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[CH] Exploring the values of personal tutoring via a level 7 academic practice module

[A] Introduction

This case study explores an academic, values-based approach to personal tutor education. It focuses on how I embedded a critical exploration of personal tutoring's core values – as defined by Lochtie et al (2018) – into a 15 credit, level 7 module on student support and personal tutoring.

[A] Context

I teach academic practice at a medium-sized, pre-1992 university in London. It has approximately 20,000 students from more than 150 countries of whom about one third are postgraduates with a similar split between UK and non-UK students (HESA, 2018–19). Nearly 60% of UK students are characterised as Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) and just over 57% of all students identify as female. The university employs staff from over 75 countries deployed across five academic schools and several professional-service sections. No single department is responsible for personal tutoring. The Learning and Development directorate to which I belong maintains a student support information hub, delivers bespoke personal tutor training when requested, and teaches the MA module 'Student Support and Personal Tutoring' (SSPT). SSPT forms part of our Higher Education Academy (HEA) accredited Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice. Typical participants include university staff (new and more established tenured academics, postgraduate researchers who teach, visiting lecturers and professional services staff), staff from other London higher education institutions (HEIs) which do not offer taught teaching qualifications, and nurse-educators from local NHS trusts. Since 2017–18, I have been the module lead for SSPT, teaching 96 participants over four consecutive years (cohorts numbering between 14 and 35).

[A] Developing personal tutoring through an academic module

SSPT was designed to deliver information about professional student support services to academics working in a heavily devolved university system. However, module evaluations showed that simple information-giving was insufficient without adequate '*tailoring as to how services available can enhance student support*' (2015–16) and participants requested (again in their module evaluations) a shift to '*stories ... of how things are done*' (2016–17).

I immediately introduced a more balanced structure to the module, initially using Earwaker's (1992) model of academic, pastoral, and professional student support. I also addressed an overreliance on professional student support staff acting as visiting lecturers, who tended to overemphasise the

referral aspect of academics' student support role rather than enabling their own practice. These initial measures influenced the 2018—19 evaluations with participants noting that SSPT was more *'clearly and logically developed'*. However, I recognised that changing colleagues' perception of their role as triaging for the professionals would require more fundamental curriculum review.

We needed to heighten participants' sense of personal investment in personal tutoring. I made extensive use of Lochtie et al (2018); the following insight of theirs proving especially helpful: *'Having the right skills is important to be able to carry out your job, but it is your core values that drive you to take those actions repeatedly.'* (p 40). Space was therefore made in SSPT for values-focused critical thinking activities (based on those in Lochtie et al (2018)). These helped participants identify and reflect on their personal core values and how these might be deployed in their academic practice. Opportunities were also afforded for participants to hear how others (peers and visiting speakers) lived out their values through personal tutoring and student support. From 2018—19 we included sessions on compassion, kindness, and self-care in the module. This had an instant impact on evaluations. For the first time, participants reported that SSPT had made them *'more reflective'*, and they appreciated the *'safe space'* given to them for contemplative and mindful discussions (2018—19), meeting Barnett's requirement, that curricula should *'contain sufficient space and spaces, such that "authenticity" and "integrity" are likely to unfold'* (2009, p 438).

Mindful of Biggs's (1999) levels of teaching model and the need to value students as individuals, the module was refocused to engage participants not only with who our students are and what we do as teachers but also what our students do – and feel – in dialogue with those supporting their learning. Student identity formation and belongingness (Thomas, 2012; Thomas et al, 2017) are now key parts of SSPT. The most impactful method we introduced to develop these aspects involved problem-based learning (PBL). Participants work in small groups for their assessment and each group is assigned two simulated 'tutees' for the course of the module. These deliberately diverse 'tutees' are introduced with a short biography and back story, before proceeding to send regular messages to their 'tutors' asking for advice, disclosing problems, etc, via a VLE forum. The 'tutors' then work together to formulate responses which are discussed in class. Both the tutor feedback and evolving student 'stories' are ipsative (ie previous issues and advice are deliberately built on and compared) and help participants go beyond theoretical knowledge alone and become effective personal tutors through making decisions in the moment in response to real-life, personalised situations.

The upheaval of the COVID-19 pandemic has intensified this challenge to being and becoming with, for instance, Gravett and Ajjawi (2021) questioning the idea of ‘belonging’ as a stable category when discussing students and their support. Given such uncertainties, the importance of developing tutors’ core values seems even more important. As Barnett (2009) observes, *‘working out the connection between knowing and being/becoming requires a thinking through of the kinds of human being that we want our students to become; and that is partly a matter of our value choices’* (p 444).

#### [A] Assessing personal tutoring

By 2017—18, SSPT’s assessment had changed from a 3000-word essay to a group poster assessment. Group work is notoriously challenging (Windscheffel, 2019), but it can nurture resilience, collaboration, mutual respect, generosity, and preparedness to listen (Barnett, 2009): all skills necessary for supporting students and personal tutoring. Working and being assessed in teams has provided myriad opportunities for SSPT participants to live out their core values (high expectations, diplomacy, and adhering to the ‘equal partner, not superior’ approach), and of practising associated skills (building rapport, teamwork, decision-making and problem-solving) (Lochtie et al, 2018, pp 33, 39-40). Crucial to enabling this learning is allocating interactive class time to peer-led group work, supported by tutor feedback. As the participants have discovered, this work is not always easy and the poster has elicited mixed reactions. Some have found it *‘a good way to present’* and *‘a new learning experience’* (2018—19). Others have found cooperating with others hard. Each year I have had opportunities to role-model the same values and skills that my participants are developing by undertaking mediation work with teams experiencing pressure and strain.

#### [A] Conclusion and next steps

SSPT is similar to the long-running module I inherited: we still invite external experts to present and to answer participants’ questions, and we still direct learners towards relevant university policies and services. However, rather than being a platform to host the performance of professional expertise, the module is now a course of active and individual learning, set within a vital community of academic practice, with the identification and exploration of values and vocation at its heart. Participant feedback and the positive contribution of alumni to personal tutoring in their schools illustrate the benefits of this kind of academic development of personal tutoring. One colleague who undertook SSPT wrote their MA dissertation on personal tutoring and is now a Senior Personal Tutor co-leading a school-based review of the service; they return each year to talk to current participants about their work. The diverse student profiles we use for our PBL activity, which were initially

developed collaboratively with the Students' Union and student support services, have, in their current form, been used in an institution-wide forum designed to support staff engage with who our students are, and gain a greater appreciation not only of the challenges they face but the richness and energy they bring to our community.

#### [A] Recommendations

From my experience adapting SSPT, I would make the following recommendations to other institutions considering a similar approach:

- focus on the role of personal tutor not just as a point for referral but as someone who can have an impact on student identity and belonging;
- structure the course around a relevant model or framework (for example, UKAT, 2019);
- foreground values through discussion and reflection, providing a safe space to explore issues and empowering participants to decide on their own ideals and ethos;
- ensure that the assessment is meaningful and linked to participants' practice;
- embed an emphasis on inclusive practice both to align with the professional values of the UK Professional Standards Framework for Teaching and Supporting Learning in Higher Education (UKPSF) (HEA, 2011) and to support UK HEIs' development of enhanced inclusive learning environments – an effort necessitated by the UK government's 2014 reform of the Disabled Students' Allowance which extended HEIs' anticipatory responsibilities under the 2010 Equality Act (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2014);
- utilise a group-work approach, whether to organise assessment or in-class activities, but scaffold and support this so that difficult but vital learning can be gained about listening to and supporting others compassionately without judgement.

There is more to do. A recent audit of personal tutoring in my institution revealed significant differences persist between the schools in the way personal tutoring is managed (as is often the case with diffused systems where executive power is delegated rather than held centrally). Of note was a finding which indicates the need to improve the uptake of personal tutor training across the institution given a concern that 'demand' for this was weak and leaving staff potentially unprepared for their roles. Requiring all tutors to undertake an MA module may not be the answer but developing such a module has, I believe, given us a clearer understanding of how participant engagement in, and commitment to, such an endeavour may be gained.

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