

PhD students as (near) peer tutors: perspectives on motivational and learning processes



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- Overview of our 1:1 tutorial scheme
- The thinking behind the scheme
- Effectiveness of tutorials
- Tutor structured reflections on the process
- Conclusions

Overview: PhD student mentors as 1:1 tutors

PhD students provide 1:1 essay writing & language advising tutorials sessions for UG & PGT students

Topics covered include:

- Planning & structuring of written assignments
- Developing coherent arguments in writing
- Effective referencing
- Developing critical reading & thinking skills
- Improving research skills & organisational skills
- Developing independent language learning skills
- Coping with feedback

Increasing numbers of departmental referrals for plagiarism

Overview: PhD student mentors as 1:1 tutors

- Each session: 30 minutes (45 mins for Masters dissertation)
- Students allowed up to 3 appointments per term
- Appointments also offered on Skype
- Year round service

Training for 1:1 tutors

- 3-day core units of HEA-accredited PDHEP programme
- 1 day training provided by Learning & Teaching Development
- Ongoing training as required (e.g. dissertation)

What is the thinking behind the scheme?

- Peer mentoring/advising schemes support retention & academic success (Terrion & Leonard, 2007)
- Schemes have been shown to result in increased confidence & motivation (Mynard & Almarzouqi, 2006)
- Peers are seen as more approachable & less threatening than staff (Kao, 2012)
- Our scheme based on idea that PhD students are more expert than UG/PGT students & is underpinned by a Vygotskian perspective on learning

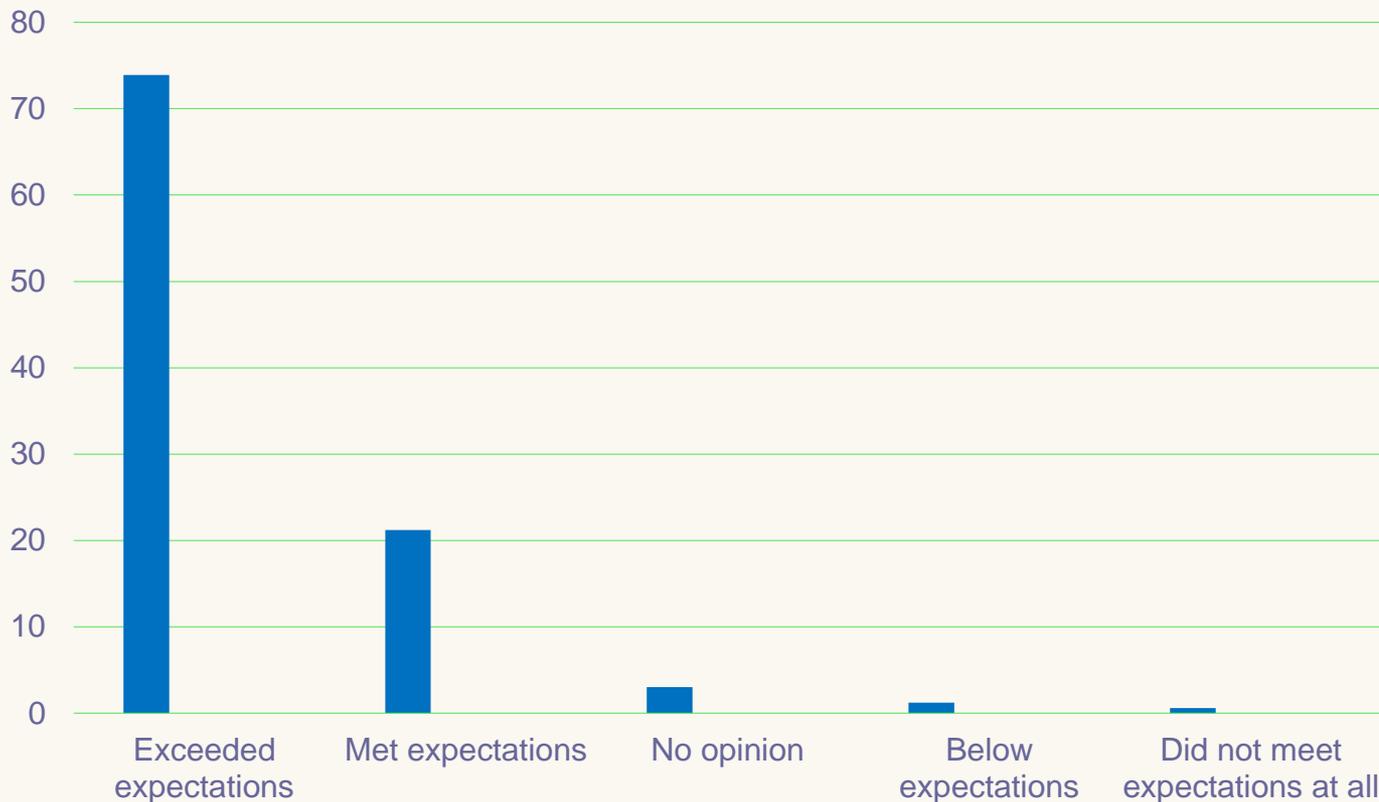
Vygotsky: Zone of Proximal Development

- Vygotsky viewed interaction with peers as an effective way of developing skills and strategies – focus is on development
- Key idea: Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) – widely used concept
- *“The distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem-solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (Vygotsky, 1994 p. 53).*
- Within the ZPD students with appropriate assistance from a more competent peer (scaffolding) can achieve a task and ultimately become more independent (Chakin, 2003)
- The notion of the ZPD gives rise to sociocultural theories, which propose that learning can be advanced through particular types of social collaboration and that knowledge is socially constructed through talk (e.g. Mercer, 1995).

In 2015/16

- 771 tutorials (feedback from 330)
- Students' views on the overall usefulness of the tutorial – very positive:

How useful did you find the tutorial overall?



Comments on usefulness of tutorials

- “Great advice, helped me in deciding how to move forward with my work”
- “It was really helpful as comments were based on my essay. It was also very useful to look at the general essay structure and compare it to what I have done.”
- “I have been panicking this last month but by talking to [] I feel much better now and I simply need to clear my head and calm myself”
- The cap on how many times I can use the service is not ideal”
- ...My comment is that if the tutor is studying the same field it would have been more useful. By the way, it was very good and helpful”
- “I found the tutorial helpful and stress relieving. Comments were in line with my expectations about the weaknesses, but was useful to get concrete advice”
- “Really helpful to talk through the dissertation with someone to become clearer about own thoughts and structures”
- “Thank you very much for your time - it was incredibly helpful and when I was unsure you found alternate ways to explain until I did get it!”

What about the process?

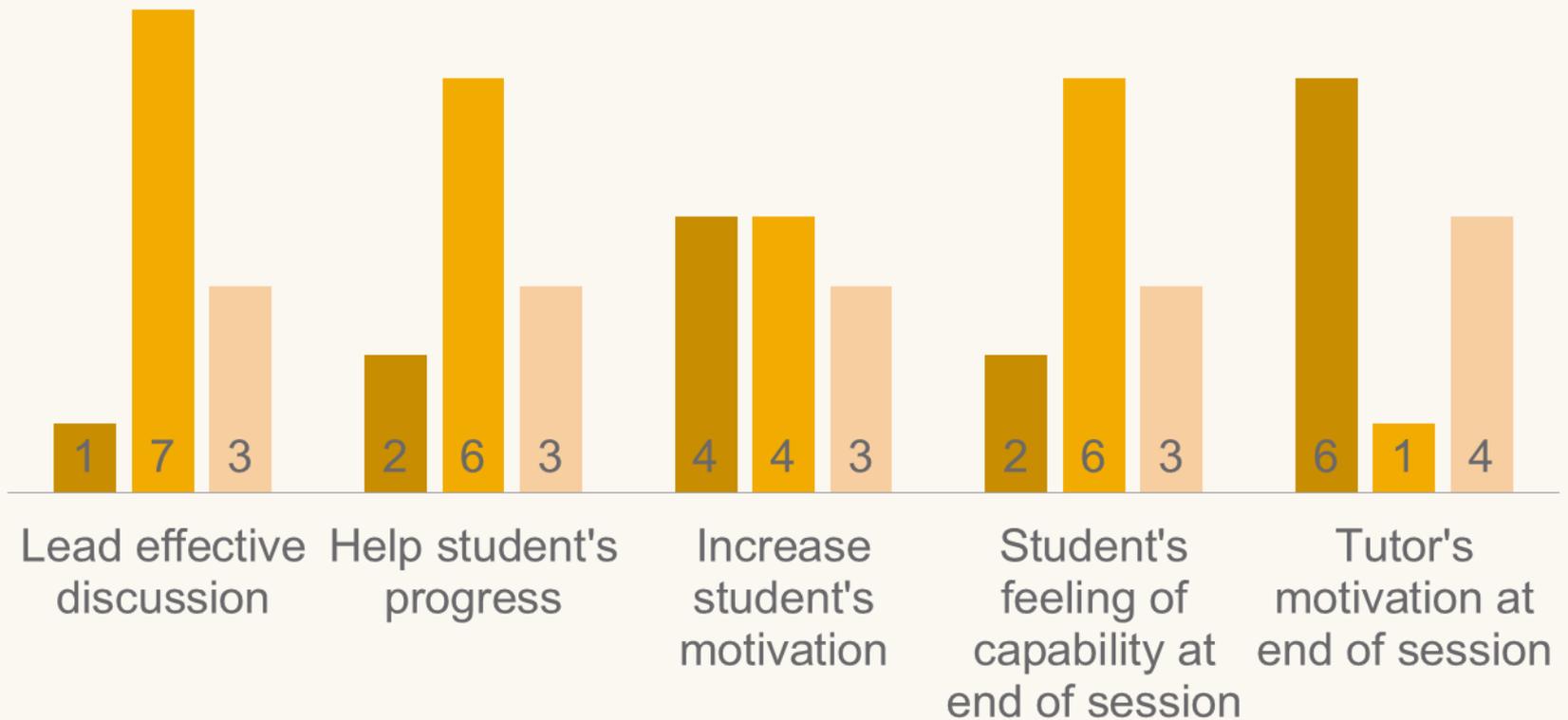
Conducted a series of post-tutorial reflections adapted from self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) & teacher self-efficacy (Mills, 2011; Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2011; Borthwick & Gallagher-Brett, 2014):

- How much were you able to engage in an effective discussion during the session?
- How far were you able to help the student progress during the session? How do you know this?
- How far were you able to motivate the student during the session?
- How capable do you think the student felt at the end of the session?
- Which of your personal qualities and professional skills do you think you used during the session?
- What did you learn during the session?
- How would you describe your motivation at the end of the session?
- What kind of tutor do you think the student needed in front of them in the session?

- Data collection after tutoring sessions through two-fold questionnaire: reflection on tutor, reflection on tutor's action towards student
- 2 week period, 11 questionnaires
- 3 recurring students; 8 one off sessions
- Conducted thematic analysis

Positive reflections: motivation and self-efficacy

■ Entirely;Very much;Very high ■ Mostly;Average ■ Very little;None;N/A



- Content related learning through tutoring sessions
 - Perspective among different disciplines;
 - Widening lateral thinking;
 - Broadening one's own research skills and methods.

PROFESSIONAL SKILLS

Brainstorming;
Acknowledging workload;
Organising and prioritising according to student's need;
Developing argument without actively leading conversation;
Provoke reasoning;
Planning

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SOCIAL SKILLS

Empathy and Reassurance;
Patience and Listening;
Concealing dislike;
Humour and breaking awkwardness/silence;
Flexibility and easiness in interpersonal interaction;
Mirroring the other in body language

Negative reflections: how does one qualify a negative session?

- Negative experiences stand out more than positive ones:

I lack human understanding!

...crushed in seeing my own limitations

Confused. [...]
**What's the student's aim [in the session]?
And am I not adequate for these kind of targets?**

**[motivation] *definitely lower* than at beginning of session.
I couldn't establish communication**

**[student] is *beyond reach* in [...]
walking together towards a common goal**

- Data collection shows tutor's limitedness and impotence:

maybe [student] needed someone who could *advise on content*, was I there for this reason? /more *content driven* advice.

[student needs] a firm [tutor], one who takes charge rather than letting him talk for the whole time. / [student might need] *firm willed* person.

- In front of such cases, tutor tries to identify the issue: Is it that the student was not in ZPD or rather that the tutor was not able to bend adequately around the needs of the student?

- A positive attitude of the tutor, when entering the session, seems to influence positively the progression of the tutorial.
- A dynamic tension is created as the tutor wishes to give more content-specific advice and yet the service we provide is deliberately general and non content-centred.
- What happens in the space where the perception of the tutor and the student on the session diverges? What is going on in that gap?
- Necessity of flexibility and willingness to bend on student's needs.
- Do tutors need self-efficacy training

- This reflective work is at an early stage – conclusions tentative
- Reflections of 1 tutor – not generalisable
- Reflections have allowed the tutor to unveil aspects of the process that were present but unknown
- Reflections have begun to reveal the complexity of the process

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