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[Walker, Benjamin](#) (2018) A Defining Moment for Personal Tutoring: Reflections on Personal Tutor Definitions and their Implications. *IMPact: The University of Lincoln Journal of Higher Education Research*, 1 (1).

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Publisher: Lincoln Higher Education Research Institute

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25507/1120188>

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A Defining Moment for Personal Tutoring: Reflections on Personal Tutor Definitions and their Implications

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Abstract

Despite personal tutoring being a highly important area, it has a contested nature. One contention concerns its definition: in simple terms, what personal tutoring is and, by extension, what effective personal tutoring is. A book on personal tutoring (Stork and Walker, 2015) I co-authored entitled *Becoming an Outstanding Personal Tutor* - which aims to define the role of the personal tutor in further education as well as explain and demonstrate how to carry out the role effectively - raises a number of questions to be explored further. These have been brought into sharper focus by both my journey from further to higher education and as a result of my former 'practical' role as a manager of personal tutoring. The most urgent of these questions are centred on the theme of definition. What alternative definitions are out there? Are single definitions sufficient for the complexity of tutoring? When it comes to personal tutoring, what constitutes a definition anyway? The urgency stems from the increased importance placed on personal tutoring resulting from contextual developments and as shown from the findings of key research reports on the retention and success of students. Similarly, if there is a broad consensus that personal tutoring is vital, then further debate around what it stands for, and should stand for, in terms of good practice, needs to take place. Informed by critical pedagogy, this article will consider these questions of definition and the potential implications for organisations, those undertaking the role and students.

Introduction

It seems the role of personal tutor is one which carries increasing significance. In higher education, this is linked to the focus on retention and success of students, and, in particular, the outcomes of the comprehensive *What Works* reports (Thomas, 2012; 2017a) that highlight the importance of the 'human side of education'¹ (Thomas, 2017a, 3) to student success along with the need for proactive support and monitoring participation. Due to the expansion of the sector that has resulted in more students and greater diversity, increased competition and concern about

¹ The 'human side of education' is defined in the report as follows: '[...] finding friends, feeling confident and, above all, feeling a part of your course of study and the institution' (Thomas, 2017a, 3).

league tables (influenced by retention), differential outcomes for under-represented groups, student expectations of support as part of the 'value for money' debate, and the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) (Thomas, 2017b; Thomas and Hixenbaugh, 2006, 5-6), personal tutoring has been the subject of increased attention. Some commentators have specifically highlighted the crucial role the personal tutor plays (Swain, 2008; Stork and Walker, 2015, 3-5; Thomas, 2017b; Stenton, 2017). As reflected in the authors cited here, and having recently journeyed from further to higher education myself, this importance appears to be commonly felt across the school, further education and higher education sectors.

Despite this, the area continues to be a relatively under-developed and under-researched field (Thomas and Hixenbaugh, 2006, 3; Stork and Walker, 2015, 2) with the latter issue reflected in the lack of published material available, despite noteworthy institutional research (Thomas, 2006, 161). Coupled with a lack of clarity over what a personal tutor is (Wootton, 2006, 115) the personal tutoring experience on the ground is often characterised in two ways: firstly, for staff, by confusion over the role and lack of training for the position (Mcfarlane, 2016; Race, 2010; Watts, 2011; Ridley, 2006), and secondly, for students, by inconsistency (Grant, 2006, 13) and limited awareness. Moreover, the very contextual developments which have increased personal tutoring's importance have made it more challenging to deliver with any effectiveness. Therefore, though unintentional, there is a tendency for it to be a low priority amongst staff (Myers, 2008, 609) and, in turn, students.

The lack of clarity surrounding the role was one of the reasons behind co-authoring *Becoming an Outstanding Personal Tutor*. Primarily, the book was intended for use within the further education sector (though it was also made accessible to others) and defined what an outstanding personal tutor should be². Another was the practical nature of further education leading to this practical book founded on desk-based research, but primarily drawing on experience and for the *practice* of personal tutoring. The book has raised, for me, a number of questions to be explored further and the most pressing of these questions concern defining the role of the personal tutor. Having devised a single definition of personal tutoring to

² We state in the book that the principles could be transferable to the school sector (Stork and Walker, 2015, 1) and have since proposed their relevance to higher education. The fact a second book for higher education with a similar structure is to be published in 2018 may reinforce this. I employ the word 'outstanding' here to relate to its meaning within and to Ofsted. Nevertheless, it also stands for 'highly effective'.

aid clarity for practitioners, it is important to highlight what other definitions exist and how they relate to one another.³ Is a single, succinct one-sentence definition, too reductive (as posited by Wootton, 2006, 157) for the diversity of the role, particularly in today's new, larger and more diverse higher education sector? What are the subsequent implications for real world practise at organisational, practitioner and student level? This article looks at each of these questions in turn and, although not a theoretical paper, uses the lens of critical pedagogy where appropriate.

Definition in Context

It is important at the outset to appreciate the different contexts in which definitions operate. The main three relate to: sector, nationality and student cohort. Regarding the first, although this article is primarily concerned with the higher education sector, it also draws on further education experiences and literature, and some commonality between personal tutoring principles and discourse in both. As for the second, the article's focus is the United Kingdom. American and international conceptions of personal tutoring and advising enrich the definitions debate, but, aside from brief reference, are not delved into in detail in this article as space does not allow. Thirdly, regarding cohort, since much of the literature about personal tutoring concerns undergraduates, this article will reflect on personal tutoring with them in mind.

Defining Definition

The premise for *Becoming an Outstanding Personal Tutor* was to address the gap in my own teacher training where the focus seemed exclusively on teaching strategy and teaching your subject with little or no attention given to personal tutoring (Stork and Walker, 2015, 2), an issue other researchers have also raised as a concern (Wootton, 2007, 126). Therefore, the need to give the primary intended reader (those carrying out the role, whether new or experienced) a clear picture of the effective personal tutor through a definition was of uppermost importance. The definition reads as follows:

³ The issue of the similarity to terms such as 'conceptions' and 'models' is explored later in the article.

The personal tutor is one who improves the intellectual and academic ability, and nurtures the emotional wellbeing, of learners through individualised, holistic support (Stork and Walker, 2015, 9).

It is informed by an 'equal partner not superior' approach incorporating non-directive coaching (Stork and Walker, 2015, 24-6) and, in this sense, links to the critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire and others who have posited that 'incidental', 'informal' education is as valid as its formalised version (Cook, 2017, 1).

In considering what other definitions may be available, a necessary starting point is to define what is meant by the word definition. Of course, multiple, institution-specific definitions within policy and practise documents exist for institutional audiences, but here, I am referring to definitions of generic effective practise for a sector wide audience. Our definition is written in a succinct, one-sentence form, is rooted in practise, and attempts to encapsulate what effective tutoring is (rather than being a description of the functions of the role). As found at the time of researching, it appears, on the surface at least, that few alternatives exist; or rather, few alternatives meeting these three criteria exist.

There is, however, much literature on models of personal tutoring - Earwaker's (1992) three models of 'pastoral', 'professional' and 'curriculum', for example, represent the 'baseline' from which much of the literature on the topic works – along with studies into attitudes on personal tutoring (as summarised by Thomas and Hixenbaugh, 2006 and Laycock, 2009). Although, as with Earwaker's starting point, some of this literature is offered from a structural and organisational perspective, there are implications for personal tutoring *practice* embedded in them, with studies producing, for example, frameworks on functions, attitudes and skills, and others succinct definitions of the personal tutor. The fact they are often not named as such could be the reason why there appears to be few, if any, alternative definitions in teaching scholarship. Whilst it seems over-simplistic to say no other definitions exist, there remains a need to acknowledge the fairly subtle distinctions between 'definition', 'conception' and 'model' along with a second acknowledgement that the literature on the second and third of these results in a furthering of the first. Moreover, the concentration on skills, attributes, and functions could be seen as

more important than the need to encapsulate these elements into a single definition (Wootton, 2007), more of which I discuss later on (p.7-9).

Existing Definitions

The following are headlines from research findings brought together by Dawn E. Stephen (2008, 450):

Personal tutors play a vital enabling role (Lago and Shipton, 1999) in 'embedding students' (Thomas, 2006, 22) to promote academic well-being through educational socialisation (Yorke, 2001) and in promoting the development of independent learning skills within a broader framework that acknowledges the place of students' goals (Broad, 2006); they are also gatekeepers to specialist support (Owen, 2002).

Although not named as such, these headlines can represent a definition for the personal tutor and contain key words and phrases that have much in common with those in Stork and Walker (2015, 9). The same source makes reference to the holistic conception of the role from a student perspective (Stephen, 2008, 450). Wootton sees the personal tutor as the 'conduit between the student, pastoral support and the curriculum' (2006, 118). Grant (2006, 14-15) argues that Watts' (1999) analysis and subsequent criteria for the adviser as 'providing holistic guidance' (Watts, 1999, 3) provides a benchmark for support. Wheeler and Birtle (1993), although talking about the personal tutoring system rather than personal tutors per se, describe it as the 'anchor, a stable point of contact between the student and the institution' (Wheeler and Birtle in Thomas, 2006, 22-3). Whereas for Neville, the personal tutor is the university's 'representative' (2007, 9). Lublin (1987, 3 in Wootton, 2007) highlights the many roles that personal tutors play, something echoed in Stork and Walker (2015, 4). Thomas' summary is perhaps closest to a single definition:

Personal tutoring can be seen to fulfil a number of roles for students: information about higher education processes, procedures and expectations; academic feedback and development; personal welfare support; referral to further information and support; a relationship with the institution and a sense of belonging (2006, 22).

It can be said that the proactive, holistic conception of the personal tutor has increased in recent years contesting, to an extent, Earwaker's assertion that tutoring

focuses on ‘the day-to-day running of things in an educational establishment’ and is ‘*not* about long heart to heart talks with students’ (1992, 132). This can be seen in the change of language associated with tutoring (and education more broadly), for example the increasing use of ‘emotional well-being’, and in teachers’ assertions that they are increasingly more like social workers (Bloom, 2014; Guardian, 2015). Although these assertions concern the further education sector, similar sentiments are uttered within higher education too. Some have seen this as part of the increasing therapisation of education to be resisted on the grounds of reducing the agency of the individual student to change and take responsibility along with reinforcement of inequality towards marginalised groups (Ecclestone, 2004; Ecclestone and Hayes, 2009; Furedi, 2003). The holistic conception is borne out by research showing that tutors increasingly hear about issues ‘beyond’ the curriculum which ‘spill over’ (Race, 2010) into the academic context (McFarlane, 2016, 78) and students’ conceptions of tutoring as holistic (Stephen, 2008, 450).

The approach the proactive, holistic conception represents lends itself to the challenge of power relations. Researchers have commented on how personal tutoring can engender non-hierarchical relationships between ‘relatively powerful academic staff’ and ‘relatively powerless students’ (Stephen, 2008, 450) and its importance in building students’ ‘cultural capital’ (Blythman, 2006, 109), a concept of Pierre Bourdieu (2016). It is similarly important then to Antonio Gramsci’s assertion that all individuals are intellectuals but do not function as such in society (Gramsci, 1971) - partly, one can argue, due to lack of cultural capital.

Lacking Definition

Despite the definitions which can be gleaned from the above studies, the lack of definition when it comes to personal tutoring is something which commentators have highlighted. In keeping with the changing times already mentioned, Ridley (2006) draws attention to the lack of positive real life role models in academics’ own experiences of being a student (when conceptions of tutoring may have been very different) resulting in ‘space to fantasise what it means to be a good tutor’ (2006, 131). Earwaker himself talks of institutional policies ‘leaving it for the two of them [tutor and student] to get together as best they can’ (Earwaker in Laycock, 2009, 7).

Furthermore, researchers have emphasised the tacit, ‘taken for granted’ (Stephen, 2008, 449) nature of personal tutoring which goes hand-in-hand with the ‘assumption that personal tutors will know what to do’ (McFarlane, 2016, 86) and that it will ‘come naturally’ (Owen, 2002, 15). The exact role of the personal tutor is often not specified within institutions (Thomas, 2006, 7) and reference to a holistic approach is rarely made (Wootton, 2006, 115). Such lack of definition can lead tutors to ‘fall back on a variety of misguided historical practices’ whereas a ‘shared understanding’ would be welcome and defend the role in the face of regulatory requirements (Wootton, 2006, 115; 117). Wootton’s research states that, rather than there being a shortage, a ‘confusing range of definitions’ (2007, 1) exist which can be ‘contradictory’ (2007, 126) and asserts ‘a clearly articulated definition of the purpose and ethos of the tutoring role is long overdue’ (2007, 111) linking to the commonly heard complaint about lack of consistency in tutoring practice.

To Define or Not to Define?

Despite the calls for a clear definition of personal tutoring, there remains the question of whether it is futile to attempt to define the role. This questioning of its relevance stems from the complexity of issues which surround the role, both in terms of diversity of context and the tutoring-student relationship itself. On the first point, Wootton (2007) concludes that

A number of researchers [...] have cited the lack of definition of tutorial provision for holding back tutorial development [...] due to the complex nature of tutorial provision, to seek one definition would be reductionary [...] a ‘one fits all’ approach arising from a fixed definition would not serve to meet the objectives of tutorial provision (2007, 157).

This could be seen to contradict the point made in the same study that a clearly articulated definition has long been needed. However, this takes us back to defining definition and Wootton’s point would appear to be that definitions are fine and necessary, but that a single, succinct one-sentence definition applied to multiple personal tutoring scenarios and contexts is counterproductive. On the second point, Blythman et al recognise the ‘complexity of the support relationship like any teaching relationship’ (2006,111) and Ridley states that, for new tutors, ‘there is no single

correct approach' (2006, 132). If teaching is complex, difficult to define and, indeed, should be according to some writers, then is personal tutoring the same? The following, also from Ridley (2006), would suggest not:

Part of the problem appears to be the absence of a secure sense of what it means to be an effective personal tutor. Most new lecturers have a choice of models for other aspects of their work' (2006, 130)

Ridley includes the examples of tutors' own/previous experiences of lectures, seminars and other activities from when they themselves were either students and/or sat in on colleagues' classes (2006, 131). Crucially, Ridley also states that, in relation to teaching, 'with or without formal training they bring [...] a basic idea of what's expected' (2006, 131) in contrast to personal tutoring. Although single definitions of teaching may be similarly contested, the wealth of writing about effective teaching means there is a lot more for the practitioner to draw on.

In Defence of Definition

The above suggests that some form of definition is needed. Yet, whether this definition is best formed as a single, succinct one-sentence entity remains debatable. Wootton's (2007) research results in an 'Archetype of Personal Tutor Role and Attributes' (2007, 120) which, despite resistance to a singular definition in the same text could be seen as precisely that. That said, the archetype is made up of themes including function, attitude, personality, knowledge and skills, but does not state what these are in singular form, and thus represents a broader thematic picture than the single 'practice-based' definition in Stork and Walker (2015, 9). However, similar themes were included (Stork and Walker, 2015, 23-38; 51-111) alongside this single definition, therefore suggesting that these are two ways of achieving the same outcome. This difference may also reflect the subtle distinctions between a broadly *experiential* and *empirical* approach and a more practical handbook (albeit one founded on research) and doctoral research. In summary, in the face of the contextual pressures and uncertainty about the role and the often heard, 'yes, but what do I actually do?', economical, encompassing definitions of effective (proactive, holistic) personal tutoring practice surely help (Stork and Walker, 2015, 11).

Implications of Proactive, Holistic Definitions of Personal Tutoring

What are the implications then, of the tension between the need for proactive, holistic personal tutoring and the context which both causes this need whilst also, to some, renders it impossible to deliver? The implications can be considered at three interlinked levels: organisational, practitioner and student.

At an organisational level, whichever of Earwaker's (1992) three models or approaches exist (and some organisations will have combinations of these), they can be reactive in nature. Laycock states that 'tutors react if students bring problems with them and many universities are now realising that this reactive, deficit model is insufficient for their current students' needs' (2009, 8) - this itself highlights how organisational issues and practice are related. Likewise, this message resonates with more recent writing included here and has resulted in the personal tutor system, and the role itself, being 'under strain for some time' (Laycock, 2009, 7). To many, this reactivity results from real world pressures exerted by the contextual factors (mentioned earlier on p.2-3) leading to a gap between holistic tutoring intentions and reality. This has been highlighted memorably by Myers (2011) who argues that descriptions of the role, for example on university websites, are myths which staff and students buy into with a symbolic function akin to Father Christmas and, furthermore, that the role is unsustainable in mass higher education and may be abandoned in the same way as the historical precedent of the residential warden (Myers, 2008). Organisational change to accommodate proactive approaches, and possibly to combat such myths, can be seen in the creation of specialised, professional roles which have a similarity to 'centralised' models in further education (Stork and Walker, 2015, 16-19). Examples include Student Support Officers (SSOs) at Manchester Metropolitan University (Marr and Aynsley-Smith, 2006, 73-82), a Student Support and Guidance Office (SSG) at Hertfordshire University (Laycock, 2009, 10) and 'Progress Coaches' and 'Student Engagement and Retention Officers' at Huddersfield University.

At a practitioner level, there are important pedagogical implications. As referred to briefly earlier (p.7), using a non-hierarchical approach can build students' 'cultural capital' (Blythman, 2006, 109) and this 'equal partner not superior' ethos empowers the practitioner and student to a Freirean view: that 'incidental', 'informal'

education is as valid as its formalised version (Cook, 2017, 1). In this sense, such an approach and ethos challenges ‘the dominant pedagogical model focused on disciplinary content transfer’ (Arvanitakis, 2015, 14) and promotes the student as ‘Citizen Scholar’ (McIntosh, 2017; Arvanitakis 2015) and ‘student as producer’ (Neary and Winn, 2009). In response to the suggested ‘descent’ into the ‘therapisation’ of education (Ecclestone, 2004; Ecclestone and Hayes, 2009; Furedi, 2003), Hyland (2006) argues that this perceived shift is nothing more than ‘giving due and proper attention to the affective domain of learning’ (2006, 302) and ‘may be exactly what’s required’ (2006, 303). While concern about ‘doing everything for the student’⁴ is a valid one (Stork and Walker, 2015, 48), developing a proactive holistic approach represents a defence, and promotion, of the fully-rounded teacher who knows the importance of the affective domain in enabling deeper rather than surface learning and responds to students’ need as teachers always should.

This, in turn, strengthens the case for increased staff development and support of tutors which, arguably, has not kept pace with changes in context. Studies have shown the emotional responses of tutors due to lack of training (Gardner and Lane, 2010, 345-6; Luck, 2010, 282-3) as encapsulated in a typical comment from one new lecturer in Ridley’s (2006) findings: ‘I’m trying to look after all these students with all their problems – but who’s looking after me?’ (2006, 127). This furthers the need for ‘structured offloading’ or ‘supervision’ for tutors which exists in other professions, something for which I have argued elsewhere (Walker, 2015; Stork and Walker, 2015, 40) as well as being recommended by McFarlane’s (2016) personal tutoring research. Such measures could combat the low take-up of tutoring development by staff (Grant, 2006, 13), which may partly be due to fears of over accountability and that attending training will result in an expectation for staff to do more of what they do not feel confident in doing. Moves to professionalise the role in line with mentoring, coaching and counselling as proposed by participants in Wootton’s study (2006, 125) can only help address this problem. She makes the link with the standards which exist in these professions and since her study the National Occupational Standards for Personal Tutoring have come into existence (UK Commission for Education and Skills, n.d.). Overall, the worth of the role should not

⁴ Following from this, the aim should be to promote student independence rather than dependence (Stork and Walker, 2015, 48).

be forgotten. As Ridley states: 'if properly supported, most staff discover that tutoring is not an additional source of stress but a rewarding and valuable part of being an academic' (2006, 136). In the words of one of her participants, '[It's] one part of the job where it is possible to make a difference to someone' (2006, 136).

Implications of proactive, holistic conceptions of personal tutoring at an organisational and practitioner level have inevitable implications at student level. If one assumes that external pressures allow its delivery, one of the most prevalent would seem to be a more consistent support experience, both in the academic and pastoral sense. This is, arguably, something which follows from greater specialisation of the personal tutor role (Stork and Walker, 2015, 17-19). Students themselves have an holistic conception of the role (Stephen, 2008, 450) and research into student perspectives on personal tutoring shows they want tutors to take an 'active role' (Hixenbaugh, Pearson and Williams, 2006, 56). Also, despite the often heard point from tutors about the lack of value students place on personal tutorials, the same study highlighted students' desire for more frequent meetings and better access (Hixenbaugh, Pearson and Williams, 2006, 52). A further study based in further education showed that a proactive, holistic approach is one students welcomed in a very positive manner in contrast to previous experiences of tutoring, for example in 'form' at school (Stork and Walker, 2015b, 20-21).

Conclusion

If we accept, due to the reasons outlined here, that personal tutoring is crucial, it is also important to discuss what is meant by the term. Only by doing so can we then begin to grasp what the implications at different levels may be. By using a definition purporting to represent good practice as a starting point before an overview of the literature, this article posits that definitions capturing the proactive and holistic approach are most useful, and, indeed, most needed in the current higher education climate. The implications can be considered at the levels of organisation, practitioner and student whilst also appreciating the fact these are inter-related. The most prominent of these are the cases for organisational change, increased staff development and support, and for tutors themselves to re-think the relationship between teaching and student support. A further implication, partly

dependent on the achievement of these three, is the prospect of an enhanced and more consistent student experience. Furthermore, through the lens of critical pedagogy, the role can be seen as not only central to education's response to a changed world but as an emancipatory force in the face of continuing, and increasing, inequality. If one accepts Gramsci's proposal that education's role is to promote social change and challenge traditional power relations (Arvanitakis, 2015, 12) and Freire's (1970) call for a 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed' which tackles inequality through addressing the needs of the masses and inspiring students to question existing power structures (Arvanitakis, 2015, 13), then this conception of the personal tutor could be crucial to positive social change. Despite the challenges involved in their realisation, these definitions represent an exciting opportunity for both the higher education sector and society at large.

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