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Influences in the design of a faculty-wide tutor development program

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***Abstract**: Tutors play a pivotal role in bridging the gap between lecturer and student, and in facilitating student-centred learning. It is essential, therefore, that tutors develop the necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes to ensure "quality" learning outcomes. A new Tutor Development Program has been developed for the Faculty of Information Technology, which comprises eight Schools across seven campuses. Being a Faculty-wide Program, it will ensure a minimum standard of tutoring across the Faculty, and will provide a pool of tutors who can move across the School boundaries. In turn, this flexibility will allow support of collaborative approaches to subject delivery across Schools that have similar subject material but a different computing focus. This paper highlights the major influences that have shaped the design and delivery of the Program, and discusses the diverse "conversations" that have helped to determine its quality.*

***Keywords**: tutor development, learning community, defining quality*

Introduction

In unravelling the theme of this Conference, we were struck by the parallels between the term ***quality conversations*** and the attributes we wanted to reflect in our Tutor Development Program. Since early 2000, the Facilitated Learning for Information Technology Education (FLITE) Centre has been involved with establishing this Program, which is intended to improve the quality of tutoring practice throughout the Faculty of Information Technology at Monash University. The ambition of the Program is to produce standardised and consistent educational outcomes across the Faculty, by providing an environment where quality conversations can occur, and promoting conversations about quality.

Etymological influences

An etymological and symbolic exploration of a word expands on its explicit literal meaning and places it into an enlarged context within which literal meanings are connected to implications not usually taken into account. Consequently a closer examination of the words *quality* and *conversation* allows new meaning and thus new understanding to emerge.

The Oxford English Dictionary (1989) defines *quality* as meaning the form, character or nature of something or someone; capacity, ability or skill; a mental or moral attribute; an

accomplishment. Hence by defining something as having quality, we give it definition; we determine its nature. Importantly, the corollary is also true**:** by defining something**,** we determine its quality. The term quality is usually associated with excellence, and conversations about excellence are often all too brief.

The term *conversation* has its origin in the Latin root *versari*, which means to dwell, hence *conversation* literally means to be situated or occupied with. The Oxford English Dictionary (1989) expands this definition to include a conversation as being "the action of living or having one's being in a place or among persons; at home, an interchange of ideas; the occupation or engagement with things as in the way of study; a circle of acquaintance or company; the manner of conducting oneself in the world; a public discussion or debate". Interestingly, the word *converse* used as an adjective or noun derives from the Latin root *vertere* meaning to turn. To have a conversation is also "to turn oneself about; to become; to transform" (Skeat, 1993). It is worthy to note that from *vertere* we also get some of the following derivatives: versatile, version, diverse, versus, conversion and verse.

Thus in a conversation, diverse and sometimes opposing views are articulated and in the process new shared insights are gained. An effective conversation is an art requiring a flexible and open mind, together with a preparedness to convert others to our view and at the same time, a willingness to accept the views of others. Another interesting view of *conversation* appears in The Dictionary of Mythology, Folklore and Symbols by Gertrude Jobes (1962), where she lists the following:

"An Italian icon personified by a smiling young man dressed in green, a laurel wreath on his head. He carries a Mercury rod, twisted about with myrtle and pomegranate and ending in a human tongue at the top. A scroll reads "Vae Soli" (woe to him that is alone). The myrtle and the pomegranate show mutual amity."

Delving deeper into the symbolism of this image, we find that that the colour green represents abundance, guidance, initiation, knowledge, wisdom and joyousness. The laurel wreath is believed to confer knowledge and distinction. Mercury was the messenger of the Gods – a fact gatherer and distributor of information, and he represents the process of building bridges between higher understanding and everyday reality. A mercury rod is associated with eloquence and the various forms of information exchange such as writing, speech and teaching. The attributes of myrtle include amiability, authority and academy. It was also the Christian symbol of conversion (which has the same Latin root as conversation). Pomegranate is often credited as being the forbidden fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, and is symbolic of concord, fecundity and union. Indeed, all of the above are valued characteristics we want incorporated in our Tutor Development Program.

As an aside, our program was originally referred to as the Tutor *Training* Program. However, an etymological analysis of the word "Training" indicated that the word originates from the Latin *traginare*, meaning to drag along. We certainly did not want this reflected in our Program. By contrast, "Development" is derived from *volvere*, which means to unfold or open out. Our Program is designed to provide an environment and structure where the potential of tutors can unfold through diverse conversations of, and about, quality.

Historical influences

The Tutor Development Program has its origins in a joint research project beginning in 1995 between the School of Computer Science and Software Engineering and the Faculty of Education (Carbone and Mitchell, 1998). Initial observations revealed that the majority of

tutors often had little or no teaching skills, and active student participation was low with many tutorials degenerating into pseudo mini lectures.

A program for tutors was then initiated which provided an induction workshop and weekly meetings in collaboration with all the teaching staff involved in the delivery of the subject. Research revealed that tutors attending the Program developed confidence and skills in teaching and became more realistic in their expectations of students (Sheard and Hagan, 1999). This program continued and expanded to include induction training for the School of Information Management Systems tutors.

Currently induction workshops for sessional staff are run by three of the six Schools of the Faculty. These workshops provide information for tutors regarding the role of the student and tutor, the use of icebreakers, principles of learning, and some teaching strategies. As many of the tutors have not tutored at this stage, it is difficult for them to discuss possible issues and problems in anything other than a hypothetical sense. Ongoing tutor support is left to the supervising lecturer. Consequently the amount of support and input varies considerably. At best, weekly meetings occur where issues relating to the running of tutorials are discussed between a number of tutors and the lecturer, with tutors contributing actively to the process. At worst, there is no contact between tutors and lecturer, except by the provision of an exercise sheet containing exercises the tutor is expected to work through in class. Regardless of the current situation, there is no opportunity for the tutor to practise or receive advice on skills needed to tutor successfully, nor is there any opportunity for the tutor to reflect upon the learning process and discuss this with peers or academic staff. There is certainly no assessment of a tutor's ability to run tutorials successfully. Further, these programs are usually conducted once per year, and hence any new tutors commencing in second or summer semester would be expected to tutor without the benefit of such programs.

For the other three schools, no formal tutor training is provided, with such advice and support left up to the supervising lecturer.

Organisational influences

A number of organisational factors have played a key role in the design of the new Tutor Development Program. These influences extend from the macro level of the university visions and policy to the local level of individual disciplines.

University level

At the university level, the Monash Plan, *Leading The Way: Monash 2020* (1999), identifies engagement, innovation and internationalisation as the defining themes for the University. These three themes are intended to guide the development of academic programs and teaching practices across the university. The Tutor Development Program embraces all three aspects.

Engagement

It is recognised that engagement of students begins in the tutorial, which provides the hands-on, interactive environment that supports learning; the tutor's role in facilitating this process is vital. Accordingly, the Program is designed to engage tutors in the development of both their teaching skills and their own learning. At the same time the program provides tutors with a model for how to engage students in the learning process.

Innovation

Providing a variety of learning experiences for tutors (ranging from an online flexible learning resource, to individual mentoring, to facilitation of peer group networks) sits well

with innovative and holistic approaches to flexible education. Tutors have the opportunity to learn at their own pace, and when and where they choose. They are provided with a supportive environment in which the needs and development of each individual are addressed.

Internationalisation

Many of the tutors within the Faculty are international students, and as such offer a diversity of cultural influences, perspectives and needs. In addition, many of these individuals have a background of traditional didactic learning environments, with little or no experience in tutoring. As such, many of the roles needed to tutor successfully are not developed, and encouragement and support are essential to develop the skills required to meet the university's student-centred independent learning objectives.

These international influences are made more immediate and pressing by the geographical expansion of the university, which now serves markets in Europe, South Africa and South East Asia, as well as across Victoria. This geographical spread is reflected in the organisation of the Faculty of Information Technology, which comprises eight Schools across seven campuses.

Faculty level

At the Faculty level, a number of factors have influenced the design the Tutor Development Program, including

- the number, structure and geographical location of the Schools within the Faculty, and the attendant challenges of communication;
- the range of courses and degree programs on offer, and the diversity of needs with respect to resourcing and methodology they require; and
- the emphasis placed on tutoring as a component of the teaching of a course, and the level of support given to tutors.

Another significant influence has been the formation in July 2000 of the FLITE Centre. The Centre's core aim is to create a collaborative environment that fosters excellence in teaching. An extensive needs analysis conducted by the FLITE Centre, in conjunction with each of the Schools of the Faculty, identified tutor development as a critically important issue. In the evaluation conducted after the first induction workshops run by the FLITE Centre, tutors indicated they required a program that supported their needs in an ongoing fashion and expressed a desire for role development and information in a variety of topics not covered in the current induction workshop.

Establishment of the FLITE Centre provided an opportunity to implement a Faculty-wide approach to tutor development, in support of, and to ultimately replace, the somewhat uneven efforts currently in place. This will ensure a consistent standard for tutors, provide a reliable quality of tutor support for students across all degrees within the faculty, and allow a greater flexibility in employment of tutors across the Schools. It will also assist students to become independent learners by providing appropriate tutor support at the different levels of the undergraduate degree program.

Discipline level

The range of disciplines within the Faculty requires that tutors develop a corresponding range of discipline-specific skills, in addition to generic tutoring skills. For example, some subjects

use practical laboratories, while others require extensive practice through the working of set problems. In other subjects, facilitation of discussion amongst students is a key skill.

In response to these influences, the Tutor Development Program draws on input from tutors and academics across all disciplines, in the form of tips, case studies, and discipline-specific experiences and examples. This will enable the Program to help tutors with practical, "here's how you might answer this specific question" advice.

Pedagogical influences

The Tutor Development Program is premised on several fundamental pedagogical principles. All of the pedagogical principles and practices outlined below profoundly influenced the design of the Tutor Development Program.

Metalearning

Tutors need to be taught ***how to learn*** so that they can become independent learners who support each other, and their students, in their development. An understanding of the mechanisms of learning as well as preferences for learning, and how to manage learning opportunities, is essential for lifelong self-directed learning (Gagne, 1988)

Constructivism

Tutors will construct their understanding based on their unique life experiences and the knowledge they bring into the learning situation (Alexander, 1999; Spiro, Feltovich, Jacobson and Coulson, 1992;). Diverse learning styles, cultural influences, perceptions and interests need not only to be acknowledged, but also to be harnessed to enrich the learning experience for all concerned.

Action learning

It is well known that action is essential to learning (Ellis and Phelps, 2000). A variety of activities that stimulate engagement in the learning process need to be created, including role-plays, listening activities, problem solving and discussion activities, partner exercises, and feedback and evaluation exercises

Reflective practice

Teaching tutors how to be reflective practitioners will help them to gain insight into the content of the Program, the process of learning**,** and themselves as learners (Schön, 1983). Reflective practice can be encouraged through the development of questioning techniques, encouragement in the use of reflective journals, discussion of the learning process, and the facilitation of the establishment of reflective peer study groups.

Evaluation

Ongoing feedback and evaluation are essential to ensure a Program that maintains the highest standards of excellence. When excellence and quality are clearly defined and articulated quantifiable measures of success are readily determined.

Constructing the Program

A key feature of the process used to design the new Program is collaborative interaction, which we have used to determine both the structures and content, and the modes of delivery. In constructing the Program we sought to create a learning environment that fosters the development of the whole person and addresses learning across all learning domains (cognitive, physical, affective and social). The resultant Program is intended to serve as an

exemplar of flexible learning and teaching, not only for the tutors themselves, but also for academics across the Faculty who are developing new subjects or courses.

A fundamental requirement was to arrive at a definition of quality. Bearing in mind the etymological meaning of quality, we needed to consider the following questions:

- What form would a quality Tutor Development Program take?
- What characterised a quality tutor, and what knowledge, skills and attitudes did that imply?
- What constituted quality learning in students?

In turn, this meant that we needed to ask what content would we provide and what processes would we use both to deliver the content and to ensure the development of quality tutors.

To answer these questions we needed to have many "conversations", to allow for the greatest possible diversity of input. This would ensure the widest possible ownership of, and agreement on, the goals, approaches and desired outcomes of the Program. By embracing this diverse input we would guarantee a Program with the greatest possible versatility. We would arrive at the most comprehensive definition of "quality" in the sense of form and of what is considered important and significant.

There are two levels at which these conversations occur. On one level are the conversations that help shape the design, development and delivery of the Program itself, and on the other are the conversations we want tutors to become involved in during their participation in the Program. These latter conversations are particularly critical in the delivery of quality tutoring because we believe they foster the building of relationships and engender a sense of support and purpose amongst the tutors. (One of the many difficulties tutors have expressed is a feeling of isolation.) How the FLITE Centre staff members facilitate these parallel sets of conversations is summarised in Table 1, below.

Features of the Program

The initial phase of development of the Program involved input from two focus groups, across all Schools: one comprising experienced tutors and the other comprising academics. Together these groups have helped to determine both ***what*** content to deliver, and ***how***, ***when***, ***where*** and by ***whom*** this content will be delivered.
Some of the issues resolved by the focus groups included

- topics considered to be essential, desirable, or optional, and to be delivered either in face-to-face workshops or as self study online modules;
- the form of assessment, both formative and summative; and
- the level of academic involvement in the delivery of the Program

The focus groups also collaborated in determining the overall structure of the Program, particularly the modes of delivery (induction workshop, follow-up workshops, online modules) and the number and timing of workshops.

Content

It was also agreed that tutor development across all the domains of learning should be an essential requirement of the Program. Accordingly, the following knowledge, skills, attitudes and social roles will be developed.

Knowledge

This will include principles of good learning, the purpose and goals of a tutorial, roles, expectations and responsibilities of both tutors and students, use of warm ups, engagement of

students, learning styles, facilitation, formative and summative assessment processes, managing tutorial workloads, support services available to students.

Table 1: Facilitation of quality conversations to be provided by those developing and running the Program.

	Tutors participating in the Program	Development of the Program
Conversations with **Self**:	Provide exercises and opportunities for tutors to reflect on their own development, through journal writing, mentoring and small group supervision.	Pursue continual improvement through monitoring of quality. Develop evaluation criteria and procedures. Incorporate new technologies and pedagogical principles.
Conversations with **Academics:**	Broker formal, discipline-based relationships between academics and tutors. Provide opportunities to support and encourage informal relationships between academics and tutors. Promote greater appreciation of the role and significance of tutoring.	Conduct open forums to solicit views and ideas from academics. Use content provided by lecturers as a focus for instruction. Develop discipline-specific exercises, problems, case studies as resources
Conversations with **Tutors:**	Promote active participation in online discussion groups. Encourage active membership of a peer study group. Develop a "buddy" program whereby experienced tutors can mentor novice tutors.	Conduct ongoing forums to solicit feedback and ideas from tutors Collect and disseminate tips, case studies, and personal experiences of tutoring from tutors.
Conversations with **Students:**	Ensure that tutors develop roles in facilitating active student participation in tutorials. Promote awareness of the impact of diverse learning styles, cultures and interests of students on learning outcomes.	Get feedback from students on their needs. Facilitate the development of multidisciplinary and multicultural learning communities.

Skills

Practical skills to be developed include lesson plan development, marking guide development, formative and summative assessment of student work, how to give feedback, problem-solving approaches, the art of questioning, learning process development and dealing with difficult situations.

Attitudes and values

This focuses on the development of the role of the tutor as mentor and facilitator through role-plays, tutor insights, personal sharing and reflective journals. Development of values and attitudes will concentrate on putting the learning control in the hands of the student and promoting values such as creativity, spontaneity, and flexibility.

Social roles

These include a range of interpersonal skills relating to collaboration, team work, multicultural issues and ethical considerations, as well as relationships with students, fellow tutors and academics.

Delivery

The Tutor Development Program will be run as a pilot study in Semester One of 2002 for sessional tutors of all Schools within the Faculty**,** and will adopt the following practices**:**

- Integration of knowledge, skills, attitudes and social roles– the approach taken will be to embed instruction within a practical framework.
- Opportunity to develop and practise skills – through role-play, practical application, case studies and assessment, tutors will have the opportunity, not only to develop practical skills, but also to receive feedback on their development.
- Collaborative learning approaches – this will include discussion (both face-to-face and online) with peers, and the development of collaborative approaches to learning, thus allowing tutors to model group processes for their own students.
- Reflective activities – opportunities to reflect on their own and their students' learning will be provided. As most tutors are also students (Honours, Masters and PhD students) it is intended that this process will benefit the tutors in their own learning.
- Provision of on-going support – through the online environment, workshops and supervision groups throughout the semester, the program will provide coaching for tutors and the opportunity to discuss issues as they arise, enabling them to grow and develop as tutors.

The variety of delivery modes and learning environments to be employed by the Tutor Development Program is summarised in Table 2.

Table 2: Modes of delivery and learning environments provided by the Tutor Development Program.

		Learning Environment	
		Virtual	**Face-to-face**
Delivery Mode	**Dynamic**	On-line discussion forums and newsgroups	Workshops Individual mentoring Small group supervision Peer study groups
	Static	Web site Online self study modules Case studies Tips and techniques Discipline specific exercises Email	Workshop handbook Reference texts

Assessment of tutors

The Tutor Development Program is intended to provide tutors with Faculty-wide accreditation in the form of a Certificate of Tutoring Practice. The program will provide both formative and summative assessment of the tutors. Tutors will be encouraged to keep a

reflective journal. Formative assessment will be provided through regular meetings and feedback from other tutors, academic staff, and FLITE Centre staff. Summative assessment will be through the evaluation of a variety of practical skills associated with tutoring and may include

- submission of a detailed lesson plan for one tutorial;
- submission of a report on their observations and analysis of one tutorial session;
- development of a marking guide; and
- participation in an asynchronous online discussion forum.

Evaluation of the Tutor Development Program

As a result of the processes outlined in this paper, which are the culmination of many diverse conversations, we have been able to define what constitutes quality, in terms of the Program itself, the tutors it is intended to produce, and ultimately, the graduates produced by the Faculty. Having defined "quality", there are quantifiable criteria by which the success of the Program in delivering quality will be evaluated. This will be done by an independent panel of academics, as well as by the participating tutors. The resulting evaluation of the Program and its effectiveness in promoting improvements to tutoring practice will be reported in a subsequent paper.

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