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Conversation as Academic Practice: Tutors' Strategies in Integrating Student Learning in a Professional Training Degree Programme

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Abstract

Tutors are generally considered to be an additional resource in teaching and learning, as a means of augmenting that of the lecturer. This article explores tutors as academic staff with responsibilities for developing practice competencies and integrating student learning in a social care professional training degree programme. The research is small-scale, based upon data from a purposive sample of five interviews; and upon insider-participant observation notes and reflections in one single setting. The author deployed a situated ethnographic methodology alongside a frame analytic approach. The research found that in their academic practice, tutors reveal how their student contact is oriented to developing a reflective practitioner and they discuss how programme inputs impact on the student's professional self. Simultaneously, tutors seek to create cross programme integration through finding overlaps with academic programme strands.

Key Words: tutoring, integrated learning, professional training.

Introduction, Context and Setting

This research article relates specifically to the issue of tutor practice strategies for integrating learning across strands of a professional training programme for undergraduate students leading to a Bachelor of Arts in Social Care. The role of the tutor in applied social sciences, while seen as a valued element of degree programmes, is not a universal feature of social care education and professional training in Ireland. This is critical at this juncture as practice in social care comes under increasing public scrutiny in the wake of public concern about the treatment of vulnerable children and adults in the care of the state. At the same time, social care practitioners, alongside vocational groups like social workers are included in the state's registration system for health and allied professionals under the Health and Social Care Professionals Act 2005. In addition, the Irish Association for Social Care Educators (IASCE, 2011) recently published guidelines on best practice for universities and higher education institutes (HEIs) in relation to practice competencies through supervised placements. The acquisition of skills and competencies within structured professional training programmes at third level takes on a new significance in light of some of these changes in the wider policy and practice arenas.

Tutors are responsible for arranging practice placements and visiting students while on placement (Doyle & Lalor, 2009). In the research setting, tutors are nominally responsible for integrating learning between college and practice but also between programme strands, which in the current setting consists of a social theory strand; a practice strand; a psychology strand; and a research strand. On paper, the programme appears to be organised in distinct silos which poses challenges to staff and students in relation to how these strands form a rounded, reflective practitioner. The programme document indicates that the integration of the programme rests upon the core module of Principles of Professional Practice. But what role do tutors play in this process and how are tutorial inputs organised in order to effectively integrate learning?

The aim of this article is to report on a small-scale research study which explored the role played by academic staff assigned to tutorial responsibilities. The respondents were implicitly charged with the integration of the academic strands of the programme, and with the acquisition of practice competencies. In the research setting, the role of tutor has remained a largely unwritten one. The research sought to identify the practice strategies drawn upon by tutors in applied social sciences and to discuss the methods for integrating learning across academic strands, and between theory and practice.

Tutors in Higher Education

Typically students experience tutorials as separate to lectures, often delivered by postgraduate students or by hired external staff. Tutorials generally are distinct from lectures and seminars in that a presentation is not necessarily made and tutorials are seen as a complement to the lecture (Biggs & Tang, 2007). In this way those performing tutorials tend to be peripheral to the teaching context and often lack subject and pedagogical expertise (Sutherland, 2009). Increasing attention has focused upon the role of tutors in problem based approaches to skill acquisition and practice development (Ragonis & Hazzan, 2009). In the research setting however, tutors are in the main, full time members of the academic staff who have allocated a specific number of teaching hours within which they are expected to facilitate tutorials and undertake practicals in the form of student placement visits. Tutorials are a central part of the development of practice in a variety of fields, including nursing, teaching and the paramedical professionals. In this sense they are critically involved in bringing together theory and competencies (Smith, 2000). Crucial here is the perception that activated student learning requires a degree of self-awareness and self-regulated / self-directed learning; a form of learning partnership. Research by Gynnild, Holstad & Myrhaug (2008) has suggested that tutors have a key role in promoting self-regulated learning by aiding the maintenance of alertness, goal setting and self-monitoring.

This kind of self-awareness is critical in reflective practice and is a desired competency in caring and clinical professionals where the self-other dynamic is vital for achieving intersubjectivity through interaction (Arnd-Caddigan & Pozzuto, 2008). The recognition of oneself as having acquired a specific self, is a long regarded feature of training and education as practicing professionals acquire a professional identity (Olesen and Whittaker, 1968). This has been brought into focus more recently by McSweeney (2012) who points out from her research on social care workers undergoing a professional training degree, that the formation of the professional self relies upon a pedagogy that engages with student experiences as well as exposing students to new theoretical frameworks. In this regard, what role do tutors play in creating this sense of knowing and interacting?

Tutoring is associated with the practice of small group teaching; this is a ‘highly skilled’ endeavour which requires the formation and development of facilitative skills (Griffiths, 2003 p.92). Tutoring using one to one interactions, which is common in the current research setting, becomes conflated with mentoring where the tutor steps out of the small group context and plays a distinct role. In this context ‘tutors’ who are also lecturers play a multiplicity of roles and in their relationships with students occupy a variety of different positions according to Fallows (2003). In the research setting, tutors adopt this cross-departmental role by dealing with students and student issues that appear to fall between strands in the programme.

The research sought to explore more fully the playing out of this role; and to discuss with the tutors, the strategies they used in order to integrate student learning. The formation of a reflective, professional practitioner in a programme that is highly structured involves tutors in interpersonal communication with students at the face-to-face level. How do tutors achieve this?

Research Design

The research is a situated ethnography in which the researcher is a full participant as a tutor. The methodology draws upon a frame analytic approach (see Goffman, 1975) in which the researcher engages with participants / informants to resolve questions that he/she identifies through this engagement; also referred to by ethnographers as 'strip resolution' (Agar, 1996). Thus the research strategy employed involved a set of semi-structured interviews with five co-tutors together with amassed observations over two years of practice in diaries and reflections prepared for the author's teaching practice portfolios.

The five interviews were conducted with a small purposive sample of tutors reflecting a variety of experiences and practice levels within the programmes. The tutorial role is distinct across the three years of the programme so at least one tutor from each year of the programme was interviewed. Interviews were audio recorded with consent and analysis of the data followed an *in-vivo* coding scheme mapped onto a text matrix giving a complete dataset in one word document. While the research is based upon a small sample and confined to one setting, the findings however constitute a theoretical case (Vaughan, 1992) in so far as the purpose of the qualitative strategy deployed here was to elaborate theory through field engagement.

Findings and Key Themes

Tutor Role, Competencies and Ethics in Practice

Tutors' tasks involve instilling a sense of broader awareness in the student care worker. They point out that it is how students combine the curricular inputs that comprises the practice and is not confined to one single piece. One tutor suggested that students need to be 'addressing root causes and not the symptoms'. In this regard the unity of concepts, theory and practice places clients' needs within a wider frame of reference. Similarly, the tutor has to integrate the broader curriculum with the goal of instilling 'a sense of humanity'. This is not possible without the tutor helping the student to understand and make sense of a broader conceptual framework which they

should learn from the programme modules. The challenge for tutors therefore is to have ‘a 360 degree view’. What tutors state here about their roles is that it is one that has to engage with the shaping of cognitive capacities, the capacity to link this with doing qua practice, together with a sense of empathy for a common humanity; the latter critical to the ontology of the carer as well as his/her epistemological stance. This capacity to read the situation as part of a wider field of action is a critical component of the ethical framework in which the act of care takes place (see Doyle & Lalor, 2009).

Integrating by Bridging Theory and Practice

Students undertake practice placements in each year of the programme and while based in an agency they are assigned a supervisor from agency staff. Tutors report that they see this as a key relationship in integrating the core academic subjects such as psychology, sociology and social policy with the practice situations they are confronted with. A tutor pointed out that it is crucial to instil in the student a sense that they must analyse the situation and hence enable them to understand that academic study is central to such an analysis. In this regard, students need to be challenged to identify the links between the supervised placement and the *evidence base* for their work on the one hand, but also the policy, legal and institutional frameworks in which the practice takes place. Tutors recognise that the practice placement provides the necessary learning scenarios for this kind of joined up learning. However students often complain that much of the academic learning appears too distant to grasp. Tutors on the other hand recognise that the placement provides the type of critical incidents in which students get the opportunities to make these links. An example here is the way in which a student working with homeless drug users was enabled by the tutor and practice supervisor to make the link between the student’s need to know something about housing policy while providing advice to an homeless person, and to appreciate the principles and operation of the social security system, if providing help with income support.

Tutor Methods and Strategies

Tutors combine a mixture of one-to-one sessions together with group tutorials. All tutors interviewed held individual tutorials. Tutors are also available by appointment with one tutor holding a regular ‘clinic hour’ during which an open door policy operates. Key to the tutors’ theory-practice bridging strategies are the tripartite meetings with practice supervisors in which theory and practice issues can be discussed.

Tutorial roles vary across the three years of the programme as summarised in Figure 1 below. The issuing of practice guidelines by the IASCE (2011) will provide a challenge to the current role of tutor in the sense that the emphasis of best practice is shifting to one based upon fitness to practice. This provides a potentially compromising role for tutor as a risk assessor which reorients the practice of facilitating integrated learning.

Figure 1: Temporal Summary of Tutor Role

Year	Focus of Tutor Role
First Year	Quasi-pastoral / mentoring role. “A caring piece”; “They are homesick; you have to mind them”.
Second Year	Intensive; professional development competencies.
Third Year	Integrated learning; motivating student performance for the grade of degree.

Tutor-Practitioners and Non-practitioner Tutors

Tutors underlined the centrality of having practice experience to identify the theory-practice links:

If they don’t have this it makes it very difficult; it’s very complex because it’s unpredictable. You are dealing with people whose lives are difficult; its easier

if you have been there and done it and you know the challenges that are involved (tutor A).

Three of the five tutors interviewed were practitioners and of these, two were graduates of the programme; both had first hand experience of what the programme achieved in terms of their own learning trajectories. These two tutors were recognised by their colleagues as having a specific capacity to win student confidence in identifying where they integrate the programme strands into practice, but this appears to suggest a deeper bonding with students. This takes the form of a strong sense of empathy with the student experience and presents in statements such as ‘I know the field; I know the programme and I know what you are experiencing’. This suggests a sharing of the craft of practice between tutor and student or a type of apprenticeship in which the deep base of practice is transmitted.

Those staff trained in purely academic disciplines on the other hand have the capacity to create links in to the core programme strands. One of the challenges identified by the tutors is that staff are not engaged sufficiently with one another to create these kind of synergies.

Integrating Programme Strands

A key tool within the programme is the third year integrated learning portfolio which accompanies the third year practice placement. The portfolio enables student reflection on the wider social field in which practice takes place; identifies practice relevant theory and research; modelling of their own practice through a client case study; and identifying new perspectives for ongoing professional learning (Graham & Megarry, 2005). While the portfolio is not the preserve of tutors, they nevertheless have a key role in its current implementation as an integration strategy and its future development.

Finally, a key issue raised is for tutors and non-tutors to have a sense of what each programme input seeks to achieve; and to identify where points of congruence

can be reinforced. One tutor expressed this by suggesting that if students do not relate to the abstract representation of the programme pillars, staff at least need to be clearer as to the points of horizontal integration within it. Recognising this it appears to point towards the need for *horizontal conversation* between academic practitioners:

“They [students] don’t like repetition but they love overlap – they can see the overlap when it all knits together. You do stuff on the drugs issue and I never knew that. I never knew that. There’s all sorts of overlaps there. [Clients are told] ‘You got a dirty sample’. What is that saying to people? It’s about stigma. Who covers that in the programme? You know ‘dirty’ ‘clean’ what is that saying to people? We need more cross cutting and collaboration” (tutor D).

Interpretation of the Findings

The findings are discussed in two related areas. The first of these relates to the structural integration of the programme and the second to the specific role that tutors play in the formulation of a professional self.

As in the literature, tutors in the setting studied play a vital role in creating linkages between theory and practice. The issue of programme strand integration is a somewhat more elusive idea and needs closer examination. Nonetheless, tutors identify that it is critical to create conversations with fellow staff and between themselves and students. In short, tutors provide the basis for horizontal communication across the vertical programme strands as illustrated in figure 2.

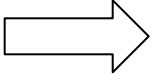

	Social Theory Strand	Psychology Strand	Professional Practice (incl. placement)	Research Strand
 Horizontal Overlaps Tutorials Tripartite Practicals Pastoral Role  Tutor & Lecturer Conversation	Social Policy Law Sociology Community Studies	Developmental Abnormal Social	Principles of Practice Year 1, 2 and 3 Reflective Integrative Portfolio	Research Methods 1 & 2 Research Portfolio

Figure 2: Practice Strategies as Horizontal and Vertical Integration

The idea of horizontal conversation appears to imply multiple sets of relationships involving interaction between different sets of actors. For now, the focus needs to be on creating opportunities for tutors as staff to engage in conversations about their own contribution. This might take the form of integrating seminars held periodically to facilitate presentation, discussion and dialogue. Similarly tutors have a role in facilitating students to reflect on programme inputs relative to practice.

In relation to the promotion of a professional self, tutors pointed out that they saw their role as discussants of the curriculum – as the agents that help students to sense make. Speaking of helping students to connect with their learning of sociology with practice competencies, one tutor pointed out that her role was to create a conversation with students around how the curriculum impacted on their subjectivity and self awareness:

Sociology is not just an academic subject that I have to get a pass in – how does it inform me as a person? How does it make me understand the situation? It's not the bold child; its not the bad family; how does it equip me for analysing the situation? What humanity do I bring as a practitioner and how self-aware am I? (Tutor C).

This seems to suggest that the practice is a kind of self-craft – the instrument of thought and intervention. Students are helped at a conceptual level to understand the subjective and objective distinction and simultaneously they learn that they are agents in the co-production of action in the setting. In this way they are encouraged to embrace the role and indeed, to prepare themselves for the role embracing them (Goffman, 1961). As the tutor reveals, this sense making is about imparting that which she has internalised herself.

Conclusion

This short research article has pointed to the arena of 'horizontal conversation' in teaching and learning practice in which tutors in an applied social science programme can play a critical role in integrating learning across vertically designed programme strands. Furthermore conversations with students about the programme show that students are helped to formulate a professional self through the engagement with tutors. Academic practice needs to recognise the value of conversation with colleagues as an essential ingredient in helping students to integrate their learning.

Some further research might explore the role that tutors play in professional socialization as a type of self-craft. This appears to be the essential skill-set required for those working in human services, in social care and social work. Tutors do this by performing the necessary cross-programme work that is difficult to quantify but is essential in the process of integrating learning and the co-production of the reflective practitioner. Indeed in the current economic climate affecting higher education and

all productive sectors, what might be glibly dismissed as ‘soft work’ appears to be the very glue that holds professional training together.

As tutors in this research setting acknowledge themselves, it appears that practice requires maintenance and investment by academic practitioners and the institution in which they work. It is insufficient to rely upon goodwill alone. Working in an academic context can also isolate academic practitioners to the completion of those tasks for which they are timetabled; and this is sometimes a self-imposed isolation. The value of staff-to-staff conversation cannot be underestimated for it appears to point towards the basis for creating the cross-programme knowledge that practice tutors need in order to resource student learning.

Finally, the tutorial role needs to be embraced around the central value of its capacity to deliver the reflective professional practitioner. In this role there appears to be little place for the tutor as a monitor of student progress for the role they play is to act as a bridge between the rigid surface of the academic programme and the interactive world of practice.

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