

STUDENT TUTORS: AN ANALYSIS OF THE CREATION OF A PEER-LED TUTORING INITIATIVE UTILISING THE IMPLEMENTATION STAIRCASE MODEL

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Abstract. *This article describes the creation of a Peer-led Team Learning tutoring initiative in the English department of a French university. It utilises the implementation staircase model of group steps to provide greater understanding of the progression of the initiative from policy to tutoring sessions down and up the staircase. The feedback findings highlight the success of the initiative and the subsequent recommendations will be of use to teachers considering adopting peer tutor programmes on university courses.*

Key words: *implementation staircase, peer-led team learning, tutoring, tutor initiative*

1. INTRODUCTION

Peer tutors are becoming a popular addition to French university departments to provide extra academic support and assistance to students to address difficulties they face within courses. Using the Peer-led Team Learning (PLTL) format, more senior university students are able to assist newer ones to succeed in academia.

This paper details the implementation of a Peer-led Team Learning (PLTL) tutoring initiative in my university department last term. It involved hiring 2 student tutors from the 2nd year to assist 1st year students with their studies via weekly interactive sessions.

The first section of this paper introduces the context in detail. The second introduces the PLTL model of tutoring utilised on the programme. Then the implementation staircase model is outlined and utilised to describe the development of the tutoring initiative. Feedback from stakeholders is then provided on the completed tutoring initiative and a conclusion drawn supplemented with suggestions for future tutoring programmes.

2. CONTEXT

The students involved in the tutoring initiative were enrolled on a 3 year English Studies degree at the French public university in La Reunion. They studied major courses in literature, linguistics, translation, phonetics, and civilisation and then ELT-based skill courses on listening, speaking and writing.

Each course spans 10 weeks with 1 lecture and seminar per week and students are assessed via 2 written examinations with a 50% score requirement to pass. There are no official teacher office hours or student study support sessions although students are free to speak to teachers or email them with any questions or concerns. Each year a student evaluation is conducted and adjustments are made regarding lesson hours, content and testing.

A significant percentage of students desire to become high school teachers and so continue their education with an MA in English or education at the university and take the national competitive teaching test. To gain useful work experience, they often apply for part-time work as English teachers or study tutors through the university's partners but these posts are limited.

3. PEER-LEAD TEAM LEARNING TUTORING INITIATIVE

The tutoring initiative aimed to recruit 2 students from the 2nd year to assist 1st year students with their studies, exams and overall progress through tutor sessions. It employed PLTL, which enables social group learning in workshops led by an experienced peer leader. Tien et al. (2002, p.607) state that in PLTL sessions "the role of the leader is to guide and mentor." Through having successfully completed the initial year of university, a 2nd year student should be able to help a 1st year address and overcome the difficulties and adversities they experienced and act as an assistant to their progress. To accomplish this, in PLTL, they set workshop tasks where attendees tackle and solve common problems presented via group discussion and peer leader support. According to Gosser et al, (2010, p. 374) "The problems focus on ideas that were previously introduced in the text, the lectures, and homework problems". Thus PLTL is well suited to the university context where it provides a complementary supportive layer between university lectures, seminars and tests as it 'irons out' issues that students, based on the previous experience of the leader and possibly student feedback, have or will have difficulties with. It is particularly helpful in contexts where study groups and study support are not within the academic culture or the latter because of budgetary reasons.

Several studies on PLTP in the university context highlight its positive effects on students. Francisco Fernández & José Arco (2011) completed a research project consisting of 100 1st year and 41 final year students at the University of Granada in Spain to assess the effect of PLTL on the students. They concluded that "The results show differences in favour of the experimental group on academic achievement and work and study habits, and also statistically significant pre-post differences for the tutors on work and study habits" (p. 109). Another study by Gosser (2010) attributed increased student success levels in the PLTP sessions to "the peer-leader role and the structure of the workshop mobilize the power of student-student interactions to facilitate learning" (p. 375). Gafney & Varma-Nelson (2007) researched the post-workshop effects on students involved in PLTL and discovered the peer leaders benefitted more substantially from the experience than their younger peers. This was attributed to the basic nature of the workshops and the introduction of new 'taught' content which is contrary to the model of PLTL.

These findings highlight the benefit of PLTL for tutors but also the danger of not adhering to Gafney & Varma-Nelson's (2008, p.11-12) 6 critical components for a successful PLTP initiative:

1. Faculty involvement
2. Integral to the course
3. Leader selection and training
4. Appropriate materials
5. Appropriate organisational arrangements
6. Administrative support

4. THE IMPLEMENTATION STAIRCASE

The ‘implementation staircase’ model proposed by Reynolds and Saunders in 1987, provides a constructive tool for analysing how a new policy develops through groups of people from concept to reality in stages or steps. Saunders & Sin (2015, p. 139) argue that “each group acts as both a receiver and an agent of policy messages, and, through this process, the message will undergo adaptation and be understood very differently according to the situated experience of each stake-holding group.” Therefore they emphasise the active role of individuals in the process. They provide a version of the staircase specific for the university context (Saunders & Sin, 2015, p. 139) which outlines the 5 stages or steps and the relevant group of people involved:

1. Policy architects
2. Institutional leaders
3. Middle managers
4. Lecturers
5. Students

As a result of the ‘people factor’, the final result of a policy could be substantially different to the original concept or intention. Trowler (2002) claims “there is a loosely coupled relationship between policy initiatives at the upper level of the implementation staircase and outcomes on the ground” (p. 314). This is also referred to as the ‘implementation gap’ (Newton, 2001) and can be potentially large when many people are involved in each step.

4.1. Steps 1-2: Policy architects to Institutional leaders

The tutoring initiative was created at the national level and then conveyed to the local education bureau in charge of universities and schools at the beginning of the term. They in turn forwarded it to our president’s office at the beginning of the term who delegated it as a ‘department level’ to our dean. At this point in the staircase, the policy was simply a directive to hire 2 student tutors on short contracts to assist 1st year English studies students in their first term.

4.2. Steps 3: Middle managers

Our dean organised several meetings with our head of department and the human resources department to create an action plan for the tutoring initiative and to actually create the 2 new jobs and contracts. During this process, our department head decided to involve all the team of teachers and teacher researchers by presenting and brainstorming solutions to the initiative in several departmental meetings, discussion of which continued via email. The objective was to decide the logistics of envisaging the tutoring initiative. Through this period and with time a minimum, a brief job advert was communicated to relevant students. It was

decided that each tutor would lead a weekly 2 hour tutor session on a list of topics to be decided later. Thus, 10 sessions or 20 hours in total. At this point, we also received confirmation of the remuneration and the contracts.

4.3. Step 4: Teachers

A colleague volunteered to set up and manage the tutoring initiative and I requested to be involved. We immediately received several applications which we then shortlisted based on teacher references. Both selected applicants accepted the posts. Through discussion with the administrative department, we chose suitable days and times for the sessions and created a tentative workshop topic list. As I have some experience of tutoring, I created a list of 10 weekly 2-hour tutoring sessions that focussed on helping students with common difficulties in certain courses, advice for mid-term evaluations, presentations, essays and finally exam preparation for the end of term tests. Thus, 20 hours in total. Each session was divided into practical group tasks based on problems the students often had with space for personalisation.

4.4. Step 5: Tutors

Both tutors were presented with the number and outline of each session, the times, explanations and brief training on how to implement them and finally given their schedules. Due to the heavy workload of the students and the common 'Wednesday off' situation where schools have no classes on Wednesdays and so some staff with children do not work on those days, both tutors disagreed with having to work on their days off. This combined with their perception of the amount of work compared to the remuneration, led them to leaving the tutoring programme. Such unexpected events are not uncommon in the final stage of the implementation staircase, according to Trowler (2002).

4.5. Step 4: Teachers

As we already had a list of candidates, we contacted the others who were not chosen to see if they were still interested in the posts. We were very fortunate that 2 of them expressed interest and we were able to provide them with contracts. To avoid the previous experience, we provided much greater information and emotional motivation. The 2 candidates also seemed more confident in general.

4.6. Step 5: Tutors

The sessions began smoothly with each tutor adapting to the job. Through regular emails and discussions with the tutors and the attending and non-attending students, we were able to advise the tutors regarding the content and style of workshops. Attendance grew from only 4 students to about 30 as the exam period began. There were slight problems regarding transport difficulties and time changes though. However, all 10 sessions were completed and the tutors finished their contracts.

5. FEEDBACK

5.1. Student feedback

Tutor 1 stated they enjoyed being a peer leader but admitted the great challenge involved in preparing and running the 2 hour sessions. It seems the initial 2 sessions were stressful but once tutor 1 felt more comfortable and became acquainted with the students, they grew in confidence. Tutor 1 stated that many attendees were interested in the sessions on the mid and final tests, although weekly homework was also a popular subject. It is worth noting that tutor 1 aims to become a teacher and so perceives the tutoring as valuable experience. Tutor 2 did not gain as much from the process and was not as emotionally involved. They prepared and led sessions successfully but with more support from the teachers.

5.2. Teacher feedback

My colleague who was in charge of the initiative was satisfied with the outcomes, particularly given the tight timeframe. She invested a great deal of time in the initiative which diminished her availability for other tasks. Despite the initial difficulties, we hired 2 tutors who prepared and delivered the 10 sessions and there were no complaints. I was a little disappointed with the initial low attendance but pleased with the final numbers.

5.3. Student feedback

Informal feedback from attending students was positive, particularly regarding the exam preparation sessions with some requesting more tasks and sessions on this topic. The scheduling of the sessions was voiced as one reason for low attendance and several students asked about contacting the tutors via email instead of attending. In the end of year feedback, there were several comments praising the usefulness of the tutors for the 1st years but also requests from 2nd and 3rd year students for their own tutors.

6. CONCLUSION

The tutoring initiative policy was developed into a 20-hour, 10 week PLTP programme run by 2 students. Despite the recruitment issues, the final outcomes were deemed successful by the teachers, the tutors and the student attendees. The implementation staircase enables us to appreciate the work involved in the progressive 'step-by-step' development of the tutoring initiative and the input of the groups involved. Perhaps more significantly, it highlights the nonlinear progression of policy implementation not just down but also back up the stairs. In this case, it could be argued that the course had not been formed enough or explained well to the student tutors at step 4 which resulted in them quitting. When it reverted from step 5 to the teachers at step 4 for further development it then succeeded where before it failed. The staircase thus draws our attention to the importance of the people in the process.

On account of the limited instructions at the beginning of the initiative, it is difficult to identify any implementation gap or loose coupling between it and the final version. The format of the tutoring programme, the topics and the number were mainly developed by the middle managers and teachers and then influenced by the students. In this respect, we could argue for an 'implementation lift' where the policy moves straight from step 1 to 3 or 4. In actuality, if this initiative had not included contract and employment issues and purely been an academic matter, it could have easily moved from step 1 to 4.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. A very clear job description must be provided for all future tutors, complete with potential session days and times.
2. Recruitment has to be started early, preferably 1 term before the commencement of the initiative.
3. Intensive interviews with a range of questions must be conducted to identify the motivation of candidates and their willingness to work on Wednesdays.
4. Detailed documents setting out all the topics, the lesson formats and materials must be given to all tutors prior to interviews.
5. Initial training on the content and peer-leading should be delivered to all new tutors.
6. Ongoing supported is required provided by the teachers.

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