

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Considering the Role of Tutoring in Student Engagement: Reflections from a South African University

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Abstract

Student engagement has been defined as the extent to which students are engaged in activities that higher education research has shown to be linked with high-quality learning outcomes. The ubiquitous influence of the term ‘student engagement’ has been felt throughout the higher education landscape. This is especially true for South African higher education where student success has been poor. South African universities have been tasked to improve the student learning experience as a component of improving success. Some of the innovative teaching and learning practices often highlighted by research which are thought to improve student engagement include: having students adopt teaching roles such as peer assessment, tutoring and mentoring. These practices are thought to promote student engagement, leading to greater student academic success. Tutoring can therefore be seen as one of the key strategies to facilitate student engagement in order to achieve academic success. The following paper considers the role of tutoring in student engagement while reflecting on strategies used at a South African university to address the challenges associated with student success.

Keywords

student engagement; tutoring; tutor; higher education; reflections; key strategies; South African universities

Background

South African higher education faces a number of challenges. These include: low pass rates, very high first year dropout rates, low participation rates from previously excluded groups as well as low degree completion rates (Strydom & Mentz, 2010; Wilson-Strydom, 2010; Scott, 2009). In the year 2000, 30% of first year students dropped out in their first year of study while only 22% of first years eventually went on to graduate (Council on Higher Education, 2010). Thus, the preceding decade of South African higher education already demonstrated a number of significant challenges which hamper student success. An impactful and relevant response is therefore needed to address these challenges. Any response to the challenges of student success needs to be based on a student development model that is culturally sensitive, promotes social justice and which recognises the needs of all students (Bourne-Bowie, 2000). The response to the challenges of student success in South Africa has therefore been focused on empirically sound approaches such as student

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engagement (Strydom & Mentz, 2010). Engagement is uniquely poised to address such challenges, especially given its association with achievement, retention as well as social and psychological well-being (Markes, 2000; Crick & Goldspink, 2014).

The Role of Tutoring and Tutors in Higher Education

In South Africa, as well as other countries such as the United States and Canada, postgraduate student tutors are given important roles to play in facilitating student engagement and learning in higher education (Clarence, 2016). Among their duties, assisting in assessment or evaluation of student work, such as assignments or tests, is included as well as consulting with students outside of tutorials. Despite the valuable role tutors play in higher education, there is disparity in the kinds of professional or educational support, training and development offered to them by their universities or the lecturers in whose courses they tutor (Clarence, 2016). Furthermore, the use of tutoring as a strategy to achieve and/or maximise engagement for the purpose of student development and success is hardly a new topic (Topping, 1996; Hock et al., 2001; De Smet et al., 2010).

In higher education, particularly at universities, tutoring has long been a historical model for enhancing students' engagement based on a close student-teacher relationship (Lee, Hong & Choi, 2016). Tutoring programmes form an important part of academic institutions yet are but one way of facilitating student engagement. Tutoring forms an integral part of a university's teaching-learning process and can be characterised as a basic strategy for improving students' academic success and professional goals (Morillas & Garrido, 2014). There is also agreement that high-quality tutoring enhances retention and facilitates advancement throughout the higher education pipeline, whilst positively impacting all students who attend (Girves, Zepeda & Gwathmey, 2005).

The importance of tutoring in higher education can also be seen in its value for students who are at risk of dropping out, and for gender equality and the integration of minorities and/or previously excluded groups (Girves, Zepeda & Gwathmey, 2005; Burrell, 2013). By promoting equal opportunities to learn, equal access to educational resources and social cohesion tutoring has a role to play in redressing inequalities. Tutoring can therefore serve as a vehicle through which to tackle complex social problems. According to Betts and Burrell (2014) complex social problems such as social inclusion should be tackled by processes and strategies which already exist in higher education. One such strategy may therefore be tutoring as a tool for engagement. Thus, the role of tutoring is multifaceted and implicit in teaching and learning, thereby fulfilling an invaluable role in student, graduate and professional development as well as in promoting student engagement.

Student Engagement, Student Success and Tutoring

There is little agreement on a definition of student engagement, although there is strong evidence to support the benefits of student engagement in student success. While a definition of student engagement remains difficult to articulate, it may nevertheless be necessary. For the purpose of this discussion more than one definition may prove useful to consider. Hu and Kuh (2001) defined engagement as the quality of effort that students themselves devote to educationally purposeful activities that contribute directly to desired

educational outcomes. Furthermore, engagement has also been described as “a broad construct intended to encompass salient academic as well as certain non-academic aspects of the student experience” (Coates, 2007, p.122). These aspects, Coates (2007) held, are: active and collaborative learning; participation in challenging academic activities; formative communication with academic staff; involvement in enriching educational experiences; feeling legitimated and supported by university learning communities. Finally, and more popularly, student engagement has been defined as both the time and effort that students devote to activities that are empirically linked to desired outcomes of college and what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities (Kuh, 2009, p.683). For the purpose of Kuh’s (2009) definition, students’ involvement in curricular and co-curricular activities may translate into involvement in their own learning. In addition, students’ participation in their institutions may assist them to actively engage in peer learning with faculty staff which may drive student success (Axelson & Flick, 2011; Van Dijk, 2013). Student engagement therefore plays a central role in student success.

Globally, a large body of literature supports the hypothesis that high levels of student engagement yield positive outcomes for the characteristics that promote student success (Astin, 1984, 1993; Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005; Goodsell, Maher & Tinto, 1992; Berger & Milem, 1999; Kuh, 1995; Kuh & Vesper, 1997; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh & Whitt, 2005; Kuh, 2013; Lodge, 2012). These characteristics include: student development, academic achievement as well as social engagement. Student engagement is a critical component needed to ensure student success (Webber, Bauer, Krylow & Zhang, 2013). The overarching conclusion seems to be that students who are most engaged at both a curricular and co-curricular level will achieve better student success.

The Case of the University of the Western Cape

The University of the Western Cape (UWC) is a public university situated in the northern suburbs of the Western Cape province of South Africa. It has a student enrolment of approximately 20 000 students. It was established in 1959 by an Act of Parliament as an ethnic college. The university opened its doors in 1960 and has since been home to very diverse student populations. Since then, it has transformed itself from a small apartheid educational institution to an internationally recognised university with a reputation for excellence in teaching, learning and research (UWC Corporate Guidelines, 2010). It is ranked 7th in Africa and 5th in the country (Times Higher Education, 2015). UWC, much like other South African universities, has tutoring as part of almost all its curricula. My role at UWC has, among others, been that of tutorial coordinator in the Department of Psychology, which forms part of UWC’s Faculty of Community and Health Sciences (FCHS).

Student engagement is not new to the university. Various interventions have been used to achieve and pursue ongoing student success. In FCHS, the Student Success project has been a notable vehicle used to investigate and address challenges associated with engagement. Results from the South African Survey on Student Engagement (SASSE, 2015) revealed that on average UWC first- and senior-year students measured markedly similar to their peers (in the SASSE comparison group) on the majority of the engagement indicators. Recent research conducted on student engagement at the UWC has also

highlighted a number of factors which play a role in student engagement. Schreiber and Yu's (2016) study examining student engagement at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) found that engagement patterns are different across race and gender while highly correlated to academic performance. The authors were able to generalise these results onto the South African higher education system (Schreiber & Yu, 2016). Like other South African universities, UWC has also struggled with student retention and throughput. Tutoring has been identified as one of the key strategies to facilitate student engagement and promote student success. Keeping these attempts to measure engagement in mind, as well as considering their results, provides UWC with opportunities to capitalise on engagement in order to improve student success. Tutoring therefore presents as an already present tool and strategy that can be used to improve student success.

Psychology Tutorials

This study is located in the Department of Psychology at the UWC. Psychology tutorials in the department are conducted with the following aims and objectives in mind:

- to practically address the lack of academic support beyond the traditional lecture setting;
- to increase pass and retention rates of modules which include but are not limited to high-impact modules;
- to contribute towards dropout prevention;
- to motivate students to learn; and
- to promote student engagement, thereby increasing student success.

The psychology department has the largest tutorial classes in the Community and Health Sciences faculty. Tutorials are tracked (using registers) and evaluated at the end of each semester. In addition, under the guidance of lecturers, tutors have consultations with students. Tutors are also required to attend compulsory training, consultation with lecturers and support meetings with the tutorial programme coordinator. Tutors fulfil various roles which, broadly speaking, includes; face-to-face tutorials, online tutorials, as well as assisting with tutorial, assignment and test administration. Tutorials are conducted across Psychology undergraduate year levels. Through tutorials, students are able to access more knowledgeable peers, and share diverse solutions to shared challenges. This allows students to build knowledge commons where student engagement is promoted. As part of pursuing student success, the department, with its large undergraduate student numbers, has employed a number of strategies to improve the quality of tutorials while promoting student engagement.

Strategies employed include:

1. the use of postgraduate tutor teams;
2. conducting pedagogically driven content and student-centred tutorials;
3. continuous-simultaneous training and evaluation; and
4. the use of Information Communication Tools (ICTs).

These will be discussed in more detail and in relation to relevant literature, below.

Postgraduate Tutor Teams and their Role in Pedagogically Driven Content, Student-Centred Tutorials

The Department of Psychology at UWC serves large undergraduate classes. Tutorial attendance varies from 10 to 120 students per tutorial. Tutor teams are utilised to facilitate large groups, and senior tutors (typically Masters students who have had previous experience as a tutor), assist first-time and less experienced tutors. Only Psychology Honours, Post-Honours, Masters and PhD students are eligible for tutoring positions. Senior tutors serve as valuable support resources to novice tutors and are available for consultations as well as offering assistance during tutorials and training.

Tutorials follow lectures on a week-by-week basis to ensure close alignment of content with the course curriculum. Exercises and group activities are included in course materials as well as content from lectures which together make up formal tutorial content. Additionally, lecturers and tutors collaborate to deliver quizzes and audio-visual materials. Lecturers guide tutorial content based on the perceived needs of students. The tutorial coordinator presents the results of student evaluations to tutors, who then reflect on these to tailor the format of tutorials.

In the face of challenges such as increasingly large class sizes, recent research points to the need for new pedagogical strategies such as those involving faculty tutor teams (Bond, Czernkowski & Wells, 2012; Crowe, Ceresola & Silva, 2014). Postgraduate psychology tutors in the department are paired with lecturers who teach the respective modules that they will tutor. According to Gucciardi, Mach and Mo (2016) this kind of collaborative approach, while new, holds benefits for lecturers, tutors and students including a much more integrated approach to learning.

While the approach perpetuated in the literature closely resembles that used in the psychology department at UWC, there are slight deviations. One such deviation is that of in-class feedback which in the literature is obtained directly from students (Cook-Sather, 2013; Troisi, 2014; Crowe, Ceresola & Silva, 2014; Gucciardi, Mach & Mo, 2016). In the psychology department at UWC, feedback is obtained from both student evaluations as well as from the literature which informs tutor training.

While the programme's overall structure aligns quite closely to that described in recent literature, at its core, it seems to lack a guiding theoretical framework. Though it may not be wise to rely on a single guiding theoretical framework, a framework remains necessary. The literature on peer tutoring in higher learning seems to recognise Vygotsky's (1962, 1986) social constructivism as a popular guiding pedagogical framework (Asgar, 2010; Stigmar, 2016). Using Asghar's (as cited in Gucciardi, Mach & Mo, 2016) logic, identifying a guiding framework/s might not be as simple as it sounds; "the interaction between peers allows students to enter the zone of proximal development where a less able peer is able to enter a new area of potential development through problem-solving with someone more able" (p. 406). In other words while one might hold a predisposition toward a particular theory for tutorials, another might emerge in practice. Simply put, even in the absence of a guiding theory, psychology lecturers, students and tutors create knowledge and meaning from their interactions, thereby constructing new knowledge. This, after all, is at the very core of social constructivism.

Tutorials require consistent monitoring as a means of ensuring that quality teaching and learning take place. Without a lens (guiding pedagogical framework) through which to monitor tutorials, the very act of monitoring might become futile, especially in the context of academia. The department would therefore need to make clear its guiding theory/theories to avoid redundancy. However, both the former and the latter points remain debatable in light of the core tenets of social constructivism.

Tutors, Training and Evaluation

The different roles that tutors are required to fulfil in the psychology department mean that continuous and, at times, simultaneous training and evaluation is required. It is for these reasons that training is conducted throughout the academic terms. Training topics include: contextual issues, academic skills such as writing, psychosocial topics such diversity, social and personal well-being, train the trainer (which includes tutor and student learning strategies) and e-tools (ICT training). Training occurs in-house (the academic department) as well as at faculty and, recently, at institutional level (university-wide). This, while both time-consuming and labour-intensive, might still not be enough to ensure high-quality tutors who facilitate high-quality student engagement. Tutors, on the other hand, seem to exhibit a generally positive attitude toward training as well as recognise the need for training. The 2016 tutor cohort, when asked whether they would recommend tutor training to a colleague or peer, provided the following comments:

Participant 1: *“Yes, I think training is important for tutors to receive standardised training.”*

Participant 3: *“Yes, it puts you at ease.”*

Participant 7: *“Yes, it is very helpful especially for the fact that there was time to ask questions.”*

Participant 4: *“It is something we can learn from to become better students.”*

Continuous training and support of tutors is an important strategy geared toward assisting tutors to develop more holistically (Underhill & McDonald, 2010; Layton, 2013). While the literature on training and support of tutors highlight that there has been improvement in the recognition and development of tutors, it also makes clear that more research-driven approaches may contribute to this end. By implication, these shortcomings illustrate that disciplinary knowledge is not enough to ensure high-quality tutoring, nor does it maximise or promote student engagement. Much like Gucciardi, Mach & Mo (2016), Clarence (2016) makes a strong case for tutors as teaching and learning partners which may be a starting point for building tutoring capacity in higher education. In this way, tutors will share in evaluation feedback, and be more involved in scheduling learning activities and clarifying procedural rules such as registration, deadlines and course requirements (Haggers & Donald, 2013). At UWC, this is already a reality, given the extent of the training provided to tutors, especially considering the way in which evaluations are being optimally used to inform tutoring.

Furthermore, Clarence (2016) identifies the following strategies which can be used to create and sustain teaching and learning environments that are better able to facilitate student engagement through tutorials. These include:

- (a) providing tutors with opportunities to develop both their contextual and/or disciplinary knowledge;
- (b) endorsing facilitation, assessment and feedback-giving practices that are relevant to their kind and level of tutoring work;
- (c) providing guidance and ongoing contact with the lecturers to create a responsive learning environment;
- (d) critically re-examining academic departments' support, training and development of tutor capacity; and
- (e) re-imagining tutor development and support in structured, research-led and cumulative rather than ad hoc ways.

The latter two strategies seem to be more applicable to tutoring in the psychology department. At UWC, however, strategy (d) might also be extended to include the broader institution. This means that critically re-examining academic departments' support, training and development of tutor capacity ought to be an institutional endeavour rather than a departmental one. Finally, and perhaps more importantly, is strategy (e) which seems to directly address the psychology department's lack of compulsory tutorials. This lack of integration of Psychology tutorials into the curriculum of undergraduate students means that these essential tools/spaces for engagement remain under-utilised and run the risk of taking away rather than adding to student success. Perhaps opening up tutorials for more than continuous and simultaneous training and evaluation, and pursuing more research endeavours in these spaces will yield better engagement, thereby doubling up on student success. With this in mind, research endeavours ought therefore to not only be limited to inform training material. Research conducted in tutorial spaces might also serve to legitimise the need and relevance for tutorials as tools for student engagement within its relevant context.

Information Communication Tools (ICTs)

The activities that tutors undertake in order to deliver content in the UWC psychology department are perhaps evidence of their changing role in higher education. In addition to traditional roles, tutors have recently taken on a more organisational role which has come to include scheduling learning activities and tasks and clarifying procedural rules such as, registration, deadlines and course requirements (Haggers & Donald, 2013). This role of tutors as organisers of educational content and activities has become more apparent in the face of a higher education landscape which relies heavily on ICT infrastructure. Online learning has become increasingly common throughout higher education (Lee, Hong & Choi, 2016). With this reality, tutors have been compelled to take on a more technical support role in addition to their more traditional roles. At the psychology department at UWC, the university's institutional online learning platform is used for online tutorials, thereby facilitating online engagement. Tutors and students form online discussion groups where content is broken down into chunks, queries are addressed and course-related issues are discussed. In conjunction with lecturers, tutors also include: weekly videos, podcasts,

small-group activities, debates and mini panel discussions. Electronic content such as videos and podcasts are vetted by lecturers. The strategies employed by tutors receive overwhelmingly positive responses from students. From this it is apparent that tutors use creative ways to deliver content to students. The timing of these interactive tutorials is also key as most took place shortly before assessment preparation was due to start. It is also during these sessions that attendance spikes dramatically. Students seem to respond well to audio-visual tools. ICTs do therefore have a role to play in engagement.

The nature of higher education institutions has necessitated technology-based learning environments which demand immediate technical support and which are critical in order to maintain student interest and the flow of learning (Wade, Hodgkinson, Smith & Arfield, 2013; Lee, Hong & Choi, 2016). The use of ICTs in the psychology department has therefore expanded student engagement beyond the traditional tutorial space. ICTs such as institutional learning platforms breach traditional barriers, thereby enabling student engagement across vast distances. Even though it may be hard to deny the need for ICTs, its mastery by academics may pose an issue as it includes supporting students by providing technical guidance, direction and feedback on technical problems and ensuring that students harness technical systems to stimulate interactive learning and promote engagement (Denis, Watland, Pirotte & Verday, 2004; Wade, Hodgkinson, Smith & Arfield, 2013; Lee, Hong & Choi, 2016). ICTs therefore necessitate greater commitment from tutors and staff. In addition, ICTs do not come without logistical challenges.

The use of ICTs for tutoring in the psychology department has been plagued by the problem of access. While the online learning environment holds tremendous promise for student engagement, students are often unable to access online platforms. This is largely the result of the large numbers of students enrolled but, perhaps more problematic, is access to the technical resources. The large numbers enrolled far exceeds what the department's and university's computer labs can consistently accommodate. This presents numerous issues and slows the pace at which online learning environments for engagement can be accessed. In the psychology department this has triggered low online attendance rates for e-tutorials.

The logistical challenges of ITCs coupled with the changes to the role of tutors have resulted in lecturers having to adopt additional roles. This places additional pressure on lecturers since they are responsible for guiding tutors as far as module content and assessment-related preparation is concerned. Added to this is that tutorials in the psychology department are not compulsory, yet a clear need for this kind of support exists. The lack of compulsory tutorials means that not all students feel compelled to attend sessions, which results in lecturers having to repeat lecture content during individual student consultations, especially with struggling students. Here, institutions have a broader role to play. Commitment from the institution toward tutorial programmes is critical for student engagement, social integration and ultimately student success (Braxton, Hirschy & McCledon, 2004). Institutions of higher learning must take decisive steps to ensure both human resources as well as infrastructure are available and sufficiently suited to accommodate staff, students and tutors. The role of the higher education institutions in student engagement has been discussed at length across the literature on tutoring.

Van Dijk (2013) maintains that higher education institutions should focus on how they shape their students' academic, interpersonal and curricular activities to promote or enhance student engagement. At UWC, this would entail a greater devotion to ensuring structured, well-funded, and adequately human-resourced tutorial programmes which operate within equally accommodating ICT infrastructure.

Considerations from the Literature

Developing tutorials and tutors as a response to student disengagement

From the literature, it appears that tutoring has a well-defined role to play in student success, especially in the South African context. Thus, a primary consideration may be to develop tutorials and train tutors in order to address disengagement and achieve and maximise student success. Several theorists (Hart, 1992; Hughes, Zhang & Hill, 2006; Ritter & Covic, 2006) suggest that one way in which to promote student engagement is through appropriate and empathic responses to students as individuals. Martinez and Munday's (1998) study of student drop-out rates found that two of the factors for success were students' awareness of their own learning process as well as lecturers' responses to the varied learning needs of the group. Any successful tutorial programmes would therefore need to incorporate careful consideration of the factors highlighted by Martinez and Munday's (1998) study. This awareness suggests that students need to become metacognitively aware of their learning (Gijsselaers, 1996). This could lead to greater levels of intrinsically motivated learners rather than mere passive learners (Dube, Kane & Lear, 2012; Lucariello et al., 2016; Brunner, 1990). For the psychology department this may mean that approaches to tutoring need to emphasise learning as an active, constructive as well as integrated process which occurs in the context of relevant social and contextual factors. A social-constructivist guiding pedagogy therefore seems particularly well suited for tutoring in this department.

However, it may also be true that an array of different tutoring approaches and practices exist which could possibly foster student engagement. Strategies such as assignment-assisted tutoring, strategic tutoring, one-on-one tutoring, training-related academic tutoring and peer tutoring, have all been shown to foster student engagement (Topping, 1996; Hock et al., 2001; De Smet et al., 2010). In addition to the strategies mentioned above, the literature on tutoring identifies more coordinated and structured guidelines to achieve student success in tutoring. These include:

- (a) tutors must receive training instructional (teaching) strategies;
- (b) a tutoring programme should be specifically tailored for each students' needs by making use of a developmental template;
- (c) the students' progress should be tracked by the tutor to adjust the strategies and for the improvement of tutoring sessions;
- (d) tutors need to work in collaboration with the students' lecturers to improve effectiveness; and
- (e) principles of learning should guide tutoring programmes (Gordon, 2009; Gordon et al., 2004).

Given the support throughout the literature, it may be useful to consider how or if the guidelines above can be utilised to improve tutoring and/or thereby maximise engagement within the psychology department. The use of evaluations to inform tutoring as well as the extensive training conducted by the psychology department seem to find agreement in the literature. The concept of tutors as teaching and learning partners and student faculty teams aligns with a number of strategies discussed throughout the literature on effective tutorial programmes and tutoring. This strategy holds a lot of promise for practitioners in and beyond the Department of Psychology at UWC.

Maton (2015) argues that to better facilitate student engagement through tutorials the following is needed: support and development programmes that are coherent, guided and underpinned by contextually relevant theory and research which may over time adequately build tutors' knowledge and skills in relation to tutoring. These considerations are especially valuable for the psychology department's tutoring programme. Firstly, Maton's (2015) argument asserts the importance of pedagogy and its role in tutoring practice. The recommendations discussed above also allow for the creation of a criterion of tutor competency and best practice. Secondly, research focusing on student needs can guide tutor development to ensure relevant tutor competencies, skills and attributes.

Conclusion

The literature on student engagement and tutoring provides a number of key strategies which can be used to address the challenges faced in higher education globally and in South Africa. Tutoring is a key strategy which promotes and can drive engagement in both traditional classroom settings and online learning environments. Strengthening tutorial programmes and the capacity of staff can serve higher education institutions well, especially when improvements and development efforts are based on research and rooted in context. Maximising and promoting student engagement through tutorials is crucial if South African universities are to responsively address the challenges of high dropout rates and student success. Additionally, ICTs can be viewed as useful in engaging students in meaningful ways and responding to students' needs and interests. Finally, within the scope of this paper and the literature discussed, the UWC Department of Psychology's tutorial programme has some valuable contributions to offer.

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