A comprehensive tutor training program: collaboration between academic developers and teaching staff

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Overview:
This program was developed collaboratively between the University’s academic development unit and the School of Psychology. The program involves a number of different components, including peer mentoring, training sessions, “brown-bag” lunch seminars, and senior tutoring positions. One of the strengths of the tutoring program is the structure for first-time tutors. The School runs two large first-year courses each semester, involving up to 26 tutors, including a small number of ‘lead’ tutors. These courses have a very structured tutorial program that supports the ‘apprenticeship’ of first time tutors. Most tutors then move on to tutor in 2nd, 3rd and 4th year courses after they have spent a year tutoring in the first-year program. An evaluation of the main components of the training program was carried out, and the results will be discussed with reference to the existing literature on tutor training and staff development.

The Tutor Training Program
The aim of the revised program in the School of Psychology, University of Queensland was to respond to feedback gained from previous cohorts of beginning tutors. In previous years, the training has typically comprised of an orientation session at the beginning of the year with a follow-up session later in the semester. These sessions were designed to equip tutors with the basic skills required to be a tutor within the School and included the necessary administrative information (e.g. payment, resources etc.) as well as some basic tutorial ‘survival skills’. Training has always taken place at the School level (rather than at the course or University level) and has typically been carried out by a junior member of the School academic staff.

In 2002, the School of Psychology employed over 100 tutors, with about half of these being postgraduate students who were new tutors. Twenty-three of these new tutors were placed in first year courses, and the remaining 19 tutors placed in second and third level courses.

The tutor training program was substantially revised for 2002 to comprise of a three-tier approach to tutor training - focusing on course level instruction, School specific training and general teaching and learning training. Course level instruction was provided through either ‘lead’ tutors in first level courses or through ‘mentor’ tutors appointed in second and third level courses (in each case, senior tutors chosen for their experience and teaching skills). The School specific training took the form of brown bag lunches hosted by academics within the School who had received of Teaching and Learning Excellence Awards. The general teaching and learning training was primarily designed and implemented by an academic staff developer from the university, and comprised of four sessions co-facilitated with the School tutor training co-ordinator and first year tutorial co-ordinator. The formal program (see table below) was compulsory for all new tutors (with paid attendance) and was complemented by
other initiatives including weekly ‘office hours’ for tutors with the Tutor Training Co-ordinator and a tutors’ web page.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tutors in 1st year Courses</th>
<th>Tutors in 2nd &amp; 3rd Level Courses</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Initial training meeting (as part of orientation week activities, including 1st Teaching and Learning session)</td>
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<td>12 weekly meetings with lead tutors</td>
<td>Mentoring program (6 hours over 12 weeks)</td>
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<td>3 Teaching and Learning sessions</td>
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<td>2 Brown bag lunches on teaching excellence</td>
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<td>Weekly contact hours with first year co-ordinator or tutor training co-ordinator</td>
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Initial Orientation

At this first session, all tutors were provided with an administration information pack which included a School of Psychology handbook, guides to relevant University policies (e.g. Code of conduct, Equity), a tutorial staff pay information sheet (detailing how and when tutors would be paid) and ‘tutor orientation’ and ‘teaching tips’ booklets compiled by the School tutor training coordinator. First, the necessary administrative details were discussed and any questions answered. Then the program for the year was explained to tutors, particularly the way in which the mentoring system would be implemented. In the final section, the first of the 4 Teaching and Learning sessions was run, focusing on equipping tutors with the necessary skills to prepare for and facilitate their first tutorials.

In this session, new tutors were allocated to groups according to the course they were going to be tutoring, or from the broad subject area of the course (e.g. statistics), and each group included an experienced tutor. These groups were asked to think back to their experience of being tutored and to identify features of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ tutorials. The academic developer was a ‘roving’ facilitator and each experienced tutor also helped to facilitate their group’s discussion. After the small group discussion, the identified features were fed back to the whole group for discussion. The small groups were then asked to identify their own fears about tutoring and to brainstorm strategies to overcome these fears. Again, the small groups then discussed their group’s outcomes with the whole group. A whole group discussion then focused on practical things that tutors could do (taken from the good/bad tutorial list) to overcome their initial fears about tutoring. The session ended with a short section on ‘checklist for new tutors- surviving your first class’, and a discussion about the practice of using icebreakers and establishing ground rules in small group teaching.

Course specific training

Lead tutors in first-year courses

All tutors placed in the first year program had weekly meetings with the lead tutors for their course. These meetings generally involved the lead tutors demonstrating major components of the upcoming tutorial, and opportunity for new tutors to collectively reflect upon experiences from their previous tutorial. Problems were discussed and suggestions generated as a group on how to approach them. Tutors talked about what strategies had worked well in tutorials as a means of reinforcing their development as educators. This process also worked as a mechanism of feedback for future developments in the program.
Mentors and second and third level courses

The mentors were chosen on the basis of their experience and teaching skills in the particular course and it was envisaged that the mentor would act as someone that the new tutors could meet with to discuss course related teaching issues. New tutors and mentors were asked to meet weekly or fortnightly as a group across the semester (up to a maximum of 6 hours) in order to address any course specific concerns that the new tutors had about tutoring. No limits were imposed on the mentoring sessions, however it was suggested that the meetings may focus on issues such as problems encountered in previous tutorials, strategies for the teaching current tutorial material (e.g. how to convey difficult points, retain student interest, structure the sessions) and any other course specific concerns.

New tutors and mentors were paid for their time and new tutors were required to keep a meeting log summarising the issues discussed at each meeting, the suggestions made by the group to address these issues and any issues for discussion at future meetings.

Teaching and Learning Sessions

The first teaching and learning session was held as part of the initial orientation session (see above). The second teaching and learning session was held in week 3 of first semester and focused on the issue of interacting with students in tutorials. It was seen as necessary to address this topic first as tutors may still be overcoming their initial fears about tutoring and may also be starting to face some problems in getting their students to interact and participate in class. The session had two main foci - reflections on the tutors’ first few tutorials and trouble shooting in the context of students’ interactions within tutorials.

Tutors were initially asked to form small groups and to consider some of the strategies that had been discussed in the first training session; use of icebreakers, learning students’ names, establishing ground rules, and reflection following their first tutorial. The facilitators of this session worked around all of the groups and discussed with the tutors their experiences of using these techniques in their tutorials. Following this short discussion, tutors were asked to form small groups and each group was given two role-play scenarios to work through. The role-play scenarios had been generated by the facilitators of the session and focused on common problems in terms of student interactions, such as problems encountered in group work, questioning techniques to aid group discussion, and issues of cultural insensitivity. An example scenario can be seen in the following.
Groupwork Assignment Scenario

Scene: Your tutorial has been divided into several groups to work on a group experiment. From watching one group in class, you suspect that there are problems and decide to sit in on one of their class activities.

Student 1: ‘I think we should all be working on a new idea. I think the one we have is ok, but I want a 7 in this course, and I don’t think I can get it with this one.’

Student 2: (Looks disinterested)

Student 3: ‘We spent the entire last session agreeing on the hypothesis. If we have to do this, let’s just get on with it, ok. If everyone would just contribute (looking at student 2), I’m sure we’ll get an ok mark.’

Student 4: (Shyly) Um, I think...

Student 1: ‘Just because you’re not interested in getting a 7, doesn’t mean my mark should suffer. We need to come up with something more original. I’ve been doing some reading and we need to design an experiment with a 2 x 3 factorial design, and incorporate gender as a subject variable.

Tutor - What is the problem here and how would you help solve it?

After each group had worked through two role-plays, the discussion was brought back to the larger group and a number of the issues raised through the role-plays discussed generally. In addition, specific reference was made within this discussion how a number of strategies introduced in the initial tutor training session could be used to deal with or diffuse a number of the ‘problems’ that emerge within student interactions.

The aim of the third teaching and learning session (held in week 6) was to move away from a focus on immediate problem solving techniques and begin to get tutors to consider some of the theoretical perspectives underlying good teaching. The session focused on five key questions: what is being a good teacher (or tutor)®, what is good teaching®, what is learning®, what makes for good learning? and how do you know if you are a good teacher, and/or if your students are doing good learning? Tutors in this session were provided with a handout of resources covering the main points discussed in the session. The session began by considering Ramsden’s (1992) perspectives on teaching and highlighting the key differences between the different approaches of teaching as transmitting, teaching as organizing student activity and teaching as making learning possible. This was followed by a re-consideration of some of the key attributes of effective teachers and teaching practice. Each tutor was then provided with a self evaluation form for considering how important each of the principles/characteristics were to them and how they rated their own performance on that dimension. Tutors were encouraged to use the self-evaluation form to identify their emerging strengths in tutoring and also where their current weaknesses lay.

Different student approaches to learning were introduced, with a key distinction being drawn between deep and surface approaches to learning. Following a consideration of this, some general principles of learning were introduced including student-centred vs. teacher-centred learning, and issues with small group teaching. Tutors were then provided with a number of tools that they could use in their own tutorials to enhance student learning (e.g. the minute paper). The session ended with a consideration of Kugel’s (1993) model of teacher development.
The final teaching and learning session focused on student evaluations and took place in week 9 of first semester (the semester contains 13 weeks in total). The aim of this session was to encourage tutors to consider why and how they may use evaluations of their teaching and also to give them a broad introduction to the evaluation services available at the University. The session began with a broad consideration of teaching evaluation, its importance, the different ways in which teaching evaluations can be carried out, and the different purposes of evaluations (e.g. summative and formative). Guidelines for gaining student feedback were also detailed, and examples of the student feedback service at the university were discussed. This was followed by a section on ‘evaluating student evaluations’. Tutors were shown an example feedback report and given guidelines on how to interpret the figures provided. Tutors were also reminded that students are invited to provide qualitative feedback on the evaluation forms. It was noted that often these qualitative comments are the most useful information that students can provide, and tutors were instructed how to interpret this type of feedback. The final part of the session focused on responding to student feedback and provided tutors with a list of resources that they could access to improve specific aspects of their tutoring.

Brown bag lunches on teaching excellence

The brown bag lunch series was an established initiative within the School to provide seminars for postgraduate students focusing on research issues of interest within the School. In 2002, two of these sessions were given over to the tutor training program and focused on ‘teaching excellence’ within Psychology. These sessions attended by a mix of new and continuing tutors. The first brown bag lunch co-hosted by two senior academics primarily focused on the teaching of challenging courses within Psychology. Twenty-seven new and continuing tutors within the School attended the lunch. The session focused on a number of practical techniques used by both academics in teaching challenging courses in Psychology and related these techniques to theoretical principles that underpin good teaching practice. In addition, practical responses to varying forms of student feedback were demonstrated, showing the development of both academics teaching over time. The second brown bag lunch was hosted by two academics who currently ‘team teach’ a core second level course (Learning & Cognition). The session began with an outline of both lecturers teaching philosophy and how this translated into a need to incorporate practical experiences of the material being taught into the context of their lectures and practical classes. They then focused on the introduction and use of technology in teaching, and specifically on using technology (in both lectures and laboratory classes) to practically demonstrate theory and practice in their course. Twenty-four new and continuing tutors attended the lunch.