

Lessons Learned: Reflections On Training Student Tutors

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ABSTRACT

As an academic institution that is still in its early phases of organisational growth, Monash University, South Africa does not have a pool of postgraduate students that can be utilised for teaching assistance in units with large groups of students. This necessitated the selection of high-calibre honours candidates and third-year students that could be trained to become tutors. The tutor training, upon which this study is based, originated from a practical need that arose within the context of teaching at a small higher education institution. The researchers developed the training with the intention of providing the necessary skills enhancement needed for tutors to conduct successful tutorials. Due to the novelty of this endeavour, the research questions emerged with the formulation of the original content of the training course. There were three main research questions. Firstly, to verify whether the topics covered in the training did in fact provide the requisite real-world knowledge and skills development. Secondly, to evaluate the quality of the training that was provided. Thirdly, to ascertain other gaps in knowledge and skill that exist and that need to be addressed. A mixed methodological approach was followed in this study. Action research and group-administered questionnaires were utilised. Action research was used both in the data collection and in the data analysis phases. Group-administered questionnaires facilitated data triangulation to enhance the validity of the research findings. The research method utilised in this study to evaluate the efficacy of the training and to identify further training needs, presented a unique opportunity for reflective practice. The content of the training was set up to address needs identified by the researchers, based on their own teaching and tutoring experiences. To ensure continuous improvement and efficacy, the content was refined once the participants were given an opportunity to provide feedback. The researchers reflected on what transpired in each training session and developed new insights into potential gaps that needed filling. The participants responded positively to the unique learning situation that was created and felt that the training equipped them with the basic skills they needed as novice tutors. The researchers found that reflective practice effectively enabled the participants to identify the individual value gained from the learning experience.

Keywords: Tutor Development; Tutor Training; Action Research; Experiential Learning

INTRODUCTION

Peer tutoring is not new. In ancient Greek and Roman schools teachers often required older students to assist them with teaching. Peer tutoring has been in practice in large educational institutions across the United Kingdom, North America and Europe for some time (Moust & Schmidt, 1994, p. 471). In the South African academic context however, the teaching model of higher education institutions does not always include a tutoring system. However, research has demonstrated that tutoring can make a difference to student success and ultimately student throughput (Boud, Cohen, & Sampson, 2001; Cohen, Kulik, & Kulik, 1982; Falchikov, 2001; Goodlad, 1998; Moust & Schmidt, 1994). Thus, tutoring has become a critical method for the academic development of students in higher education across the globe (Falchikov, 2001; Goodlad & Hirst, 1990). Typically, the large weekly lecture format on its own is not always an ideal option for maximum learning, since students may be overwhelmed by information and may have a need to ask clarifying questions or to have an opportunity to practically apply the theory discussed in the lecture (Underhill & McDonald, 2010, p. 93).

Monash University is an Australian multi-national higher education institution with campuses in Australia, Malaysia and South Africa. The Australian teaching model includes a two-hour lecture and a one hour tutorial's worth of contact time with students per week. This means that students have more access to their lecturers and practical application of theory is done in smaller group settings – i.e. tutorials where students have an opportunity to ask clarifying questions. This also places educators in a better position to identify problematic students who need learning and teaching assistance. As an academic institution that is still in its early phases of organisational growth, the South African campus of Monash University does not have a pool of postgraduate students that can be utilised for teaching assistance in units with large groups of students, where the lecturer is not able to conduct all the tutorials him/herself. This necessitated the selection of high-calibre honours candidates and third-year students that could be trained to become tutors. To facilitate this leadership development opportunity, the researchers developed a program to train tutors with the basic facilitation skills needed to tutor.

The *Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines “to facilitate” as “to make easy”. From this definition it is evident that the role of a facilitator is to *enable* individuals’ learning and growth so that they are able to contribute to the greater whole (Berry, 1993, p. 23). Thus, subject-matter expertise is less important than the facilitator’s ability to identify expertise in others and create space for it to come through. Therefore, at the most basic level, the facilitator should listen, question, clarify and summarise in a way that fosters the involvement and commitment of all participants (Berry, 1993, p. 23). In this paper, the necessity of these skills was highlighted from two perspectives. Not only did the facilitators who conducted the training require these skills, but the actual participants needed to learn these skills so that they could become good facilitators themselves.

Aim of the study

The training, upon which this study is based, originated from a practical need that arose within the context of teaching at a small higher education institution with a lecturing and tutoring teaching model. The researchers developed the training with the intention of providing the necessary skills enhancement needed for tutors to conduct successful tutorials and become effective facilitators. Hence the training was aimed at addressing the contextual practical challenges at hand. According to Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008, p. 193) it is an often-occurring phenomenon that researchers collaborate, actively engage with and work within businesses to solve specific problems, develop organisational activities and ensure more effective business practices. Bruffee (1993) posited that when tutors undergo training, they are in a position to collaboratively address institutional issues at grassroots level. This study was a collaborative effort between the researchers and novice tutors to develop the necessary facilitation skills needed to maintain the lecturing and tutoring teaching model utilised at Monash South Africa. It facilitated a shift from being a student, learning content, to becoming a tutor, delivering content and guiding the learning of others. Due to the novelty of this endeavour, the research questions emerged with the formulation of the original content of the training course.

There were three main research questions. Firstly, to verify whether the topics covered in the training did in fact provide the requisite real-world knowledge and skills development. Secondly, to evaluate the quality of the training that was provided. Thirdly, to ascertain other gaps in knowledge and skill that exist and that need to be addressed.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The model of experiential learning contexts depicted in *Figure 1* was developed by Roberts (2006, p.26) and it outlines the context within which the tutorial training program took place. The model is defined by four dimensions, namely the level, the duration, the intended outcome, and the setting. Each will be discussed below.

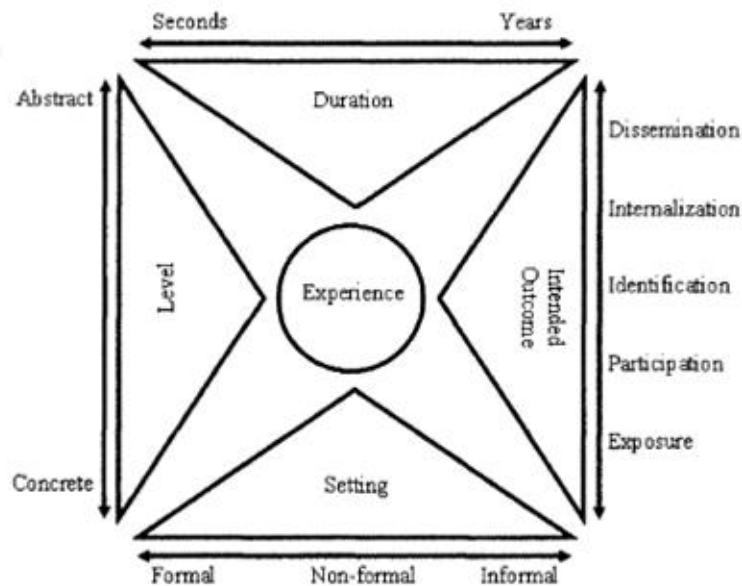


Figure 1: Model of Experiential Learning Context

Source: Roberts (2006, p.26)

Level

Educational experiences occur on a continuum from abstract to concrete. The central idea of Dewey's (1938, p. 25) philosophy about education was that "... amid all uncertainties there is one permanent frame of reference: namely, the organic connection between education and personal experience". Tutors have themselves been students in tutorials but have likely never actively considered the nature of the educational experience as they were predominantly concerned with consuming the content being conveyed. Thus, the tutor training starts with a reflection on participants' experience as students – a more concrete level. There is a systematic progression throughout the course of the training towards abstract knowledge as they make the shift from students to tutors, thus progressing from being consumers of the content to facilitators of the learning experience that their students are exposed to. As a result of the tutor training experience a connection between prior and current knowledge is established. This training experience then becomes the foundational building block for additional learning in real life.

Duration

The duration of a learning experience is dependent on the time it takes to go through an iteration of the learning cycle, which is depicted in *Figure 2* below. The process starts with an "initial focus", which in this case were the requisite skills for effective facilitation of tutorials. Participants then have to "experience" and "experiment" with the development of these skills. The experimentation with facilitation skills is facilitated by tutorial simulations where the participants are asked to conduct mock tutorials. They receive feedback on the mock tutorials and have an opportunity to reflect on their experience of the simulation. The participants are asked to complete a questionnaire to establish what they learnt from the simulation exercise and how they would rate their ability to facilitate tutorials after having gone through the simulation exercise. The entire experience is thus fine-tuned through "reflection" and "generalisation", leading to the "next iteration of the learning cycle".

Learning that is centred on conveying theory generally requires a longer learning cycle. However, by virtue of the simulation and discussion based on reflections of their own past experiences the learning cycle for the tutor training can be reduced significantly. Further iterations of the learning cycle will occur when tutors implement the knowledge they have gained. The next iteration cycle will only start once the participants have to conduct their first

tutorials. If the training allowed sufficient space to reflect on their learning experiences, the tutors should be able to recall their experiences and the discussions during the training sufficiently to allow them to know how to facilitate the tutorial even when faced with different challenges. This creates an iterative or continuous learning cycle since each opportunity to facilitate a tutorial would present a new learning opportunity where the tutors can reflect on and improve upon their tutoring/facilitation practice.

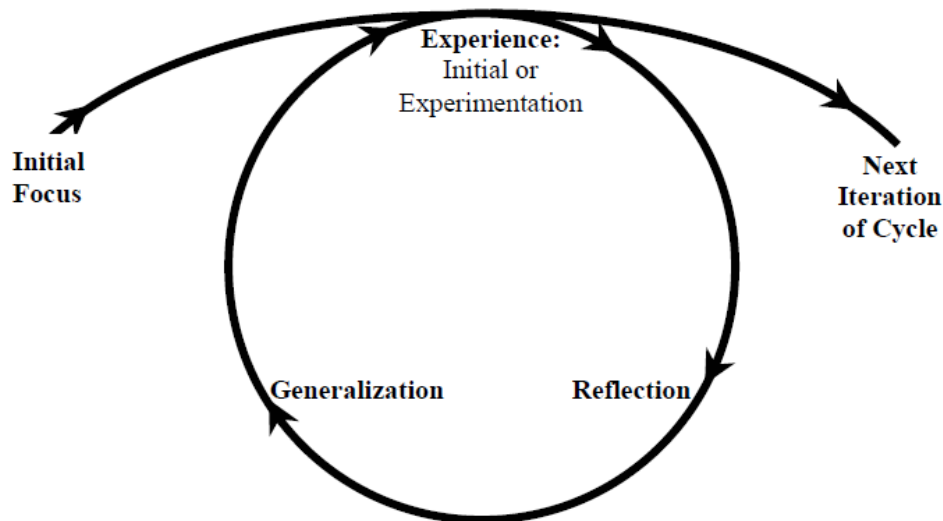


Figure 2: Model of the experiential learning process

Source: Roberts (2006, p.6)

Intended outcomes

Intended outcomes occur on a continuum from exposure to dissemination. As learners' progress higher on the intended outcomes continuum, more is required from them (Stripling, 2011, p.17). The tutor training requires tutors to disseminate the knowledge that they acquire thus requiring more from the tutors than just being participants and internalising the knowledge they gain. During the training tutors are exposed to knowledge and required to participate in the simulated tutorial exercise. They are also required to identify and acquire the skills required to be a successful tutor and to internalise the knowledge they are exposed to. The dissemination of information occurs once they are facilitating tutorials for undergraduate students. This also means that tutors are exposed to multiple learning contexts – i.e. the discussions during the training, the simulation exercises and the real-life facilitation of tutorials – thus providing continuity in the learning process for them.

Setting

As illustrated in *Figure 1*, settings range from formal to non-formal to informal. Formal learning environments are highly structured settings such as a classroom. Non-formal settings are less structured and include internships and service learning (Stripling, 2011, p.17). Informal settings are unplanned, occurring in everyday experiences as a result of incidental learning. Although, the day long tutor training occurs in a formal learning environment – i.e. in a classroom setting – every effort is made to create a comfortable, *non-formal* learning context. This non-formal learning context is similar in nature to *on-the-job training*. Participants are not attending a lecture or tutorial, but are rather engaging in an intellectual discussion about their experiences as students and how these experiences can be translated into guidelines for effective facilitation of tutorial sessions. Additionally, the simulation exercise creates a real life setting where tutors can practice and thus learn from whatever transpires during the simulation. This provides the participants with an educational experience that can be reflected on and utilised in future tutoring scenarios (Stripling, 2011, p.17). Thus, incidental learning occurs during the simulation

exercise and will continue to occur once the tutors facilitate their first tutorials and interact with students. Therefore, the simulation exercise, as a non-formal learning context, *simulates an informal educational setting*, which is the context they will find themselves in when they have to facilitate actual tutorials.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A mixed methodological approach was followed in this study. In a mixed methods approach, quantitative and qualitative methods complement each other and allow for more complete analysis of the research situation (Greene, Cacarelli & Graham, 1989; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). *Action research and group-administered questionnaires* were utilised. Action research was used both in the *data collection* and in the *data analysis* phases. *Group-administered questionnaires* facilitated *data triangulation* to enhance the validity of the research findings (Merriam, 1998, p. 216). Triangulation is often used in social sciences research, particularly in qualitative studies (Merriam, 1998, p. 216; Watkins, 2006, p. 74).

Research where close collaboration with the research object and its practical problem solving is part of the research process is termed *action research*. Action research is thought to be suitable where the research questions describe an unfolding process or series of actions taking place over time in a certain group (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, p. 193). Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008, p. 194) believe that when the research questions are aimed at understanding changes taking place or the development or improvement of some problem in order to learn from it, action research is the most appropriate method to apply. In action research the researchers and the researched group are not separate, even if they have clear differences. The researchers are the facilitators and the instruments of data collection (Cresswell et.al., 2007, p. 257) who bring change and who promote reflection about the change and then conduct research on the specific case (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, p. 194). The tutor training was *interactive and non-formal providing a space for the participants to share ideas and to learn from each other. Reflective sessions* enabled the participants to develop best practices based on their own knowledge and past experiences as students. Concurrently, the researchers were able to observe and document the personal growth, and skills development that was enabled by the learning space created.

Sample group

The sample group constituted senior students on third-year and honours level who were academic achievers in their respective disciplines. Thus, tutors at Monash South Africa are selected on the basis of academic merit and every effort is made to ensure that they represent the diversity of the student body. Candidates submit a written application outlining their motivation for seeking a position as a tutor. Candidates can also be contacted for an in-depth interview. Once the tutor is selected, he/she signs a contract committing him/her to a six-month tenure, for which they receive monthly compensation. This is determined by the number of hours worked per week. The compensation includes payment for conducting small group classes, one-on-one consultation with students, and in some instances, marking of in-semester assessments and providing students with feedback. In some schools tutors are also required to attend weekly tutor meetings.

There were three different groups from three different disciplines. Participants in Group 1 were tutors in the School of Business and Economics. Participants in Group 2 were tutors in the School of Arts. Participants in Group 3 were tutors in the School of Information Technology. With each group the participants were presented with the challenge of identifying the generic factors that lead to the successful facilitation of tutorials by reflecting on their own experiences of tutorials they had attended as students. The researchers actively participated in the process by facilitating the discussion and asking questions. Participants were allowed to share their views and to formulate criteria for successful facilitation of tutorials.

Participants were allowed some time to reflect on their experiences during the training and were then instructed to design their own short tutorial. The tutorial had to include an explanation of theoretical concepts and the facilitation of a group activity. They were required to conduct the tutorial with their fellow participants. Thus, participants were presented with an opportunity to test their ideas on how to facilitate a tutorial (Dewey, 1916, p. 163). Participants took turns to present and act as “tutors” and to participate as “students” receiving instructions from a “tutor”. At the end of each mock tutorial presentation, the “tutor” who presented was asked to reflect on

his/her own ability to execute a short tutorial. Other participants were encouraged to share their comments and observations of the tutorial and offer constructive suggestions for improvement to the “tutor”.

Validity and reliability of results

Respondents who are present in a *group* could be asked to complete a *questionnaire*. Preferably each respondent should receive the same stimulus and complete his/her own questionnaire without discussion with the other members of the group. The advantage of this is that the group of respondents are handled simultaneously and are consequently exposed simultaneously to the same stimulus (De Vos, Strydom, Fouché & Delport, 2010, p. 169). The nature of the training provided the setting to administer group questionnaires. The questionnaires were distributed at the end of each training session to obtain feedback from the participants. Open-ended questions were asked that enable the participants to reflect on their own personal experiences of the training session. Participants were asked about their experiences during the simulated tutorial exercises and were encouraged to reflect on what they had learnt when they had to “tutor” and what they would do differently in a real-life tutoring scenario based on the feedback they had received from their mock tutorial. This combination of research methods enhanced the reliability and validity of the study (Babbie & Mouton, 2001, p. 275; Merriam, 1998, p. 216), since the results were not merely observed but recorded from participants’ responses to the questionnaire.

Creswell et al. (2007, p. 37) emphasise that it is important to ensure that results are consistent even when they are obtained on different occasions or by different forms of data collection as was the case with this particular study. Merriam (1998, p. 205) argues that replication in qualitative research is not possible since “human nature is never static”. So in order to be taken seriously by the scientific community, the researchers have to ensure that the results or phenomena that are discovered through the data collection methods used are congruent with reality (Creswell, 2007, p. 37). The researchers decided to validate the data by means of a questionnaire distributed at different time intervals, to three different groups. This constitutes *data triangulation*. Triangulation through the use of multiple data sources means comparing and cross-checking data collected through observations at different times and with different groups with data collected from questionnaires circulated to these same groups of participants in order to validate the findings (Merriam, 1998, p. 216).

In this particular case, the same questionnaire was distributed to different groups of participants at different time intervals to document their respective perspectives on the training. For the results of the training to be reliable, the majority of participants from the various groups who participated in the simulation exercise should demonstrate a definite improvement in facilitation skills and a definite experience of improvement through their reflections on the training. According to Leedy and Ormrod (2001, p. 91) one axiom of research is that any research effort should be *replicable*, that is, other researchers should be able to *repeat* a specific study at a different time under *exactly the same conditions*. Although the same researchers conducted each group-administered questionnaire, these questionnaires were distributed at different times to different groups under the same conditions, to establish if the same results could be obtained with different groups at different times.

Contextual nature of the research

This study was conducted within a very specific context – i.e. that of a higher education institution that utilises a lecture and tutorial teaching model where large groups of students are being taught. The training was conducted with a small number of participants. At any one time there were no more than 20 participants taking part in the training. This allowed the researchers/facilitators to engage with the participants on a more personal level. The challenge with this particular context though, is that the results may differ if the study is repeated in a different context. This presents a limitation to the study. One way in which the researchers tried to counteract the impact of the context, is by data triangulation, i.e. by asking different groups of participants the same questions. It could thus be argued that in any context where senior students are trained to become tutors, the same results may be obtained, specifically because the training was aimed at developing generic facilitation skills – i.e. those skills that are needed to successfully facilitate any tutorial in any discipline. However, the success of the training would depend on whether participants had attended tutorials as students before, since they would only be able to reflect on experiences they have actually had.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The participants responded positively to the unique learning situation that was created and felt that the training equipped them with the basic skills they needed as novice tutors. The simulation exercises that they participated in during the training increased their confidence sufficiently to facilitate their first tutorials. The researchers found that reflective practice effectively enabled the participants to identify the individual value gained from the learning experience. The researchers noted a difference in participants' attitudes and thinking throughout the course of the training. Participants' reflections as students indicated little understanding of the educational aims of a tutorial. In contrast, after having completed the training most participants were able to identify the components of a well-structured tutorial and were able to identify the skills they deemed most important to successful facilitation. They understood the educational aim of a tutorial, in essence making the shift from being students in tutorials to facilitators of tutorials.

All participants from the different groups indicated that they found the training to be valuable and meaningful. They rated the quality of the training as very high. Some comments included "the sessions were very well done"; "I learned how to deal with different situations"; "It was professionally done and extremely helpful"; "It helped me identify problems in tutoring and build my confidence"; "The training exceeded my expectations. I now know how to tutor"; "It met my expectations by covering all the areas of tutoring I had questions on"; "The training gave me clarity on what is expected of tutor".

The researchers planned to rely on the tutors' tacit knowledge from having some first-hand experience to reveal hidden training needs that might not have been that obvious at the beginning of their learning journey. Although the researchers initially anticipated that the feedback from participants would drive the development of new training courses, this has in fact not been the case. The questionnaire that was distributed was successful in addressing the first two research questions. Participants were able to identify the elements they thought contributed to a well-structured and properly facilitated tutorial session. They were also able to specifically point out which facilitation skills they had learnt and which skills required fine tuning and more practice.

The third research question could not be addressed in this manner though, since the tutors were limited by their lack of experience and expertise in the educational field and this did not enable them to envision further training needs. The third research question was addressed by the active reflection of the researchers after each training session and again after each training period. The researchers would reflect on a particular training session and highlight the problems they felt had not been addressed through the training. The researchers' continuous search for novel ideas and new findings in higher education, inspired additional training courses aimed at skills enhancement. During each training session, the researchers were presented with an opportunity to learn from participants about what works and what does not work. The researchers were able to adapt their teaching based on the suggestions from participants during the discussions in the training sessions. As the researchers identified new ways of engaging students, they also identify new skills development needs for tutors.

Additional training requirements were identified when the researchers reflected on the unfolding training process. This revealed needs that reflected more advanced skills like understanding learning style differences in different students, engaging students at different levels and marking assessments and providing effective feedback. Thus, two additional training courses were developed, a training course aimed at understanding learning styles of different students and utilising tools and techniques to engage different student groups and cater for different learning styles during a tutorial. Another training course focused specifically on the development of the necessary skills to mark in-semester assessments and provide effective feedback to students in both written and verbal format.

Limitations to the study and opportunities for further research and development

In action research tension could arise between research and action as it takes longer to complete this kind of research due to its labour intensity. It is often impossible to control for extraneous variables, making it difficult to attribute positive results to the actions taken by the researchers (De Vos et.al, 2010, p. 422). Furthermore, the close relationship between the researchers and the subjects complicates objectivity (De Vos et.al, 2010, p. 422). The researchers utilised *bracketing* to eliminate bias. Bracketing could be seen as the process of "cleansing the mind to

ready it for the perception of meaning” (Husserl, 1931, p. 56). It thus implies “purging all assumptions” (Husserl, 1931, p. 56) before undertaking the research endeavour.

As educators, the researchers themselves might be biased in the sense that they might have specific expectations about how tutorials should be conducted. The researchers had to identify their own thoughts and feelings regarding tutorial facilitation before conducting the training and had to actively refrain from steering the discussion into a particular direction, based on their assumptions. This was done by refraining from making any particular comments until the participants had had an opportunity to identify the factors that they deemed important. The researchers had to pay careful attention to the discussions taking place between the participants to ensure that they truly understood the context of each group of participants. The researchers themselves are not experts in the different fields where tutors are needed and had to familiarise themselves with the teaching and tutoring context of each discipline. This required open-mindedness and a willingness to listen.

The tutor training did not address discipline specific skills development, but focused on the development of generic tutoring skills such as presentation skills, taking control of a tutorial session and responding in an emotionally responsible and mature manner to student requests and specific student actions. Some of the respondents indicated a need for discipline-specific guidance as well. Certain disciplines require familiarisation with subject-specific terminology and very specific reading and writing skills. Although participants were encouraged to identify the discipline specific needs of the students they would be tutoring, there is still some room for improvement of the training in this regard. The researchers would never have the subject/discipline knowledge of every group of tutors they train, but they could engage in discussions with their colleagues from other schools to establish how best to cater for discipline specific needs. There is also room to develop a continuous tutor development program in collaboration with colleagues from other schools. This development program would first equip novice tutors with the basic generic skills needed to facilitate tutorials and would then rely on the support and collaboration from discipline specific colleagues in other schools to provide *mentoring* to these tutors.

Another element that is missing from this particular training program, is a “classroom visit” system as described by Underhill and McDonald (2010, p. 100). They explain that classroom visits from lecturers to the tutor’s tutorials creates an opportunity for dialogue on how to improve their facilitation of tutorials. Underhill and McDonald (2010, p. 101) emphasise that mentorship of individual tutors becomes a pivotal component of tutor development. Although, tutors who have completed the tutor training can contact the researchers with specific questions or for discussions about their tutoring practices, the researchers do not have the capacity to implement classroom visits. It is envisioned that classroom visits could be incorporated into the program with the assistance and support of colleagues from the other schools at Monash South Africa.

Lastly, the internal validity of this study would increase if longitudinal data were available. The researchers intend to repeat this study over a period of five years. Once longitudinal data are available, the data could be re-evaluated to ascertain if there is year-on-year consistency between findings.

CONCLUSION

This study came about as a result of a practical need for novice tutors with facilitation skills at a small higher education institution in South Africa. There were three research questions that the researchers sought to address. Firstly, to verify whether the topics covered in the training did in fact provide the requisite real-world knowledge and skills development. Secondly, to evaluate the quality of the training that was provided. Thirdly, to ascertain other gaps in knowledge and skill that exist and that need to be addressed. These research questions were answered by applying a mixed methodological approach; utilising both action research and group-administered questionnaires. The participants responded positively to the unique learning situation that was created and felt that the training equipped them with the basic skills they needed as novice tutors. All participants from the different groups indicated that they found the training to be valuable and meaningful. The third research question was addressed through the active reflection of the researchers after each training session. Reflecting on the unfolding training process, the researchers identified the need for more advanced skills like understanding learning style differences in different students, engaging students at different levels and marking assessments and providing effective feedback. Thus, two additional training courses were developed, a training course aimed at understanding

learning styles of different students and utilising tools and techniques to engage different student groups and cater for different learning styles during a tutorial. Another training course focused specifically on the development of the necessary skills to mark in-semester assessments and provide effective feedback to students in both written and verbal format. The researchers identified opportunities for further research, which includes the development of mentoring program in collaboration with colleagues from other schools at Monash South Africa. The internal validity of this study would increase if longitudinal data were available. The researchers intend to repeat this study over a period of five years.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

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