MULTIPLE STUDENT VOICES: WHAT MAKES AN EFFECTIVE TUTORIAL?

Mégan-Leigh Burgoyne
Educational Advisor
Centre for Teaching and Learning

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Stellenbosch University
Context

- medium-sized research-led institution
- situated in the Western Cape, South Africa
- approximately 25,000 students
- 4,800 making up the first-year cohort

Sitting this Study

Phase 1

• 2008: SU Economics dept & CTL embarked on 1st research project:
  "Tutoring is fun - a good experience": An Empirical Study Investigating Tutor Motivation (published in November 2009)

Phase 2

• 2008/2009: SU Economics dept, Biology dept & CTL collaborate on 2nd research project:
  "Tutors’ Perceptions of Two Tutorial Programmes at Stellenbosch University"

Phase 3

• 2009: SU Economics dept & CTL embark on 3rd research project:
  "Multiple Student Voices: What makes an Effective Tutorial?"

Rationale for this Study

• Since large amounts of time & resources are spent on providing tutorials to 1st year students on SU campus...
  - Do students find them effective?
  - What is the role of the tutor?
  - Why is review of existing modes of delivery in tutorials important for improvement?
What do 1st-year SU Economics students value in their tutorial classes?
Why do students attend tutorials even when they are not compelled to do so?
What factors hinder their participation in tutorials when compelled to?
What aspects of their tutors teaching styles should be maintained or improved?
What should be taken into account when tutorial programmes are evaluated?

Implemented in 2007
Focuses on first-year success
Providing support for development & extension of new or existing tutorial programmes
Recognises that the pattern of student engagement is changing in HE
Is therefore a “deep commitment running through the institution, which seeks to maximise the success of its students” (Yorke & Thomas, 2003)

Provides support to
Tutors
Lecturers/tutor coordinators
Support from an academic development perspective in terms of:
Tutor training
Logistic & Administrative assistance
SU Tutor Training Programme

- Upon request from depts
- Lecturers are encouraged to join
- Tailor-made according to specific needs

- 5 generic components:
  - Roles and responsibilities
  - Understanding how students approach learning
  - Facilitation & communication skills
  - Diversity & classroom management
  - Preparing for your first tutorial

SU Student Feedback System

- In the interest of accountability, reflection of teaching is encouraged
- Promotes the evaluation of tutors & provides tutors with a formal report post evaluation
- Depts are encouraged to make use of this service to ensure tutorials are reviewed

The SU Economics Dept

- Characterised by high-enrolment rates
- Typically 350 students/lecture
- 30 students/tutorial
- 1st-year students generally perceive Economics to be difficult and abstract (Van der Merwe, 2006)

The SU Economics Tutorial Programme

- Was revised in 2005
- In 2008, it employed 23 tutors who supported approx. 1700 students
- These students include:
  - Those who are compelled to attend if they fail the EA test, or any subsequent high-stakes test
  - Those who choose to attend even though they are not compelled to do so
- Tutorials take place once a week
Responsibilities of the Tutor

- Assisting students in applying & understanding content by working through the problem sets
- Students have to be active – not a mini-lecture – use of small group work
- Tutor = facilitator / ‘guide on the side’
- Encouraged to make use of teaching aids
- Encouraged to check that students attempted the problems set
- Act professionally & show keen interest in the performance of their students

So, what is an Effective Tutorial?

- This approach to the theory is based on the understanding that learning is constructive, cumulative and active
- In the context of the SU Economics dept, considerable emphasis is placed on:
  1. Student engagement
  2. Peer-assisted learning
  3. Role of the tutor

Promoting Student Engagement

- Student engagement = one of the better predictors of student Success (Astin, 1993)
- The more students study or practice a subject, the more they tend to learn about it. Likewise, the more students practice and get feedback on their writing, analyzing or problem-solving, the more adept they will become (Carini, Kuh & Klein, 2006)
- Responsibility of the teacher/tutor as facilitator of learning experiences & opportunities (Smit et.al. 2005)

Peer-Assisted Learning

- PAL = group of strategies involving active & interactive mediation of learning through learners who are not professional teachers” (Topping & Ehly, 2001)
- Peer tutoring is a form of PAL
- PAL is interpreted as a subset of collaborative learning
Tasked with facilitating learning & stimulating cooperation (Schmidt & Moust, 1998)
- Needs to challenge students to clarify ideas, check for inconsistencies & consider alternatives
- Helps students organise knowledge, resolve misconceptions
- To do this, tutor needs a suitable knowledge base, willingness to become involved in an authentic way & the skill to express ideas in a language understood by students (Schmidt & Moust 1998)

Should have cognitive congruence (Schmidt & Moust, 1995)
- Should be sensitive to problems students may experience
- Should know when to intervene and what to offer

Theory of effective tutor merges two perspectives:
- The personal qualities of the tutor, ability to communicate informally, empathy
- The tutor’s subject-matter knowledge

May 2008: 800 students completed a tutorial student feedback form
- Form consisted of four sections:
  1: questions regarding the tutorial programme in general
  2: questions regarding the tutor in general
  3: open-ended questions regarding the compulsory nature of the tutorials
  4: open-ended questions regarding the aspects of the tutor’s teaching style should be maintained or improved

Students rated their opinion on a Likert scale of 1 – 5
- Categories collapsed into ‘disagree’ and ‘agree’
- Neutral not included for ease of interpretation
- Open responses grouped thematically and trends are highlighted
**Results**

- Reports the students ratings of:
  - The organisation & logistics of the tutorial programme
  - Their tutor’s performance in general
- Reports on the open-ended responses regarding:
  - The compulsory nature of the tutorials
  - The aspects of the tutor’s teaching style should be maintained or improved

**Students general perceptions of the programme**

- 97% agreed that the material covered and discussed in the tutorials was course-related
- 78% agreed that “the tutorials in this module are essential for my academic success”

**Tutorial Programme Admin & Logistics**

**Tutor’s Teaching Attributes (1)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>This tutor...</th>
<th>% disagree</th>
<th>% agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ap(les)inter-active strategies &amp; encouraged participation</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>makes it easy for me to participate in discussions</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>communicates clearly</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
If you are not compelled to attend the tutorials, why do you attend?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To gain better understanding/insight &amp; to learn</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To practice/revise</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because the tutorials are helpful</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For test and exam preparation</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I want to do well in Economics/improve my marks</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>380</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If you are not compelled to attend the tutorials, why do you attend? (2)

- “it helps to understand the calculations and how to answer questions”
- “difficult module, need extra practice”
- “tutorial class has helped me considerably since I started attending it”
- “to make learning easier for exams”
- “I want to cum [laude]!” (translated)
- “explanations in small groups is better” (translated)
If you are compelled to attend the tutorials but do not do so on a regular basis, please indicate why

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tests, class clashes, other assignments, sporting commitments</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issue of compulsory tutorials</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was ill</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I didn't see the need/value</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I use the time for self-study</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If you are compelled to attend the tutorials but do not do so on a regular basis, please indicate why (2)

- “[I don’t attend because of the] stress of other tests”
- “I have second year subjects that clash with the tut periods”
- “[I am] over-worked, I guess”

State aspects of the TUTOR’s teaching style that you think should be maintained

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspect</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>He/she explains well</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He/she promotes group work/interaction</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He/she is friendly &amp; promotes a relaxed environment</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He/she is well prepared and has good expertise</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He/she is enthusiastic, willing to help &amp; is professional</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He/she extra examples &amp; refers back to previous tutorials</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>His/her presentation &amp; communication style</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He/she makes good use of teaching aids</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td>405</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

State aspects of the TUTOR’s teaching style that you think should be maintained (2)

- “[h]e explains well; takes it slow from the start. I never left a tut not knowing what and how to do the problems”
- “[t]he tutor uses class participation as a big part of her teaching”
- “[h]e’s very much like a friend and creates a relaxed environment in which we can all enjoy doing economics”
- “...[h]is communicating with the class, his personality. He always makes concepts easily understandable by referring to daily things or sports”
- “[t]he slides help a lot and drawing the graphs on the board step by step helps to understand the work”
## State aspects of the TUTOR’s teaching style that you think needs improvement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspect</th>
<th>Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>His/her communication style</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>His/her explanations</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He/she moves too quickly/slowly</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>His/her use of teaching aids</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He/she should increase his/her confidence</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He/she should check homework regularly</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He/she should increase his/her enthusiasm</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>239</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### State aspects of the TUTOR’s teaching style that you think needs improvement (2)

- “[g]ood knowledge of ecoss – battles to communicate to students”
- “sometimes we don’t know which answer goes with which question and then she just goes on” (translated)
- “[s]ometimes confusing, too detailed, takes too much time for his lesson”
- “[h]e should check that we’ve actually prepared by doing the work otherwise it’s easy to get lazy or forget when you know no one’s going to be bothered”
- “[h]e needs to be more confident within the answers he gives and the way in which he teaches. If he is unsure of what he says then we become unsure”

## Where to from here?

- Need to review the key elements that students have identified as crucial to effective tutorials
- Even though tutors are hand-selected, attend training & receive on-going support, the quality of the learning experience within the tutorial is dependant on these elements

## What do first-year SU Economics students value in their tutorial classes?

- Tutorials that are interactive and encourage participation
- Tutors who can communicate clearly
- Tutors who are well prepared and professional
- Tutors who are enthusiastic and build confidence
- Tutors who check that the homework is at least attempted before the tutorial
Concluding comments

- What is the impact of the students’ emphasis of checking homework on ‘student-centered learning’?
- Even though the students rate the tutors highly in most instances, what does this mean for the objectives set out by the programme?
- How well does the department’s understanding of student engagement translate into practice in the classroom?
- What implications do these considerations have for tutor coordinators and trainers?

Contact details

- Mégan Burgoyne
  meganb@sun.ac.za