provision of extra tutorial support classes, but by focusing on changing the students’ perceived self-efficacy from negative to positive in a caring and supportive learning environment (Killen 2005; Kuh et al. 2005; Wenger 1998).

Thus, the first lesson learnt is that a dedicated support unit which is faculty-based has shown that it can make a difference in the lives of at-risk, ECP students. The fact that the students were provided with a caring and safe learning environment is significant. They could talk about their fears, their challenges and their concerns,
and openly share this information with staff and their fellow students. Students were given hope, moral support and encouragement, a self-development plan, and practical guidelines on how to apply effective planning and time-management techniques. Through this process, students built and strengthened all three modes of agencies, which allowed them to become self-regulating students (Keller 1987; Wenger 1998). It is, therefore, recommended that other HEIs consider creating such a support unit in their faculties.

A second lesson learnt is that complete failure does not have to be the end result for students in the ECP. Timeous interventions, such as the action research pilot project described, could turn a student’s prospects of success into a reality. The fact that the students became motivated again and started to take responsibility for their own learning under the guidance and support of the ESSRU staff shows that all students could be successful in the learning process, if given similar support, encouragement and guidance. As a result, the social nature of learning was emphasised, that is, that the students could not succeed on their own, but they needed institutional support (staff) and peer support (Killen 2005; Kuh et al. 2005; Wenger 1998). Thus, the pilot project accentuates the fact that HEIs have a responsibility to assist all the students whom they admit to the different degree programmes. In other words, in addition to providing students with physical access and academic support, it is recommended that affective and social support should also be provided as far as possible.

A third lesson learnt is that a supportive and conducive learning environment enhances students’ chances of success in the learning process. It is recommended that students should be directed to Keller’s theory of motivation which is based upon the four principles of attention, relevance, confidence and satisfaction. Academic staff could strive to incorporate these learning principles in their teaching methodologies and could make these principles explicit to students in their lecture content and assessment criteria. Staff in the support services could also include these principles in their interactions with students.

Lastly, peer interaction and cooperative learning not only strengthen the integration of students into the university environment, but they also improve their academic performance. It is thus recommended that Wenger’s communities of practice learning principles be adopted because these would assist staff to promote collaborative learning, and to create platforms that would facilitate students working together, learning from one another, and supporting and encouraging one another. This does not necessarily have to be done through group work assignments only, but social opportunities outside the classroom could be created that could focus on enhancing the students’ collective agency mode.

The pilot project, thus, has provided evidence that the personal well-being of students is as important as their academic well-being – a holistic approach to student learning, as far as possible, should therefore be considered for implementation. If ECP students are successful in the learning process, the dropout rates will decrease,
and throughput and retention rates will increase. But more importantly, a much bigger cohort of the youth will be empowered to become productive citizens of the country.

CONCLUSION

The ESSRU staff and lecturers have learnt a great deal from the students with whom they interacted in the pilot project, such as: the challenges to learning students faced; the manner in which students tried to deal with their fears, self-doubt and low morale; as well as their dreams which sometimes could be shattered as a result of failure.

Academic support is an integral part of learning at university. The pilot project has demonstrated that academic support alone is not enough – especially for at-risk students in ECPs. The students need moral support and encouragement from the staff and their peers; they need a personal self-development plan; and they need to be taught effective planning and time-management skills which will enable them to manage the workload and achieve their goals. Learning is indeed socially situated and embedded, and it occurs through communities of practice as Wenger (1998) and Bandura (1986; 2001), among others, so rightfully advocate.

The first-year students in the ECP in the EMS Faculty are privileged to have a unit which is primarily there to support, motivate and encourage them on an individual basis and within small-group, workshop sessions. Acknowledgement must be given to the previous dean for his vision and strategic thinking in establishing the ESSRU.

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