

FYE Conference

Training postgraduate student to provide learning support for first years

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Context

Large class sizes in first year courses

Lectures struggling to keep up with admin and marking loads, also pressure to research and publish

Learning support for first year students often neglected

Consequence of this:

- first years find it difficult to access help
- they experience a sense of anonymity and helplessness
- find transition to HE very challenging
- high failure and drop-out rates

In Faculty of Humanities at University of Witwatersrand, we have found that weekly small group tutorials make a big difference to the learning experience of first year students.

Staff resources already stretched too thin, but we do have another resource to draw on: pool of postgrad students – committed to subject matter of the discipline, able to understand the learning and psycho-social needs of first years, energetic and innovative.

Role of tutorials

- Draw on principle of **scaffolding**: provide appropriate structure and support to enable students to develop and practise the competencies required in HE.
- Draw on strength of supportive, collaborative relationships developed during tutorial sessions
- Provide a learning environment in which students are encouraged to construct their own understandings of new and complex concepts

Role of the tutor

“Central to the task of a tutor is the facilitation of students’ learning, rather than direct teaching. Tutor interventions must encourage students’ autonomy. The primary task of a tutor is to facilitate students’ learning processes, by helping students to integrate and use information and secondly, to help student interact effectively in the small-group tutorial.”

Moust and Schmidt 1995

The strengths of Peer Tutoring have been extensively described in the literature (Goodlad). Most significant of these strengths is the potential for tutors to act as role models of successful students: motivating and inspiring

Outline of Tutor Training Programme

1.Managing small groups in tutorials

Initiation, essential survival skills, re-orientation away from lecturer role

2.Student perceptions of peer tutoring

Promoting confidence in role of tutor and role model

3.Strategies for success as a student

Transition to university: encouraging reflection on students' own experiences

4.Deep and surface approaches to learning

Transition to university: experiential encounter with concepts in literature

5.Encouraging active learning in tutorials

Facilitating a constructivist approach to learning in humanities disciplines

6.Decoding the essay topic

7.Essay writing skills for first year students

8.Reading for academic purposes

Academic literacy skills

9.Helping students to manage exams

10.Evaluating your tutorials

How to elicit constructive feedback

Small-group learning methodology

Modelling of small group facilitation skills, including:

- Collaborative approaches to problem-solving
- Recognition of students' own experiences
- Promoting reflection on own experience and learning
- Valuing diversity
- Responding to input in non-judgemental way
- Structuring session to include participation in different modes (listening, talking, reading, writing)
- Allowing for interaction in different format (student-tutor, student pairs, groups of 3 or 4, report-back, etc.)

Evaluation of Tutor Training programme

1.Surveys/interviews conducted with first year students:

76% of students rated their experience of being tutored by post grad students as positive/very positive

88% of sample indicated preference for student tutor

First years report benefits relating to:

Student tutors' ability to refer to linking concepts, relationships, facts that are part of their experience.

- *"In lectures you get the facts but in tuts you take that stuff into every life and see "Oh, that's how it works."*

Enthusiasm and energy:

- *"Student tutors are energetic and fun and make the subject enjoyable."*

Relaxed, informal learning environment:

- *"You can speak freely to the tutor and also to other students in the group. You don't have to worry about saying the right thing or trying to sound intelligent."*

Role modelling:

- *“Student tutors can still remember how they felt and the problems they experienced moving from school to university like having to think for yourself, knowing it’s up to you now, no more spoonfeeding. Lecturers have forgotten how frightening this is.”*
- *“I thought that I was the only one suffering, but the tutor told us that we should expect hurdles. Reading isn’t easy – even he himself finds things tough. He encourages us. He tells us ‘I’ve done it. You can also do it. There’s no difference between us.’”*
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2.Focus group discussions

Conducted annually at end of programme, findings used to modify/adapt the training programme.

Student tutors indicate that they have gained in various ways:

- Confidence, self-esteem, personal growth
- Learning strategies for structuring tutorial sessions
- Strategies for dealing with different types of students (talkative, unresponsive, etc.)
- Improvement in own academic literacy skills
- Development of skills related to world of work: communication, group-management, promoting tolerance of diversity
- Opportunities to meet and interact with students from other departments

Our perspective on strengths of Programme:

One significant measure of gains for student tutors is that attendance is excellent, even though:

- Attendance is voluntary
- No “concrete” reward, award from certificate (ceremony, lunch)
- Workshops take place during lunchtimes
- Postgrad students experience time pressure/work load
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We have observed the following gains for student tutors:

- They appreciate being recognised and valued by Faculty and in academic departments
- Being able to share experiences “normalizes” commonly-experienced anxiety and insecurity
- Meeting and getting to know students from other departments is a huge gain in an institution often characterised as impersonal/cold – particularly for students who enter the university at a postgrad level.

Limitations of Tutor Training Programme:

Tutors often struggle to integrate skills focus with content specified by lecturers

Training too generic – need help to apply to specific subject contexts

If tutorials are to be successful, this requires ongoing support from relevant lecturers in academic departments.

Conclusion

We believe that the Tutor Training Programme described above represents a win-win-win situation, in that there are gains for tutees, student tutors as well as for academic departments.

These gains are extensive, when compared to the relatively few resources required to implement this pedagogical intervention.

