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Evaluation of a tutor training programme through the frame of activity theory

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This paper reports on an evaluation study that was conducted on a tutor training programme (TTP) at a University of Technology in South Africa. The TTP was dichotomized into a centralized and decentralized model with the former being managed by the Academic Development Department (to provide generic training) and the latter by the respective faculties (to provide discipline-specific training). The evaluation was framed by activity theory in order to help focus the study.

A triangulation of methods were adopted and include the following: 1) A qualitative study involving face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with the TTP manager, tutor training coordinators and tutors; 2) A qualitative study pertaining to observation of tutor training programmes and 3) Document analysis of the course materials and other relevant documents.

The results showed that the generic training provided (by both models of the TTP) was effective in preparing tutors to cope with a diverse student population. The training was ineffective in that tutors were not trained, within the context of a discipline-specific TTP, on how to facilitate learning so that they would be able to create more meaningful learning places in tutorials. Specifically, during tutor training, too much emphasis was being placed on how to work in a group (in a generic sense) instead of training tutors to facilitate group work (within the context of their disciplines). Among the recommendations made for improvement of the TTP as a place of learning is that there should be a balance between generic and discipline-specific training when conceptualizing and implementing TTPs.

Keywords: Tutor training programme, programme evaluation, higher education

Introduction

If one were to seek documented evidence of the benefits of peer tutoring in higher education, the literature will not disappoint. For example, Comfort’s (2011) investigation on the impact of peer tutoring on academic performance revealed that students who were tutored had significantly higher grades than those who were not. Further, in the midst of the challenges faced by lecturers who have to cope with large classes, peer tutoring provides a mechanism of enhancing deep learning in small groups (Hanley, 1996; Underhill & McDonald, 2010). Peer tutoring can promote more learner-centered activities such as self-directed learning or informal group discussions (Bruffee, 1995), as well as more participative learning and greater ownership of the
learning process (Greenwood, Carta, & Kamps, 1990), which would not be possible in large classes. Yet another advantage of peer tutoring is cited by Bruffee (1993) who claims that tutors can engage in a conversation with students and provide support in translating the terms of the communities they are trying to enter so that they may incorporate the practices of that group. The goal would be to internalize the conversation of the academy so that students eventually become self-sufficient members of the academy.

There is growing research which shows that tutors themselves stand to benefit from the tutor-student relationship in peer tutoring, a phenomenon which has been referred to as reciprocal peer tutoring (Lassegard, 2008; Ching & Chan-Chen, 2011). Through this type of peer tutoring, both tutors and students are able to increase their self-confidence (Ching & Chan-Chen, 2011) and tutors may learn by teaching (Topping, 1998) while developing and enhancing communication, interpersonal and organizational skills (Falchikov, 2001).

It is conventional practice for tutors to be recruited on the merit of their academic performance but being successful in their course work does not necessarily translate into them being successful tutors. Although they might be achieving good grades, they might not be using effective study strategies themselves and will need training to be able to empower students to become competent, independent learners (Rings & Sheets, 1991).

A myriad of tutor training programmes have been published, which address the demands and challenges in higher education. Recognizing that these programmes have to be continuously improved, evaluation studies receive extensive coverage in the tutor training literature (for example Ching & Chang-Chen, 2011; Smitha & Bath, 2003; Underhill & McDonald, 2010). Mouton, and Babbie (2001) provide the following categories of evaluation, taking cognizance that evaluations are conducted for different purposes: 1) judgement-orientated evaluation; 2) improvement-orientated evaluation and 3) knowledge-orientated evaluation.

In this study, the evaluation was improvement-orientated and, therefore, formative in that the intent was to determine how the tutor training programme (TTP) could be improved. This decision was arrived at due to a lack of information regarding the effectiveness of the TTP at the University of Technology where this study was conducted. Hitherto, the evaluation of the TTP was primarily focused on satisfaction surveys that sought to determine what tutors “liked” and “disliked” about the TTP. Thus, the evaluation of the TTP needed to go beyond satisfaction surveys.

Evaluation studies, however, can be a complex task and when they pertain to TTPs the complexity is further multiplied given the multi-faceted dimensions of tutor training. Acknowledging this, Mouton, and Babbie (2001) advise that evaluation requires a frame of reference in order to guide the collection of data and interpretation of empirical findings. In this study, it was thus decided to use activity theory, combined with a conceptualization model for evaluation, in order to provide focus for the design, implementation and analysis of data for the evaluation.
Few researchers have applied theory-driven evaluation with respect to TTPs and in particular, the use of activity theory in that context is somewhat limited. This study attempted to demonstrate how activity theory was applied in focusing the evaluation so that important gaps could be readily identified. These limitations can be addressed by the designers of the TTP so that it can be optimized as a place of learning.

The research questions that guided this study were as follows: 1) How effective is the implementation of the centralized and de-centralized models of the TTP? 2) What are the conceptual differences between the training that is provided by both models of the TTP?

**Theoretical framework for the study**

A conceptual framework for the evaluation study described in this paper (see Hassan, 2012) was created by combining a conceptualization model (comprised of an integration of three evaluation models (see Saunders, 2000; Jacobs, 2000; Winberg, 2011) with activity theory.

Activity theory was chosen as a framework so that the TTP could be evaluated as an entire system rather than focusing on isolated fragments of tutor training. Therefore, the two models (centralized and de-centralized) of the TTP in this study can each be seen as an activity system. The *subject* is the tutor training co-ordinator while the *tools* that are used to act on the object are the teaching and learning methods and materials. The *community* comprises everyone who shares a common *object* (in this case, tutor training) and includes other tutor-training co-ordinators, the tutors, students, link lecturers and lecturers. The *rules*, which promote or constrain behavior, refer to policies for tutor training and selection criteria for tutors. The *division of labour* or roles pertains to what each community member is responsible for doing when acting on the object and describes both a horizontal division as well as a vertical division in terms of their relative positions of power (see figure 1).
Activity theory allows people from different activity systems to work together as the object starts to interact; in the process expansive learning is produced (Engestrom, 2001). Engestrom (1987, 1995) postulates that: “A team embarks on expansive learning when it engages in questioning, reflective communication, and redesign of its own way of working, including its boundaries and its relations to outsiders such as other teams or clients”. In both the centralized and de-centralized models of the TTP, there is a common object (tutor training) and a common outcome, that is, enhancement of learning, which opens up possibilities of expansive learning.

Activity theory itself can be used as a mediating tool for research (Jonassen & Rohrer-Murphy, 1999) and in this respect activity theory which was conjugated with a conceptualization model for evaluation to produce a conceptual framework, was applied in this study. Activity theory is used descriptively as well as an analytical tool to expose contradictions and difficulties between different elements of the activity system (see Engestrom, 2008; Engestrom & Miettinen, 1999). Contradictions are not the same as problems or conflicts but rather historically accumulating structural tensions (Engestrom, 2008). Contradictions can occur at different levels: primary level contradictions pertain to contradictions within elements; secondary level contradictions occur between elements while tertiary and quaternary level contradictions occur between systems (Engestrom, 1987; Roth, 2004).

In this study, the identification of contradictions and difficulties within the TTP helped illuminate what was ineffective about the programme and thus allowed, to some extent, for the first research question to be answered. Also, by viewing the two models of the TTP as activity systems and by using elements of activity theory as a focus for the analysis, a comparison could be made between the models. This helped answer the second research question.

Context of the study

The University of Technology in question was created when a merger took place between two higher education institutions. This precipitated in a large student population with the result that the centralized model, which worked well previously, started taking strain and the infrastructure could barely support the demands for training. At this juncture, the idea to create two TTP models was born: the centralized model would be run by the Academic Development Department while the de-centralized model would be run by each faculty. It was envisaged that the faculties would provide discipline-specific training given the peculiarities of the disciplines. Only one faculty adopted the decentralized TTP model (addressed in this study); other faculties still preferred that their tutors be trained through the centralized TTP.
Research design

In order to answer the research questions (given in the introduction section of this paper), a triangulated data collection approach was adopted, namely, observation studies, document analysis and in-depth face-to-face interviews. Observation studies enabled the researcher to collect contextual data and to see firsthand what tools (materials and pedagogical methods) were being used in the TTP and how those tools would mediate the outcome of enhanced learning. Document analysis helped in the verification of the findings. It was conjectured that interviews would have provided an opportunity to illustrate the different voices that had become embedded in the various elements of the activity system of the TTP (see Engestrom, 2008; Engestrom & Miettinen, 1999). In particular, interviews further provided rich data with a wide range of individual perceptions, conceptions and personal views (Bennett, Dunne, & Carre, 2000) set within the context of the TTP.

Participants for the interviews were selected using the technique of purposive sampling. They had to have been involved in the TTP either as a manager, co-ordinators or tutors so that they could give an informed opinion about the implementation of the programme. Ten participants were interviewed comprising three tutor training co-ordinators, one manager and six tutors (two who had been trained through the de-centralized TTP and four who had been trained through the centralized TTP).

Interviews with the three co-ordinators and the manager who oversees the implementation of the centralized TTP ranged between 40–90 minutes. The interviews with the tutors ranged between 26–52 minutes. All interviews were tape-recorded and hand-written notes taken. The data obtained during the interviews was coded and categorized according to the elements of activity theory as shown in figure 1.

In the reporting of the results, pseudonyms have been used (in some instances) to ensure anonymity. “Jane” is the tutor training co-ordinator within the decentralized model in one of the faculties; “Mary” and “John” are tutor training co-ordinators in the centralized model and “Sue” oversees the implementation of the centralized TTP. (For the purpose of simplification the tutors were not given pseudonyms nor referred to by their real names).

The TTPs of the three tutor training coordinators were observed, with the duration ranging between 2-5 hours. Observation notes were analyzed in accordance with selected components of the framework for observation foci as provided by McMillan and Schumacher (2001), the checklist for observation outlined by Spradley (1980) and the techniques described by Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2000). Themes were grouped in order to identify patterns of behavior, and the identification of critical incidents that would help answer the research questions. Similarities and differences between the training methods of the three co-ordinators were analyzed.
Document analysis of minutes of meetings, email messages, discussion documents and reports were also used as a means of corroborating information obtained during the interviews and observation studies. Other documents for analysis included course materials used during the TTP and the handbook that served as a guide for tutors.

Results and discussion

In this section, the reporting and discussion of the findings of the study are in the form of subsections which are in line with the elements of activity theory as illustrated in figure 1.

1. Object: Purpose of the tutor training programme

Engestrom (1987) proclaims that it is important to clarify the motives and goals of the activity system in order to understand the context within which activities occur and to understand the motivation for the activity being modeled and any interpretations of perceived contradictions. In the context of this study, this step helped identify contradictions inherent in the purpose of both models.

With reference to the centralized model, Sue (manager of the centralized TTP) pointed out that training was “generic” and based on an experiential model. They “don’t look at content” since that is the domain of lecturers who are experts in their fields. Rather, the focus of the training was (inter alia) on the inculcation of interpersonal skills, self-awareness, the promotion of the identity of the tutor, and communication skills. John (co-ordinator of the centralized TTP) explained that the aim of the TTP that he facilitated was “to give consistent and meaningful support to [tutors] while Mary’s (co-ordinator of the centralized TTP) aim was “to give [tutors] certain skills, such as questioning skills, to use in tutorials”.

According to Jane (co-ordinator of the de-centralized TTP), the de-centralized TTP was “discipline specific”, especially during the simulation phase when a lecturer was called in to present discipline content and thereafter tutors were expected to run a mock tutorial.

Therefore, from the interviews there were apparent conceptual differences between the two models: generic training versus discipline-specific training. The observation studies sought to verify this finding and to provide more insight into how the TTP was conceptualized, by examining how they were being implemented, that is, what tools were being used.

3. Tools: Materials and methods used in the training

Both models of the TTP ran over two days. Typically, on the first day there was a focus on ice-breakers and allowing tutors to get to know each other. During this time, issues of diversity and the accommodation thereof are addressed; this is important given that the South African population is so diverse. The second day is set aside for actually preparing tutors for tutoring.
Document analysis of the 121 page handbook contains a vast repertoire of generic topics relevant to the training of tutors, as shown below:

- Interpersonal communication.
- Understanding learning.
- Mentoring, motivating and building relationships.
- Facilitating learning.
- Useful techniques and strategies.
- Study skills.
- Examination techniques.
- Tutoring at the university.

The handbook provided scenarios for authentic learning within a tutorial context in order to prepare tutors for their future roles in facilitating tutorials. It also promoted reflection among tutors in order to inculcate empathy for students.

The similarity in both models of the TTP was that the handbook was used as the main resource. The difference was the way in which content was interpreted and applied through varied teaching and learning strategies which were predominantly socio-constructivist in nature and comprised small group discussions, interactive power point presentations, simulations, viewing and discussion of videos, tutor presentations and large group discussions. Examples of the methodological tools used are given below.

In John’s (co-ordinator of the centralized TTP) session, tutors presented topics related to discipline knowledge to the group. A critical incident occurred when one of the tutors spoke with a strong French accent and struggled to make herself understood. She was teaching (not facilitating) a difficult concept in Chemistry, and English was not her mother tongue language. Also, she became increasingly frustrated when the chemical terms she was using were foreign to the other tutors who did not have a science background. When she later reflected on her experience, she said that it was an indication of and good preparation for the challenges she could face when she is actually tutoring.

The topics covered during the interactive presentation of Jane’s (co-ordinator of the de-centralized TTP) session focused mainly on generic skills with only the last phase of the training involving a simulation exercise. A lecturer was invited to give a mini-lecture on a topic in Chemistry and tutors were expected to do a presentation as part of a simulated tutorial. Therefore, primary level contradiction (see Engestrom, 1987; Roth, 2004) was found in the tools used in the de-centralized TTP which should have had a discipline specific focus but instead was predominantly generic in nature and somewhat similar to the centralized TTP.

An attempt at benchmarking of tutor training shows that there is a leaning towards providing discipline specific training even when generic training is being offered. At the University of Stellenbosch in South Africa, the Centre for Teaching and Learning (2012) offers a generic tutor training service to departments but works with lecturers to customize the programme so that
discipline-specific examples augment the generic training. Other researchers discuss a model where staff could be developed to run their own TTPs in their departments. For example, Smitha & Bath (2003) describe a tutor training model at the University of Queensland that is centrally driven yet devolved for its de-centralized, discipline specific implementation to departmental contexts. The academic development unit develops departmental tutor trainers who would then conduct TTPs for tutors in their respective departments.

The Queensland model was not without its constraints, though, which should be heeded by tutor trainer planners embarking on similar hybrid strategies. The designers made the assumption that developing departmental tutor trainers in the general principles of teaching and learning would result in their effective application within TTPs in departments. When these tutor trainers tried to implement discipline specific TTPs in their departments they experienced challenges which were peculiar to those contexts. They had not been adequately prepared to apply the generic skills acquired to their discipline-specific situation and in this sense, the training seemed irrelevant to their departmental concerns (Smitha & Bath 2003).

4. **Roles: Division of labour of the tutor training co-ordinator (as the subject) and the tutors.**

The role of the tutor-training co-ordinator was to prepare course materials and to implement learner-centered teaching and learning methodologies in the TTP. Another role was, as John (co-ordinator of the centralized TTP) explained: “to facilitate and role model the prototype of a tutor”. Mary (co-ordinator of the centralized TTP) added that her role as a tutor training co-ordinator was “…to provide clear guidelines, to empower tutors and to build confidence and to recognize them as a tutor”. According to Jane (co-ordinator of the de-centralized TTP), the role of the tutor training coordinator was to “support tutors to work through the process of running tutorials”.

The role of the tutors discussed here was two-fold and focuses on their role as participants in the TTP as well as how they were being prepared for their future role as tutors. In terms of the latter, the “do’s and don’ts of tutoring” was an important agenda within the TTP of both models as was evident during the observation studies. Discussions centered on confidentiality, issues of identity and how tutors should avoid assuming the role of a lecturer, that is, as a dispenser of knowledge, but rather as a facilitator of learning. For example, during Jane’s (co-ordinator of the de-centralized TTP) training session she advised tutors not to teach content but to give students problems to work through and to redirect questions before offering guidance. Mary (co-ordinator of the centralized TTP) adhered to similar principles: “The tutorial space is not a lecture. We want [tutors] to model the design of the training and emphasize group activities”.

With regard to the role of the tutors as participants in the TTP, an insightful observation was made by one of the tutors who proclaimed that the TTP had focused on “how to work in a group” but did not prepare them to facilitate group work. Therefore, they were expected to be facilitators of group work but were being trained inappropriately in the TTP. This could probably be due to the co-ordinators still regarding the tutors as students rather than as prospective
facilitators of learning. Drawing on activity theory, this is an example of primary level contradiction (see Engestrom, 1987; Roth, 2004) in the tools that are used in the TTP.

Furthermore, the stance taken by Jane (co-ordinator of the de-centralized TTP) and Mary (co-ordinator of the centralized TTP) regarding the role of the tutor as a facilitator of learning contradicted that taken by John (co-ordinator of the centralized TTP) who had asked tutors to do a presentation on a discipline-specific topic and to focus on content, that is, they had to teach. Thus, the way in which the role of the tutor is conceptualized in both models is another example of primary level contradiction (see Engestrom, 1987; Roth, 2004). When we turn to the literature we see that, in their training, tutors are expected to adopt learner-centered approaches to tutoring where they would facilitate learning and are encouraged to refrain from using didactic, tutor-centered approaches where they would be more prescriptive (Williams, 2008; Sanderson, Clewes, & Hand, 1998). This is a way of addressing the issue of “tutor power”: “….the power of the tutor has to diminish to the point where the students do not feel inhibited.” (Sanderson, Clewes, & Hand, 1998:39).

5. Community

An assumption of activity theory is that: “activities are complex and interactive, which necessitates collaborative effort” (Jonassen & Rohrer-Murphy, 1999: 67). Activity theory nomenclature such as “network”, “knotworking” and “co-configuration”, are used to illustrate how activity systems interact (Avis, 2009; Engestrom, 2008) and, thus, how people collaborate as a community. Network refers to collaboration across traditional boundaries with a focus on connecting and reciprocating rather than competing as individual groups (or organizations) to succeed (Engestrom, 2008). Knotworking is characterized by a movement of tying, untying and retying together seemingly separate threads of activity (Engestrom, 2008:194). In knotworking, collaboration between role players takes place in the absence of strong predetermined rules or central authority (Engestrom, 2008). Whereas network is a relatively stable connection between organizational units, knotworking is characterized by negotiation and “rapidly pulsating, distributed and partially improvised orchestration of collaborative performance” (Engestrom 2008: 194, 196). Co-configuration refers to the continuous configuration of products and services in interaction and collaboration with the client (Victor & Boynton, 1998).

As discussed earlier, when the objects from different activity systems start to interact and people work collaboratively the benefit accrued is expansive learning (Engestrom, 2001). In the context of this study, what was identified as potentially problematic was the lack of communication and collaboration among all three co-ordinators and the TTP manager; even though they were all focused on a common object, namely, tutor training. For instance, John (co-ordinator of the centralized TTP) admitted that he had never even met Jane (the co-ordinator of the de-centralized TTP). Mary (co-ordinator of the centralized TTP) commented that she and Jane (co-ordinator of the de-centralized TTP) only had a couple of meetings and that they “linked loosely”. Notwithstanding that Mary and John were both involved in co-ordinating the centralized TTP, collaboration between them was minimal. More open communication, sharing of techniques for good practice and collaboration (as a network or through knotworking) would have created
opportunities for expansive learning and, arguably, could have resulted in the TTPs being further optimized. Also, the notion of co-configuration could be applied through engagement with tutors (as “clients”) for the betterment of the TTP.

6. Rules

There was no policy for tutor training within the centralized model. In the faculty under study, there was no stand alone policy; rather tutor training was located within the teaching and learning strategy for that faculty. Starks (1984:5) proclaims that: “it is important to put the rules and policies of the tutor programme in writing. When planning budgets these policies assist in the formulation of goals and objectives”.

7. Outcome

 Mostly, the perceptions and experiences of tutors regarding the TTP were positive. They indicated that they had benefitted from the generic training as it showed them how to accommodate for the diverse backgrounds of students and differences in learning styles.

Tutors stated that the students they tutored came from diverse cultural, racial, national and socio-economic backgrounds. The TTP had given them a “feel” for how to work with prospective students. Whenever possible they had provided assistance to students in their mother tongue language in order to “make it easier for them to understand”. One tutor explained: “Some students are intimidated in class and tutors act as mediators and translators between lecturers and students. I go over what they’ve done in class and try to explain in a language they understand…Students understand better in their mother tongue language”. Another tutor endorsed this by saying: “Xhosa tutors explained solutions to Xhosa students”. Another tutor said that he speaks Afrikaans (a South African language) and English only, but that he learns African language terms from his students which he then uses in his tutoring.

Further, by addressing the learning styles of their students, tutors were also able to render the content of the subject more understandable. For example, tutors described how making the content “more visual” enhances students’ understanding. One of them reported: “I look for a picture [of the content] on the internet, not just the words”.

Suggestions for improving both models of the TTP included making the training discipline-specific. One tutor advised: “...Get the tutors to go through the subject so that it gets easier when it comes to helping students, because we forget [the content]”. In addition, the TTP was over-emphasizing group work rather than focusing on equipping tutors with “tutoring skills”.

Conclusion

The TTP was effective in that generic skills training such as the accommodation of diversity and cross-cultural communication were useful in enabling tutors to cope with the challenges of tutoring a diverse student population. The TTP, however, proved to be ineffective at two levels.
Firstly, the training was somewhat inappropriate and inadequate in teaching tutors how to facilitate tutorials. The tutor training co-ordinators did not acknowledge and accommodate for the powerful position that tutors will occupy as facilitators of learning when they would eventually run tutorials. Secondly, the training was too generic in nature. Discipline-specific training, which could have helped tutors enhance their (and their students’) discipline knowledge, was being addressed to a limited extent. The de-centralized model of the TTP was meant to be providing discipline-specific training but this was not happening. There were stark similarities between the way in which the two TTP models were conceptualized and implemented when in fact they were meant to be different.

Based on the findings described in this paper and as a way of addressing the limitations identified, the following recommendations are offered:

- Communication between members of the TTP community should be promoted. A chief coordinator who should be in charge of coordinating both models should initiate and sustain communication for the sharing of good practice.

- The balance between generic training and discipline specific training should be part of the conceptualization of tutor training, within both models, and should be embedded within a tutor training policy.

- A staff development initiative should be in place to develop tutor training co-ordinators on how to train tutors more appropriately in becoming facilitators of tutorials as a place of learning.

A limitation of the study was that it was conducted at a one institution. Other studies need to be conducted at other sites for the results to be generalizable. Also, the study focuses on the implementation of the TTP only; other phases of tutor training need to be evaluated to obtain a more holistic view of the effectiveness of the TTP.

A further limitation of the study was the small sample size especially in terms of the number of tutors, that is, two de-centralized TTP tutors and four centralized TTP tutors. Nevertheless, the findings could be useful to researchers who are involved in professional development of tutors and lecturers. Further studies could include a larger sample size.

From the angle of activity theory, intentions and plans, which manifest as actions in the real world, are not cast in stone but are always incomplete and shifting and can be re-conceptualized and re-negotiated (Jonassen & Rohrer-Murphy, 1999). Therefore, the results of this evaluation study could contribute to the re-conceptualization of the TTP based on what is being done versus what should be done to create a better place for learning.

References


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