

Strategic Approaches to the Development and Management of Personal Tutorial Systems in UK Higher Education

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1 . Introduction

This chapter explores our experience, over nine years, of taking a strategic approach to personal tutoring within University of the Arts London. University of the Arts London comprises (at time of writing) five colleges and is specialist within the disciplines of art, design and communication. It is the biggest art and design educational institution in Europe and possibly the world. The chapter outlines the positive development we have been able to achieve in some colleges of the university and the tensions and difficulties encountered. In particular we examine:

- Developing appropriate structures and cultures with a particular focus on the role of the tutorial co-ordinator
- Relating this work to the wider structures and aims of the university/college
- Harnessing resources
- Strategic problems and some ways forward

These are set within current policy contexts of widening participation, internal and external quality reviews and increasing focus on the student experience.

Additionally, we draw on our experience of how such strategies were developed in further education and the lessons in this for higher education. Our view is that

many current strategies around diversity and the student experience have come from FE (Blythman and Orr 2002) and that the HE sector has a lot to learn from developments in this sector (in particular see Green 2001).

In the second part of the chapter the personal tutorial strategy is then explored through the series of related theoretical concepts of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1997), 'the space between' (Ellsworth 1997), access and participation (Archer et al. 2003; Riddell et al. 2005) academic literacies (Grimm 1999; Lea and Street 1998; Lillis 2001;) and micropolitics (Hoyle 1982; Ball 1991). In the conclusion we pull together our practical experience with the underpinning theoretical constructs. We aim to encourage practitioners to appreciate that personal tutorial can benefit from personal tutors and managers having a deeper theoretical understanding of educational issues that impinge on the success of personal tutorial systems.

2 . Rationale for our approach

We come from a value position of supporting widening participation, equity and social justice in higher education and see personal tutorial support as a key strategy. We also come from a perspective of micropolitics (Hoyle 1982) which has led us to explore 'How do things get done around here?'. This involves considering the position of personal tutorial in relation to access to resources, the institutional agenda, both public and private, and the current focus of institutional energy and related discourse. In other words what is the institution worried about, putting effort and money into and how do they talk about it? How does this then translate into, or clash with, the working practices and values of individual and groups of academic staff.

3 . Developing appropriate structures and cultures

Our starting point was the need to operate across a number of levels. It is useful to think of institutions on three levels, the macro level of the whole institution, the micro level of the individual academic and the less often discussed meso level (Trowler et al 2005) of the department or course/subject team. At London College of Fashion and London College of Communication (both colleges of University of the Arts London) to give a focus we started by setting up a group to produce a tutor handbook. This was an open group that anyone could join but it also had senior management support. We quickly realised the importance of the meso level and the need for a middle management structure for tutorial. We had brought, from FE, experience of developing management structures for personal tutorial and had realised that, to have access to resourcing and some symbolic power, it was necessary to have some kind of formal management structure. This required a definition of personal tutorial which for us evolved into 'the systematic monitoring and support of individual academic progress across their whole programme'. This ensures that, on a continuum of academic to pastoral, personal tutorial is located much closer to academic. It also meant that we needed a job description for tutors and this new middle management role, and adequate resourcing not only of tutoring itself but the management of tutoring. We were on our way to developing an institutional policy which raised the profile of the project at all levels and in a variety of arenas.

Crucial to our strategy was the development of the role of the school tutorial co-ordinator. Their main responsibilities are around supporting and monitoring personal tutorial provision within their school. This includes ensuring that provision is in place and is properly resourced and roomed, introducing students at induction to the idea of personal tutorials, being part of the induction process for new staff, cascading information informally and formally through a termly tutor newsletter, having a presence at school boards of study, linking with student reps and university central services for students and raising awareness of the importance of personal tutorial at every opportunity. Some key success factors for this role include having a culture of student support within the school and

university, good relationships with Deans of Schools, strong links with, and support from, Deans and quality/learning and teaching managers, good knowledge of the School and how it operates as a community of practice (Wenger 1998), able to work with colleagues in a context of using both pressure and support and proper resourcing of the role.

Tutorial co-ordinators are able to influence approaches to personal tutorial by working along side personal tutors over concerns expressed by students about matters such as access to staff. Tutorial co-ordinators can also ensure that the personal tutorial system starts well by having significant involvement in student induction, helping to bring some consistency to the personal tutorial message, and in developing contacts with student course reps across the school. They support individual personal tutors when they are dealing with difficult student personal tutorial issues. They can help jump-start projects such as student: student mentoring. They can also support staff over documenting the personal tutorial process, mainly by working to achieve records that capture the necessary information in the least laborious way possible. This experience can then be used to produce case studies for staff development purposes around this role. Another way that the tutorial co-ordinator can support personal tutors is by taking responsibility for the documentation of the whole personal tutorial system for quality review purposes and help individual tutors with their own contribution to this written account. This was regarded as invaluable by personal tutors during Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) visits of various kinds.

As a result of these activities the tutorial co-ordinator role has developed over time at LCC. It has growing status and recognition as part of the school management team, a heightened profile and liaison with all university services to students and student reps and an increasing staff development role.

Relating to the wider aims of the university

This role is, however, dependent on having management support and this is best achieved by the identification of levers which will capture institutional energy and resources. These will vary across context but are likely to include retention, lack of parity across the university (especially if identified by QAA audit), managing a diverse student body or marketing strategy in relation to the National Student Survey (NSS). The last ten years have been a real opportunity for those of us concerned with academic support for students. Policy drivers have progressively covered retention, widening participation and the student experience, especially the first year experience. The NSS is the latest development in this line.

However, all universities have private, perhaps tacit, aims as well as publicly espoused aims and it is important to be able to 'read' the institution to get insight into these diverse aims and where institutional energy is focused. Within universities, different departments may have private aims that are quite at odds with the espoused and private aims of the university as a whole. This is likely to be affected by whether a department is a 'recruiter' or 'selector' of students. Later in this chapter we explore micropolitics as a theoretical lens for exploring these issues. At this point we want to argue that one way of influencing the cultures of the university and department is by 'capturing the discourse'.

In employing these levers it is important to use discourse that the institution cannot reject. This includes discourses of widening participation, retention, quality (particularly if an audit or review is imminent), student satisfaction (particularly if the university position in the NSS is a cause for concern), international students (particularly if recruitment or retention is an issue) and protection against litigation.

Harnessing resources

To return to the culture(s) operating amongst academic staff who actually populate the personal tutorial system, academic staff want to work in the best

interests of their students. Very few academics think that it is good for students to have less personal tutorial support. Resistance to development of personal tutorial is likely to come from a concern over work intensification. In our model we provide as much information as we can in as easily accessible a format as possible to support the role. But, more importantly, at LCC we have made it a priority of the tutorial co-ordinators group to fight for resources. This includes a time allowance formula for tutors based on number of tutees and a time allowance for the tutorial co-ordinators to carry out their role. The group also exerts pressure to ensure that there is adequate and appropriate physical space for one to one personal tutorials, something that becomes increasingly hard as space pressures militate against academic staff having their own rooms or even sharing with one other person. These are standing items on our agenda and staff appreciate that we value and support this aspect of their job.

Strategic problems

There are difficulties, however, and we would not claim to have resolved all of these. We do have time allowance for personal tutoring and the tutorial co-ordinators also have a time allowance for this role. Increasingly, however, there is a problem with declining levels of resource and concomitant pressures on staff in all aspects of academic life through increasing student numbers, lack of physical space and increasing requirements for documentation of all processes. Within this pressurised environment, research continues to have more status than teaching, and, within teaching, any kind of support activity has even less status in a way that is heavily gendered. Personal tutorial support is heavily dependent on the 'emotional labour' of offering support and being caring (Morley 1998), a role that often falls to women within the academy.

Thus academic staff may react by resistance to monitoring and this resistance is increasingly sophisticated. It can take the form of cynical compliance to the letter but not the spirit of the requirement, or simply doing nothing (Cowen 1996). Also,

while we have argued that very few academic staff are against personal tutorials, there are differing conceptions of learning, those who believe the role of higher education is to 'grow' students and those who believe that higher education is a 'sorting' mechanism to establish who is worthy of a degree. (Dore 1997). This can affect what goes on *inside* a personal tutorial, an issue of growing concern for us.

But there are key strategies which include an emphasis on 'reading the university' to identify ways of tackling 'wicked issues' (Watson 2000). These are issues that are so fundamental that the only way forward is to 'nibble round the edges', change what is changeable, in the hope that this acts to reduce the impact of the central problem. This has led us, for several reasons, to a theoretical examination of what we are doing and why. First, we regard a theoretical understanding, particularly of complex underpinning issues, as a way of increasing our own knowledge and capacity to operate successfully within the academy in our project of developing personal tutoring. Second, we have perceived that areas of student academic support gain respect and symbolic power with other academic staff if they are perceived to be rooted in theory.

4 . Conceptualising personal tutorial strategy

The scholarship of student academic support.

We have set our work in a context of scholarship of student academic support which covers, in addition to personal tutorial support, activities such as study support, language support, student to student mentoring, supplementary instruction and disability support. We regard these activities as sites for students to receive explicit introduction to, and dialogue on, the expectations of higher education in the UK. Additionally, they create spaces which give us the opportunity to actually listen to the students and so institutional structural and

cultural barriers can become visible and can therefore be 'outed' as the first stage to challenge.

Student academic support is an underdeveloped area of the scholarship of teaching and learning. Many current theories of teaching and learning, including much of 'approaches to learning' focus on the cognitive, to the exclusion of social factors (Haggis 2002; Malcolm and Zukas 2001). This is not to deny the usefulness of these models but they are only part of the picture. There is also a danger of the concept of the universal student - or sub-categories that are cognitive and hierarchical, and often binary, such as 'deep' and 'surface' approaches. Similarly, what the institution offers in terms of student academic support is often not recognised as part of the picture when teaching and learning is being considered.

We locate a strategic approach to tutoring, therefore, within the following theoretical frameworks.

First, we see personal tutorial systems as a way of building cultural capital (Bourdieu 1997), particularly for students from backgrounds with little previous experience of UK higher education. We see cultural capital as what the educated elite of a particular culture at a particular point in history value. Students arrive in higher education with different amounts of cultural capital that relate to their social background. One aspect that benefits from exploration is the hidden curriculum (Margolis 2001), those tacit, unspoken rules and attitudes that manage to survive even the current 'tyranny of transparency' (Strathern 2000). Students, therefore, arrive in the particular habitus of their university with differing degrees of alignment with, and understanding of, institutional practices. This presents particular problems for students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. For example, Archer et al (2003) explore the structural and cultural barriers faced by such students and Riddell et al. (2005) explore these

issues from the perspective of another disadvantaged group, students with disabilities.

Second, we use the concept of 'the space between' (Ellsworth 1997). In this construct, pedagogy is examined as an analogy with the film theory concept of 'mode of address', a particularly useful analogy and metaphor when working with academics in the media disciplines. Ellsworth draws parallels between such questions as 'Who does this film think you are?', the relationship between the film's text and spectators' experience and interpretation, and the pedagogic experience. She argues that unmediated dialogue is impossible so uncritical reliance of ideas of transparency in communication with students is futile. In essence, this means that we need to be constantly aware of the assumptions we make about who we think our students are and how we tailor our pedagogic approaches to these assumptions. Also, as we have learned from complexity theory (Haggis 2005), we need to look at not only the tutor and student but also at the characteristics of the interaction between them. This is always affected by both sides, experienced differently by both sides and cannot be fully controlled. Our experience indicates that this analysis not only gives insights into the tutor-student relationship but also helps when working with academic staff to build the personal tutorial project. Professional development is a teaching activity which also requires us to think about who our audience actually is, and what assumptions we are making about their motivation and values.

Third, we use the work, both from the UK and the US, of academic literacy theorists (Grimm 1999; Lea, and Street 1998; Lillis 2001). This work focuses on academic writing as a social practice constructed both by wider social structures such as issues of class, ethnicity or gender and by the immediate institutional and disciplinary context including rules and regulations, what is valued and the culturally specific nature of, for example, plagiarism. It gives us insights into contradictions in belief systems between staff and students (e.g. Higgins et al.

2002) and explores contradictory discourses and tensions with other subjectivities for both academics and students.

Micropolitics

To be successful in developing these ideas strategically within an institution we return to our earlier point about the need to 'read' the department and university. Our micropolitical perspective is based on the work of Hoyle (1982).

Micropolitical strategies are located in 'the space between structures' (p.88) where influence and alliances operate, and which represent multiple interests that go beyond the rational. They operate in spaces which are arenas for bargaining. They operate at the level of the personal, as material and symbolic gain and protection of territory and individual agency; at the level of the professional through commitment to particular forms of practice and at the level of the political through commitment to particular political positions and values. The personal and political are often presented in form of the professional, thus creating an illusion of rationality. Ball and Rowe (1991), in a similar vein, analyse organisations through perspectives of personal socio-political values, educational values and material interests.

Micropolitical perspectives examine 'strategies by which individuals and groups in organisational contexts seek to use their resources of power and influence to further their interests' (Hoyle 1982 p.88). Strategies are not fixed, can be long term or short term and have multiple sources. They can be based on individual or group identities such as gender, position in hierarchy, subject discipline, professional interest or political views. Strategies used include control of rewards, controlling agendas both formal and informal and therefore deliberately 'losing' issues, secrecy around budgets and information, and control over recruitment and training (thus 'cloning' to ensure that only those who fit in with the dominant power base are appointed). Control of operation of rules and procedures,

combined with distortion of information and denying outsiders competence, are other methods. Hoyle also suggests that strategies include 'losing' recommendations, 'rigging' agendas (both ways), 'massaging' the minutes, 'nobbling' individuals, 'inventing' consensus, 'interpreting' the opinions of outsiders and a receding locus of power so that we no longer can pinpoint who is actually making the decisions (Handy 1976; Pettigrew 1973 both quoted in Hoyle 1982; Hoyle 1982). This resonates with experiences in many universities of watching how key committees operate, how policy is developed, how information is distributed, how resources are allocated and how external agencies such as QAA are quoted as reasons why something must happen.

To improve the position of personal tutoring within a university, it is therefore important to invest time in analysing the university to identify formal and informal power relations at all levels, particularly in relation to control of resources and agenda setting. This involves identifying at various levels and groupings who, at an individual and group level, actually makes the decisions - not always easy in the contemporary university! This then allows for the identification of spaces for intervention in support of personal tutoring. There may be a current dominant discourse that can be used e.g. 'the first year experience' or there may be new resources around that can be harnessed e.g. Centre For Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL). The strategy may be a formal paper to a committee, or it may be getting ten minutes to talk to the key person.

5 . Conclusion

Over the years we have built our structures and practices on a very particular model of personal tutorial which recognises universities as institutions which operate in a social system of cultural capital and complex, often tacit, institutional cultural assumptions. In this context we appreciate the complexity of the support relationship (like any teaching relationship) through an understanding of what is happening in 'the space between'. We use the personal tutorial space to explore

these issues and capture information that we can then use to affect university policy. We aim to affect these changes by capturing the discourse and being able to read the power relations of the institution so that we understand the context, culture and structures we are working within. We also use this space to explain to students the hidden power relations of institutional operations and the culturally specific nature of rules and regulations. Much of this is possible because we work as a group, who meet regularly and share experience and information from across the college. Our involvement includes input into professional development including the university Postgraduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching in Art and Design and school, college and university management and policy making structures. What we have tried to do is pull together a research perspective on personal tutorial issues and practical implementation. We feel success in the latter is enhanced by an understanding of the former.

From our theoretical perspective, our recommendations for those trying to develop personal tutoring would include:

- Identify who the powerful people are in your context, what they are most anxious about and what 'language' they talk. Is it 'student as customer', 'finance', 'status of the university', 'equal opportunities' or 'teaching and learning'?
- Listen out for 'new money' becoming available and assess whether it could be accessed to support the development of personal tutoring
- Gather a group (formal or informal) of others interested in personal tutoring and work out how to present your case in the dominant 'language'. Identify whether presenting this case should be by trying to work your way up the hierarchy speaking to particular individuals, or through a formal paper to a committee. It may of course be both.

- Raise your profile as a group through asking to speak at as many other committees or groups as you can get access to. Have something specific to ask them for which is in their power either to give you or help you get.
- Win over personal tutors individually by offering them as much help and support as possible, particularly with difficult individual student issues and getting space and time to do the personal tutoring role successfully.
- At the first sign of a chink in the armour argue for a middle management layer to manage personal tutoring. Be modest in the resources you are asking for initially but ensure that those in this new role meet regularly as a group to support each other and share good practice.

It has been through strategies like this that we have some chance of achieving university recognition of the importance and potential of personal tutorial systems and of ensuring greater success with espoused government policies such as widening participation and student retention. More importantly, we are making a contribution to student success within a wider framework of equity and social justice.

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