Training tutors in a super sized first year unit – an examination of strategies to develop long term partners

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Abstract

The training and development of tutoring staff is not only varied across universities but also within institutions. Despite disparity of approaches, there is general consensus that tutor training is worthwhile for tutors, scholars and the institution (Barrington 1999). This paper describes the strategies employed by a super sized first year business unit, which included peer mentoring, formal training sessions, moderation partnerships and various communication strategies to develop a team of motivated tutors. One of the strengths of the approach is that the structure has a first-time tutor focus. The strategies outlined in this paper support the fostering of first time tutors through the creation of an autonomous environment for staff within the context of a first year experience. The important role of and engagement of tutors is particularly important when recognising the different backgrounds of first year scholars.

Introduction

Designing, developing and delivering a training program that successfully prepares new tutors for the important role they play in the teaching-learning arena is a challenge that requires constant reflection on and feedback from a variety of sources. With the growing number of scholars entering university, there is an expansion on the employment of sessional staff and as a consequence a growing need for requisite training to address issues of quality, consistency and standards. Added to this, is the increasing diversity of scholars' backgrounds and means of entry to the tertiary environment, and a growing shift in scholars' engagement in the learning process due to a variety of factors such as part time work, less time on campus and more affiliation with technology (van der Meer & Scott 2008). The creation of an effective first year scholar learning experience is an issue of significance as it is the experience of the author that new tutors are often assigned to first year units and are unaware of the unique challenges of first year scholars.

Provision of training and orientation for tutors is difficult and is exasperated by not only the large size of first year units (which can typically exceed 500 scholars) and the high number of teaching staff required to deliver unit content, but also by the mix of new and experienced staff and the potential for staff turnover from one semester to the next.. Compounding these challenges is the issue of first year scholar retention. The challenge for Unit Coordinators then, particularly of these large first year units, is to develop comparable and consistent

teaching standards across all tutorials and in addition prepare first year scholars for future academic success with a memorable value adding first year experience.

This paper focuses on strategies adopted in a first year business unit to address this challenge through the development of teaching staff. A fundamental assumption in this paper is the important role tutors play in the experience of scholar learning.

Background

The focus of this paper is a first year business unit. It is a required unit for all business scholars at Curtin University. The unit is supported by one and a half fulltime Unit Coordinators with multiple study periods conducted in 11 offshore campuses. With over 4500 scholars studying the unit in one year as well as a team of up to 52 tutors per semester, there have been a range of strategies addressing consistency in the unit and ensuring that not only the content is taught well but also opportunities exist to develop resilient self directed learners.

Lectures and tutorials are used as the primary teaching and learning activities. The unit has a strong skills as well as business content focus. The unit emphasises a student centred approach to learning and teaching – that is an approach underpinned by the belief that deep scholar learning is facilitated primarily by what scholars do in order to learn rather than what scholars are or what teachers do (Biggs 2003). Accordingly, an emphasis on what the teacher should do to facilitate active scholar learning is part of tutor training. The literature highlights that tutors have a significant impact on the learning and acculturation experience of scholars (Brookfield and Preskill 1999). They have an important role in facilitating the student centred approach. Further, because undergraduate scholars in first year units have very little opportunity to interact with the lecturer in large units, tutors provide an important point of contact in the unit and the creation of relatedness. Indeed, the tutorial is where most interaction and learning takes place.

Recruitment and training

In developing a solid team, identifying tutors with similar attitudes to learning and teaching is important. The recruitment process is therefore an integral element to addressing consistency. In recruiting staff, a number of characteristics are looked for in the applicants. These include good communication skills, enthusiasm, common ethos about working with scholars and passion about the subject material. Tutors are also identified suitable based on business experience that matches the unit content.

Cranton (1998) indicates, good teachers not only convey a body of knowledge to their scholars, but are also aware of how to convey that knowledge by connecting their own experiences with their scholars' experiences of the world. In this respect, it can be argued that experience and enthusiasm together with good practice are the necessary ingredients for a successful tutor. In view of this, training plays a significant role and initially aims to lay solid foundations for good teaching, particularly where tutors are new to teaching. This is achieved by introducing tutors to principles that underlie effective facilitation and means of working

with scholars, especially in the face of the growing diversity of the scholar body and less presence on campus, developing tutor confidence in their roles as well as working to liaise with staff to understand the First Year Curriculum Design principles to support successful transition

All tutors are required to attend three training sessions throughout the semester. These training sessions are conducted both face to face and online. After the initial program of training addressing content and administration of the unit, the focus of tutor interaction shifts towards an inclusive model, seeking tutor feedback into the development of the unit. The focus of training is less on instruction to ensure quality and consistency and more so on the development of skills. The literature on first year experience is n support learning units and the changing pedagogies associated with the delivery of these units. There are two extreme views which either adopt an Academic Darwinism approach (Chaskes & Anttonen 2005; Biggs 2003) or a remedial model (van der Meer & Scott 2008). In between these two extremes is the view that skills are integrated as a normal way of learning (Skillen et al 1998). The need for consistency in approach is important as divergent views make it particularly difficult to teach generic skills (van der Meer & Scott 2008) and a lack of clarity amongst staff adversely affects the first year experience.

Whilst scholars are less on campus, the first year literature indicates that access to staff is important. It is also evident that when staff are unclear of their roles or do not understand tasks, there is an impact upon the first year experience. It is therefore also an aim of training to raise tutor awareness of their important role in the teaching environment and prepare them for this so that the experience is rewarding for them and their scholars. This is an important point as the tutorials within the unit do not have formal attendance records though attendance is necessary in order to satisfactorily complete the assessments. Tutorials are highly interactive and tutors therefore play an important role in a positive tutorial experience for scholars, resulting in consistent high attendance and arguably better levels of scholar satisfaction.

The idea of creating a positive learning experience for scholars as an outcome of tutor interaction can be linked to the work of Ryan and Deci (2000). This research emphasises the importance of social context in facilitating the satisfaction of fundamental learner needs and identifies the importance of autonomy-supportive environments and relatedness.. These environments acknowledge the perspective of the individual and empower them with a sense of choice over their behaviour. Scholars who report a greater sense of autonomy also report feeling closer or more related to their tutors, Research indicates that scholar's perceptions of relatedness to their tutors are associated with positive outcomes such as positive behavioural engagement and academic outcomes (Connell and Wellborn, 1991).. Supporting relatedness and autonomy-supportive environments is about providing acceptance, respect and a feeling of mutuality (Filak and Sheldon 2033).

Other Strategies

The tutor training and interactions have attempted to keep this fundamental idea of autonomy and relatedness central to all strategies. The Unit Coordination team has worked towards

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developing a supportive environment through simple strategies outside training such as tutorial visits, invitations to participate in additional personal development programs and being readily available to communicate with tutors when the need arises. The benefits of adopting such a philosophy with tutors has included opportunities for modelling good practice for tutors to role model and for scholars to adopt in small group settings, the facilitation of a safe environment for tutors to examine different approaches for use in classroom scenarios, and the establishment of an ongoing peer network among tutors.

In contrast, research by Black and Deci (2000) indicates that controlling environments signify to the individual that the control over their behaviour is likely to be generated from outside themselves. Such environments lead individuals to experience conflict and pressure, and consequently reduced motivation. This can result in a negative environment for both the tutor and scholar. Given these observations efforts are made to provide flexibility to tutors in the delivery of the tutorials. It would be easy to see that the inclusion of flexibility tutorial delivery may impact upon consistency, and as such strategies have been employed to provide limits to such arrangements.

There are several other strategies employed within the unit to create long term partnerships with tutors and mirror the autonomy supportive environment outlined in this paper. This includes the idea that training, whilst programmed formally throughout the semester (as briefly outlined), s also seen as an ongoing process that occurs informally between peers. Benware and Deci (1984) comments on the learning process and note that when one learns in order to teach, one is therefore more intrinsically motivated, achieves better results and is more actively engaged. This can be witnessed in the moderation buddy arrangement established within the unit. This is a simple strategy whereby senior experienced tutors mentor and assist in moderation of new tutors' marking. Further, the moderation activities undertaken by the Unit Coordination team also provides opportunities for tutors to not only learn but also contribute as a team member. Due to the constraints of this paper, further initiatives will be discussed at the forum.

Outline of process

This paper provides the foundational ideas to be explored in the forum. I will briefly sketch some of my experience, and then engage participants in a discussion around the issues associated with developing relatedness with first-year tutors. Following is the session outline:

Introduction and Aims (5 min)

- Background about the speaker and the reason behind the significance of this issue and aims of session

Ice-breaker (2 min)

Discuss in pairs (5 min)

- Why do some universities support training of tutors and others not?
- Does tutor training help shift the culture towards higher value on teaching and support a transition pedagogy and positive first year experience?

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Presenter (10 min)
- Overview of content of paper

Whole Group discussion (5 min)

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