Supporting large first year cohorts through selection & skilling sessional tutors

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Introduction

First year in Higher Education is increasingly taught through large courses whereby a lecture is followed by multiple tutorials or workshops. Today, many of these classes are are staffed by casual tutors who may only have a tenuous connection to the University. While the significant and ongoing casualisation of Higher Education teaching over the last two decades has meant that many casual staff have acquired considerable experience, many others are first-time tutors with little more to go on than their own, often teacher-centred experiences of teaching and learning. While the implications of the changes are many and varied, knowing what we do about the transitional needs of first year students it now appears clear that the way we select, support and maintain our teaching teams is an issue of vital importance.

We are Senior Tutors in First Year Higher Education in the School of Global Studies, Social Science and Planning at RMIT University. Our first year courses have enrolments of between 350-600 students and cover generalist humanities areas such as sociology and politics, for students in seven degree program areas: Social Work, Environment, Policy & Research, Planning, Youth Work, Psychology and Legal Studies. The intended learning outcomes for these courses are equally focused on developing content knowledge as well as foundational academic skills like essay writing and critical thinking. A further objective of these workshops is to link this content and activities to the specific professional program area that students are studying. The courses are staffed by the Course Coordinator/Lecturer, a Senior Tutor and a team of approximately 6-10 sessional tutors. Out of the four courses students undertake each semester, two or three are in these large first year courses.

This first year program is based on the idea that a constructivist approach to teaching and learning is essential (Biggs & Tang, 2007). Our student group is diverse with many students coming from minority or marginalised communities. Clearly this increases the complexity of the learning environment. Having large teams of sessional tutors, however, dilutes the connection of the Lecturer and Senior Tutor with the majority of students, increasing the risk that learning environments in tutor led workshops may not create a productive and inclusive learning community, and consequently intended learning outcomes may not be met. It is because of this that we see the selection and skilling of sessional tutors as crucial in supporting large first year cohorts, as it is these staff who will spend the most interactive time with students in our large first year courses.

To address these issues we decided to develop a new process for selecting and skilling sessional tutors. We will outline these two connected processes in a 'nuts and bolts' session at the First Year in Higher Education Conference 2009, sharing our experience, materials and activities with others who may have large sessional teams in large first year courses. We will emphasise points of transferability to other institutions, and identify the problems we encountered and how they were overcome.

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Selection of Sessional Tutors:

In order to address the issues outlined above, we developed an open and transparent process for the selection of first year sessional tutors that explicitly attempts to ensure that students in these first year courses experience good student-centred teaching and learning which meets the intended learning outcomes. The selection process has been refined and adjusted in recent years in response to our own reflection and collaboration with student participants and colleagues. This process has now become a functioning and successful model which could benefit other programs using large sessional teaching teams. The process we have developed allows a wider range of people to apply for these roles, and reinforces the idea that we are looking for enthusiastic teachers.

We ask all people interested in teaching in these courses to formalise their interest through submitting an Expression of Interest form. If they meet basic qualification requirements but have not taught with us before, we then ask them to attend a Teaching Demonstration appointment where they carry out a 20 minute teaching demonstration with a combination of staff and first year students operating as 'the class'. A guideline is sent to all those doing a teaching demonstration which outlines our approach to learning and teaching, dictates the learning objective/s that must be addressed in their demonstration session, and offers some suggested activities they might like to run. By providing this material we model the support that they will receive from us during the semester, and reinforce the primacy of learning objectives as the driver for lesson planning. Through their demonstration of teaching we are able to see how they utilise support materials, and how well/whether they focus on the key learning objectives. Potential tutors are then ranked in consultation with students based upon clear criteria. These criteria are provided to the participants when they receive their support materials, so they know the range of teaching attributes sought. Furthermore, the criteria reflect that the level of teaching experience is not the crucial determinant of selection, rather the attitudes and teaching potential actually displayed. The demonstration sessions also allow the Senior Tutors and Lecturers to see the kinds of skill development each new tutor might require. This connects the selection of tutors to the next stage which is the skilling of sessional tutors.

Skilling of Sessional Tutors:

Once we have finalised our teaching teams but before the commencement of semester we hold a day long workshop for our sessional tutors. Tutors are paid to attend this workshop. Although originally conceptualised as an induction session for new tutors this workshop has evolved to be relevant to all tutors as a form of continuing professional development as well as opportunities for informal mentoring. Through constructivist activities we engage tutors in areas such as what constructivist teaching and learning is, how to facilitate workshops that are inclusive and active for our diverse cohort of students, how to negotiate problematic situations, and how to become a reflexive teacher. We also provide the rationale and thinking behind our first year transition curriculum. These workshops also unite the tutors in a community of practice with new tutors making connections with each other as well as with those who are more experienced.

In our 'nuts and bolts session' in addition to outlining these processes we will showcase some of the innovative activities that we have developed to skill sessional tutors teaching in large first year courses. We will also highlight potential issues, and how we have resolved them.

Session Plan

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In the 'nuts and bolts' session at the First Year in Higher Education Conference we will outline the models for selection and training of sessional tutors that we have developed. We will also distribute material that we are unable to discuss in the session. Session attendees will be invited to participate and contribute during the presentation as well as having time for discussion and comments in the second half of the session.

Introductions:

- Who we are and the context we work in

Selection of Sessional Tutors:

- Qualities that are ideal for tutors of first year Higher Education students
- Issues with traditional processes in the selection and appointment of tutors
- Principles that a selection process should be based on
- Overview of our model for selection of tutors
- Some other positives and negatives from our experience
- Aspects of our model that are transferable, aspects that may be institution specific

Training of Sessional Tutors:

- Connections between the processes of selection and training
- Overview of our training day
- Example of one activity carried out on the day
- Bigger issues for training sessional tutors

Time for Discussion, Question & Comment

- Session attendees are encouraged to discuss the issues of sessional tutor selection and training, and comment on the models presented.
- Final questions and comments are welcome.

References:

Biggs, J., & Tang, C. (2007). *Teaching for quality learning at university*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

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