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## **What is ‘excellence’ in Teaching?: The Role of Learning Development Practitioners (LDPs) in Supporting Independent Learning**

In recent years ‘excellence’ in teaching and learning has become an integral part of the strategic aims of most Higher Education Institutions. This has prompted research on the vexed question of what ‘excellent’ teaching might be. Researchers are, of course, by no means agreed on a single definition, but the ability of teachers to promote independent learning is often cited.<sup>1</sup> This concept also forms the basis of many institutional strategic plans.<sup>2</sup>

It is not clear whether institutional teaching strategies take the teaching offered by Learning Development Centres into account. Certainly, they are not usually specifically identified. Nonetheless, there is no reason why general teaching strategies should not apply to learning development, despite the apparent mismatch between the type of support on offer and the ultimate goal of ‘independent learning’. Bob Matthew, for example, writes:

These days I hear many colleagues complain about students not doing things for themselves – and this in the era of handouts, PowerPoint presentations, study skills courses and 24/24 in QAA reviews. It is my view that we have created a generation of dependent learners.<sup>3</sup>

This may well be true; indeed there is much colloquial evidence to support it, and Learning Development may have played a role. Still, this paper will argue that there is also enormous potential for LDPs to play an integral part in creating independent learners because of the unique nature of the role. This paper will examine this potential and thereby the possibilities for alignment with broader institutional teaching strategies.

Pedagogical research shows that ‘scaffolding’ is a crucial strategy for fostering independent learning. ‘Scaffolding’ is a term that is now widely used in education circles, though perhaps still more so in relation to school-age children than university students. ‘Scaffolding’ is generally seen as a ‘process that enables a child or novice to solve a problem, carry out a task or achieve a goal which would be beyond his unassisted efforts.’<sup>4</sup> Such strategies allow the novice to complete as much of the task as possible unaided, but also to acquire new skills when a tutor helps them complete the harder parts.

‘Scaffolding’ is tailored to the specific abilities and needs of the novice. As such it is more appropriate to one-to-one tutorial situations than group teaching. In other words, the kind of teaching experiences usually offered by LDPs offer far more potential ‘scaffolding’ opportunities than those by university lecturers, if LDPs know how to capitalise on these opportunities.

There are three main ways in which LDPs can foster independent learning through tutorials. Firstly, tutorials offer the opportunity to ascertain the student’s existing level of knowledge and build on it, thereby also building confidence. Secondly, the sessions are highly flexible and so can be tailored to the student’s specific need. Thirdly and perhaps most importantly, tutors have far greater opportunity to interact with students than in other learning situations. Higher interactivity has been shown to correlate with larger learning gains by many studies, particularly where students are trying to reach a level that is beyond their current abilities.<sup>5</sup> These high levels of interactivity allow opportunities for students and tutors to pose questions. Studies have suggested that the best tutors virtually never provide answers to problems. Instead the questions they ask help the students find the answers themselves.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Brenda Little, William Locke, Jan Parker and John Richardson, *Excellence in teaching and learning: a review of the literature for the Higher Education Academy* (Open University Press, 2007), 14.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 15-16.

<sup>3</sup> Bob Matthew, ‘Excellent teaching or excellent learning? Are we asking the right question?’, *Exchange* Vol. 5 (2003), p. 30.

<sup>4</sup> Wood, Bruner and Ross, ‘The role of tutoring in problem solving’, *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 17:2 (1976), 90.

<sup>5</sup> Chi et al, Wood and Middleton, Lane and Van Lehn

<sup>6</sup> Michelene, ‘Constructing Self-Explanations and Scaffolded Explanations in Tutoring’, *Applied Cognitive Psychology* Vol. 10 (1996), p. 7.

But what does the typical tutorial generally look like? And do they make the most of these potential learning opportunities? Well, research has shown that tutors, particularly inexperienced tutors, tend to intuitively follow a 5-step frame. This includes:

1. Tutor poses a question
2. Student attempts to answer it
3. Tutor provides brief evaluative feedback
4. Tutor and student work together to improve answer
5. Tutor asks if student understands<sup>7</sup>

This framework clearly provides potential for ‘scaffolding’ in step 4. Nonetheless, a slightly modified template would provide more ‘scaffolding’ opportunities and this is what I have been developing in my tutorials as part of the Centre for Achievement and Performance at the University of Northampton.

### **A ‘Scaffolded’ Tutorial**

#### **Work out what the student wants**

This allows the student to take control of the tutorial and set the agenda and thereby feel more confident, proactive and independent. But it is at odds with typical tutoring techniques, whereby tutors direct the conversation.<sup>8</sup>

#### **What do they already know?**

In the second step, instead of directly giving the student information to fill in their knowledge gaps, the tutor asks the student what they already know and builds on it. Questioning techniques can be used fruitfully at this stage to broaden the student’s understanding of a particular topic. They can also offer corrective feedback if necessary.

#### **Explain concepts using templates**

Typically, the second stage will identify some gaps or errors in the student’s knowledge or skill base. It will not always be enough to use questioning techniques to fill these gaps. Usually the tutor will have to introduce new concepts. Research has shown that tutors often use lengthy monologues in these types of situations. However, there is no evidence to suggest that students learn from such an approach.<sup>9</sup> Instead, the “scaffolded tutorial” lesson plan suggests that interactivity should be maintained by using modelled examples. These can form the basis for discussion and the introduction of new ideas.

#### **Task**

New ideas should also be reinforced by means of a task. This gives the tutor the opportunity to assess how far the new concepts or skills have been successfully understood and react accordingly. The task, of course, provides potential for ‘scaffolding’ as the tutor can work together with the student to complete the task.

#### **Recap and target setting**

In traditional tutorials, tutors tend to ask students if they have understood what has been covered. Studies have shown that students are notoriously unable to gauge their comprehension levels and will usually simply say that they do understand what has been covered.<sup>10</sup> In this lesson plan, the tutor asks more direct question or asks the student to recap what has been covered in the tutorial. This is a better strategy for gauging comprehension. It is also important to encourage the students to set targets and plan what they will do after the session. This encourages them to take responsibility for their learning and shows them that they can continue making progress without the help of the tutor.

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<sup>7</sup> Graesser, Peron and Magliano, ‘Collaborative dialogue patterns in naturalistic one-to-one tutoring’, *Applied Cognitive Psychology* Vol. 9 (1995), p. 504

<sup>8</sup> Graesser et al, ‘Collaborative dialogue patterns...’, p. 2.

<sup>9</sup> Michelene, ‘Constructing Self-explanations and Scaffolded Explanations...’ p.3.

<sup>10</sup> Michelene, ‘Constructing Self-explanations and Scaffolded Explanations...’ p.3.

Overall, this “scaffolded” lesson plan has enough in-built flexibility to allow it to be adapted to different students and different tasks. Sometimes a tutor may be able to skip some of the early stages of a tutorial if the student has a good understanding of the concepts involved and only needs help implementing them. In other cases it may be necessary to repeat certain steps.

Sometimes, however, students are simply unable to specify what they want. In these instances the tutor is forced to take charge and has to set the agenda based on the work they see before them or their access to the student’s assignment feedback. The tutor can and should, however, help the student to take charge once the agenda has been set.

Overall, the lesson plan offers much potential for interactivity with students and enables students to reach higher goals than they could achieve alone. I would like to illustrate this with a case study.

### **Case Study: Midwifery Student**

One of my students was writing an essay on the role of the midwife in the postnatal period. She was able to tell me what she wanted from the session. She was worried that her essay did not “flow”, that there were issues with the structure, and she did not know how to construct an argument. We briefly covered some of these concepts through me questioning what she already knew about structure and argument. Through our discussion I was able to build on her existing knowledge, but as the student already had a good knowledge base we quickly moved onto the fourth stage of the “scaffolded” lesson plan.

The student had already written a first draft of the essay, but they found it difficult to tell me what it was about. I, therefore, had to break my initial question down into smaller ones. First I returned to the essay question and asked what the midwife does after labour. The student told me in considerable detail. I then asked if the student could group these details into broader areas. She seemed confused so I gave an example of medical care. She came up with other areas herself, and in the end she realised that everything she needed to cover could be put into these broader areas, which were all related.

We then tackled how to construct an argument. Again, I asked prompting questions. I asked if anything had particularly struck her or interested her about the material she had included in the section on the legal duties of the midwife. She remembered that she had liked that the legal framework mentioned the importance of the midwife using their own professional judgement. She had also mentioned her interest in the extra support given by midwives to patients suffering from psycho-social problems earlier on in the tutorial. She had not pieced these ideas together, but I saw potential for an argument. I decided to ask a leading question about whether she thought the legal guidelines covered the extra support given by midwives. She said no. I asked if midwives sometimes go beyond their role. She replied that this was quite common. I asked if she thought the legal guidelines alone could define the role of the midwife. Again, she thought not. So from there she began to see how these ideas could form an argument – that the role of the midwife cannot be defined by legal guidelines alone as midwives often perform important duties that go beyond their “official” role. We then worked on framing the argument within the 3 parts of your structure.

The student’s argument was based on her own ideas that I had picked up on throughout our discussion. However, she would not have seen the potential argument without my help.

To conclude, I asked the student to recap the process and consider how she might apply it to her next essay.

### **Method**

In order to test the strength of the new tutorial model, a control group of 20 students experienced tutorials according to the standard 5-step frame, whilst an experimental group of a further 20 students

experienced “scaffolded” tutorials, following a more interactive structure. This sample size is relatively small, but we will see that the results indicate that it would be worthwhile to undertake a larger-scale study in future. At the end of each session I verbally tested students on their understanding and retention of topics covered. I then sent a follow-up email a week after the tutorial to further test the understanding and retention of the students. This was to minimise the potential confounding element of the pressure of giving the students an on the spot test.

## Results

A 2 x 2 chi-square test revealed that, as predicted, there was a significant association between experiencing a “scaffolded” tutorial and retention ( $\chi^2 = 3.956^a$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p = 0.047$ ); students who experienced a “scaffolded” tutorial are more likely to retain the topics covered. This is based on retention at the end of the tutorial. I also recorded the retention of students a week after the tutorial. Unfortunately, I got very few e-mail responses from students so I have not been able to perform statistical analysis on this data, however it suggested that in most cases retention rates did not change and in one case improved. I also recorded the topics covered in the session. Most students wanted help on some aspect of critical thinking. I also had a number with writing-based queries and others wanting help with literature reviews. I found that the topic of the tutorial did not affect the results. There was improvement in retention in the experimental group across all topics.

Generally, I noticed that students in the “scaffolded” tutorials asked far more questions and were also more likely to summarise ideas at different stages throughout the tutorial. They were more engaged, proactive, and because of this reached higher levels of understanding and retention. Students in traditional style tutorials were more likely to sit passively and listen. I did not include this in the statistical data I collected, but I think it would be valuable to record this in future versions of the study.

Interestingly, in a response to a follow-up email I sent to a student, the student seemed aware of some the scaffolding techniques I was using and they seemed to find them an effective teaching tool. They wrote:

I came to you for support in my assignment writing as I have had a couple of assignments back that pointed out my lack of academic tone and structure of my assignments...By reading my previous assignment, you were able to point out where I could improve on and also lead me to understand the correct structure by the types of questions you asked, ie you didn't tell me what to write or how to put words down you managed to ask me questions that I then had to think the answer through and explain to you, which gave me a more secure understanding of what the tutors were asking of me.<sup>11</sup>

## Challenges

Before wrapping up this paper, I would like to take a couple of minutes to consider the challenges I faced in implementing my lesson plans and some recommendations I would make for the future. In order for the lesson plan to be successful, the tutor has to have prepared templates and tasks. The Centre for Achievement and Performance, like many other Learning Development Centres, offers tutorials on a wide range of topics. It is important, therefore, for the tutor to know the topic of the session in advance so they can prepare the necessary teaching materials.

My research has also shown that it is beneficial for the student to have thought carefully about what they would like to cover so forward planning would benefit both the student and the tutor. At the University of Northampton we ask students to tell us what they would like to discuss when they book the appointment. They are given a number of suggested options, however these are often quite vague, such as ‘essay writing’. My research suggests the need for a more detailed evaluation of the students’ needs at the booking stage.

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<sup>11</sup> Anonymous student at the University of Northampton, 2013.

The students can also offer their own challenges. The personality of the student, their work ethic, their expectations of tutorials and Higher Education can all affect their responsiveness to a “scaffolded tutorial”. This type of teaching approach requires far more effort from the student and a deeper level of thinking than a traditional tutorial. This can prove difficult for students who lack confidence and can be disappointing for students who were hoping, at best, to simply sit back and listen, and at worst, to get the tutor to do their work for them. In these cases the tutor has to use their interpersonal, questioning and motivating skills to help the student reach their potential. My research has highlighted the importance of marketing CfAP in such a way that manages student expectations by making it clear that students must be active participants in tutorials, whilst also trying not to intimidate students who need our help.

### **Conclusions**

To conclude, “scaffolded” tutorials offer a number of challenges, but the benefit to the student seems to far outweigh the costs. This preliminary study suggests that the design of the tutorial offers many opportunities for student interaction, for independent learning, confidence building, problem solving, and retention. I, therefore, intend to continue my study, involving a wider number of participants. I welcome any feedback and comments.