



TOWARDS A STRUCTURED PROCESS FOR INVOLVING DISTRIBUTED TEACHERS IN FACILITATION STRATEGY DESIGN AND REVIEW

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Summary

In universities, much emphasis is placed on continual professional development for teachers to ensure they have the required teaching competencies. Less emphasis is placed on capturing the professional expertise that teachers have developed in their practice, to inform strategies for achieving teaching excellence and the best possible student experience. In the context of online and distance education, where teachers are distributed, there is a need to develop a structured process whereby the voices of the distributed teachers can be heard and they are encouraged to feel a responsibility to engage in the process.

This paper describes a case study undertaken at the UK Open University (OU) with a view to developing a structured process for involving distributed tutors in the design and review of the tutorial provision. Tutor feedback was collected by a variety of means and fed into changes. Other feedback, not directly related to the tutorial provision, that was also captured should be acted upon to develop the tutor community of practice.

Context

In higher education, much emphasis is placed on delivering continual professional development to ensure that teachers have the required teaching competencies. Crawford (2010) focused on the importance of developing academic staff expertise through professional development. In the context of professional development, Crawford observed that the voices of academics were generally not being heard and recognised that their views should be included in the debate.

Teacher expertise is a resource that educational institutions should be utilising in their aspiration towards teaching excellence and the best possible student experience. “Staff expertise is the most important asset in a university; without it literally nothing can be achieved” (Blackmore & Blackwell, 2003; p.23, cited in Crawford, 2010). Teaching excellence is best achieved by fostering “a culture of quality and enhancement, through dialogue and collaboration” through “committed and passionate higher education staff working to a clear, shared vision and a common set of goals” (Marshall, 2017).

Teachers develop professional expertise in facilitating learning through their practice and experience. In the context of online and distance education where teachers are distributed, it

becomes more difficult to capture their expertise to inform teaching strategies. Some universities have created processes to facilitate peer review of good practice amongst distributed teachers, for example, a peer observation programme organised by the UK University of York’s Distance Learning Forum (Walker, 2015).

In the UK Open University (OU), module materials are written by campus-based teams of academics called module teams. Tutors distributed across the UK are employed part-time to facilitate student learning. Thus the design for learning is separate from the facilitation of learning. Each tutor is allocated a group of students and facilitates learning in a number of ways one of which is to deliver synchronous tutorials to their group, also called group tuition, either face-to-face or in an online virtual classroom. Student attendance at tutorials is optional. Tutors traditionally used their professional judgement to adapt the timing and content of their tutorials to the needs of their own students. In 2016 the OU introduced a Group Tuition Policy whereby the timing and content of tutorials on a module would henceforth be specified by the module team in a document called the tuition strategy document (Table 1). Each module has its own tailored tuition strategy, with tutorial timing and content specific to the requirements of that module.

Table 3: A simplified extract from an early OU tuition strategy document

tutorial title	session length	timing	face-to-face or online	tutorial description
Introduction	1 hour	between weeks 1 and 3	online only	Introduction to the module, what it covers and its main goals. Study tips.
Coding in Python	2 hours	between weeks 4 and 10	face-to-face	This hands-on session will introduce Python through simple examples and exercises.

In this new system, students (and tutors) are provided with a description for each tutorial. The Group Tuition Policy aims to ensure that students understand the purpose of each tutorial and that all students receive a consistent tutorial experience. *Clusters* of tutors and their student groups are formed so that all tutorials given by the tutors in the cluster are available to all the student groups in the cluster. This gives students a wider choice of tutorials to attend and allows for tutors to collaborate, e.g. tutors can pair up to deliver a tutorial or different tutors can deliver tutorials on different topics. The tuition strategy is implemented by a tutorial timetable for each cluster (Table 2).

Table 2: A sample tutorial timetable for a cluster of two tutors and their student groups

tutorial title	session length	date and time	tutor(s)	face-to-face or online	tutorial description
Introduction	1 hour	10/10/2018 19:00 – 20:00	Tutor A	online	Introduction to the module, what it covers and its main goals. Study tips.
Introduction	1 hour	14/10/2018 13:30 – 14:30	Tutor B	online	Introduction to the module, what it covers and its main goals. Study tips.

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Coding in Python	2 hours	07/12/2018 10:00 – 12:00	Tutor A, Tutor B	face-to-face	This hands-on session will introduce Python through simple examples and exercises.
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There was no tutor input into the first tuition strategies created by the module teams. During the first year of using the new tuition strategies, the Vice Chancellor announced that tutors would be consulted on the effectiveness of these strategies, and their feedback would inform a tuition strategy review for every module.

Goodyear and Dimitriadis (2013) assert that design for learning should take into account the role of the teacher “at learntime” and should treat the teacher as “a knowledgeable, helpful actor” who can be depended upon to monitor students’ learning and intervene where appropriate. An Open University project undertaken in 2017 found that tutors are experienced in delivering and reflecting on tuition, they have views on tuition, and they see the practice of delivering tuition as part of their professional identity (Walshe & Gallen, 2017).

This paper describes a case study undertaken at the OU with a view to developing a structured process for involving distributed tutors in tuition strategy design and review.

Method

The case study examined the review process for modules in the OU School of Computing and Communications (C&C), STEM Faculty. The university-wide review took place over a three-month period during the first year of implementation of the new tuition strategies. Each Faculty took responsibility for the review in its own Schools. The STEM Faculty provided a toolkit of issues to consider and questions and prompts for tutor consultation. Each school in the STEM Faculty, including C&C, used this toolkit.

Issues to consider included:

- Were the tutorial titles clear and informative?
- Did the tutorial descriptions provide appropriate information?
- Was the timing of the tutorials appropriate?
- How could the tuition strategy be improved to make it more effective?

Tutors in the OU are managed by academics called Staff Tutors, who have close links with, and may be members of, module teams. For the tuition strategy review, Staff Tutors worked with the module teams to consult tutors by a variety of methods, including synchronous online meetings, consultation threads on forums, and direct emails. For each module the methods used were chosen by the Staff Tutors and/or the module teams according to individual preferences. Feedback from the consultations was collected and considered. In the light of the collected feedback, the Staff Tutors and module teams used their academic judgement to decide on what revisions if any to make to the tuition strategies. In some cases, proposed revisions were posted on the forums for further tutor comment before being finalised.

Findings

The number of tutors on the modules included in the case study ranged from 6 up to around 30. Responders were self-selecting. Response rates ranged from 27% (7 out of 26) up to 83% (5 out of 6) of tutors on a module.

Although the intention had been to collect feedback about the tuition strategy designs, much of the feedback was about how the strategies had been implemented and some feedback was about other aspects of the tutor role.

Feedback on the tuition strategy designs included:

- Most tutorial titles were OK but some tutorials needed clearer labelling.
- Some tutorial descriptions needed to be reviewed and revised, for example, to clarify that the content could vary according to the needs of the students who attend and to tell students they will get more out of the session if they come with questions.
- Descriptions should be sufficiently broad to allow tutors to exercise their professional judgement. Tutorials can be organic and take a different, more student-relevant direction at times, which is the concept of creative teaching as structured improvisation (Sawyer, 2004).
- Some tutors felt that online sessions should be longer than one hour to allow more scope for interactive activities. Other tutors preferred shorter and more frequent online sessions. It was understood that session length can be varied by negotiation with the tutor when implementing the tuition strategy.
- A single tutorial should not try to cover too many topics.
- There was some doubt over whether students read the descriptions. There was a feeling among some tutors that students don't attend tutorials based on the descriptions. They trust the tutor to deliver appropriate tuition.

Feedback on implementing the tuition strategies included:

- Tutors would prefer to see a more even distribution of tutorials across the available time windows.
- Daytime sessions are a useful alternative to evening tutorials.
- Some tutors would like a standard set of resources and more guidance for each tutorial. There was a feeling that there must be a lot of duplication of work by different tutors preparing similar tutorials.
- On larger population modules there is greater scope for tutors to deliver tutorials in pairs because there are likely to be more tutors in a cluster.
- There was a willingness to trial new ideas next time round.
- Tutors often message their students with a more specific agenda for an upcoming tutorial.
- Attendance at some face-to-face tutorials was very low. Maybe an online tutorial would be better next time.
- The wider choice afforded to students did not always increase student uptake of tutorials.

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- There was not always collaboration between the tutors in a cluster, particularly on established modules where tutors had already developed their individual tutorial practice. There was felt to be scope for greater collaboration. Finding time to plan collaboration was perceived to be a problem.

Not all tutors are of the same opinion. For example, views differ on whether an online tutorial should be longer than one hour. Some would like more guidance on tutorial content than others. This is to be expected depending on the experience and personal preferences of each tutor.

Resulting changes

Following the consultation, the resulting changes to the tuition strategies varied from module to module. Some tutorial descriptions were reworded. Some session lengths were changed. Sometime windows were widened. Overall the emphasis was on maximising flexibility for implementing the strategies.

Some sessions were split into separate sessions on different topics. On some modules, regular ad-hoc drop-in sessions were added, with no particular content, to help students with any questions or issues that had arisen.

There were no changes to some strategies where the feedback suggested the tutors were happy with the strategy as it was, and the feedback was more about the implementation than about the strategy itself.

Not all changes to the tuition strategies were a result of the tutor feedback. Module teams and Staff Tutors continue to develop their own views in the light of experience about how best to design tuition strategies, for example to maximise flexibility and not to inhibit the professional judgement of the tutors delivering the tuition. Some changes, in particular to the descriptions, appear to have been influenced by what other module teams were doing.

Discussion

The case study raises many new questions that need further exploration.

What is the best method of gathering feedback?

Consulting tutors by email does not allow for discussion between them. Discussion can evoke responses and enrich the feedback. A synchronous online meeting allows for participant discussion and a quick consultation. Providing the consultation questions in advance of the meeting enables participants to reflect and prepare their responses. Recording the meeting is a good way of documenting the discussion and allows the discussion to be revisited for reflection and consideration. A disadvantage of a synchronous meeting is the difficulty of finding a date and time to suit everyone. Although an asynchronous forum consultation takes longer because participants respond over a period of days or weeks, it allows time for reflection on points others have made before responding, as well as allowing for iterative

refinement of the reviewed strategy. The longer timeframe is more likely to enable all to participate. It is important to give deadlines for responses and to close the forum discussion at the end of the stated time period. An effective method of gathering feedback might be to start the discussion on a forum, then hold a synchronous online meeting and follow up with further forum discussion.

How can distributed teachers be encouraged to engage in the design and review process?

Feedback appears to have been provided by a small proportion of the tutor cohort across the modules included in the case study. This can lead to bias in the feedback, since those who respond may not be representative of the views of the whole cohort. Crawford (2010) asserted that having the right to participate comes with an obligation to engage. One answer might be to include time in the tutor's contracted hours for engaging in design and review.

Is it easier to make the review process iterative when the group being consulted is relatively small?

Those tutors who did engage provided a wealth of feedback. The review process varied from module to module depending on the choices made by individual module teams and Staff Tutors. In some cases, the review was an iterative process where online discussions allowed further probing questions to be explored, further ideas to be generated and further discussion to refine the ideas. In other cases, the review was a sequential process with no iteration.

How can perceived needs of distributed teachers be captured and acted upon so as to develop a community of practice among the teachers?

Other feedback not directly related to the tuition strategy review was also collected during the review. For instance, some tutors felt that the new Group Tuition Policy was leading to an erosion of the tutor/student relationship. As a result of this feedback, some workshops were held by Staff Tutors for tutors to explore ways of nurturing the tutor/student relationship. In those workshops, further ideas emerged about how Staff Tutors can help nurture the tutor/tutor relationship, that is, nurture the tutor community of practice (Walshe, 2018).

Conclusion

This case study exemplified the value of capturing the professional expertise of distributed teachers. The consultation resulted in richer feedback and discussions than expected.

The next steps following the case study are to develop a structured process of consulting tutors, with recommendations for the methods of collecting feedback and using it to inform module strategy decisions and reviews. This process should be piloted in the C&C school before disseminating recommendations more widely across the Faculty and ultimately across the University.

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Further work needs to be undertaken to develop the emerging ideas for nurturing the tutor community of practice.

Across the online and distance learning sector there is a need for structured processes to involve distributed teachers in design and review of strategies that affect their working practices. Distributed teachers are closer to the students than any other staff in the university. Their expertise gained from working with students should be harnessed to enhance teaching excellence for the benefit of the student experience. Consulting distributed teachers and facilitating discussion amongst them should lead to development of their community of practice.

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