Universities as learning organisations: Putting tutors in the picture

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Abstract: This research builds on the rising interest in the concept of the Learning Organisation and is intended as a contribution to the literature on tutor development. Its key premise is that if universities are to become learning organisations on the lines suggested by Peter Senge (1990) and others, then tutors will play a crucial role in this process. Student learning is affected by the competency of tutors, and training in turn plays an important part in developing effective teaching skills among tutors. This paper discusses the results of a 2004 training needs analysis conducted at a New Zealand university. In doing so, it draws upon both a survey and interviews with tutors and course co-ordinators. Though the findings reveal that tutors are relatively satisfied with what the university is doing to address their needs, there are still gaps. This paper offers a reading based on select aspects of Senge’s notion of “learning disabilities” and focuses on barriers to learning encountered by the tutors and how these may be remedied. The paper suggests that comparative research on the role and utilisation of tutors in universities in other countries would be a fruitful avenue for future studies. Research, however does not take place in a conceptual vacuum, and the paper argues that organisational theory, and specifically Senge’s Learning Organisation concept provides a valuable framework within which to analyse the role of tutors and to seek ways in which the university may learn to deploy them better.

Keywords: learning organisation, tutors, learning disabilities

Introduction

Universities are complex organisations with various functions, the relationship between which can be problematic. For instance, while research and teaching are described as complementary, in practice, since time and resources are finite, one often takes place at the expense of the other. This conflict may be resolved, not necessarily for the better, by the new models of dividing research from teaching funding. Nevertheless, even the most ‘research-oriented’ university of the future is going to have to devote much of its attention to teaching. Tutors have long played an important role within the teaching process and this is likely to expand as universities and academics seek to assign more of their energies to research. However, this paper argues that tutors should not be seen as a cheap substitute that allows the academic to spend more time on research. On the contrary, tutors can potentially be utilised to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the teaching of the university, and the learning of its students. In other words, paying attention to tutors is one of the ways in which a university can learn to do better. ‘Learning to do better’ is a constant challenge to all organisations and so organisational theory relating to this offers a useful framework within which to address the issue. In particular, it is argued that the
‘Learning Organisation’ concept provides insights that can be applied to universities and specifically to the deployment of tutors.

Senge’s (1990) architecture of a Learning Organisation is built upon the foundation of the ‘five disciplines’ (shared vision, personal mastery, mental model, team learning and system thinking) that, when used in concert, facilitate organisational learning. These disciplines have evolved from the premise that an organisation should focus its attention on conditions that motivate people to do great things for themselves and for their organisations. The central message of the five disciplines is that organisations work the way they work because of how their members think and interact. Hence, only by changing the thinking of employees and the deeply embedded organisational policies and practices can new capacities for learning be established (Garvin, 2000).

In introducing the learning organisation framework, Senge builds on certain barriers to learning which he terms “learning disabilities”, that confront organisations and employees. Senge suggests:

Learning disabilities ….are no less tragic in organisations, where they also go largely undetected. The first step in curing them is to begin to identify the seven learning disabilities (Senge 1990, p.18)

Senge (1990) and others (Wijnhowen, 2001; Marquardt, 2000; Nicolini & Meznar, 1995) claim that even the most successful organisations fall short of their true potential due to the fact that they are poor learners. He states:

It is no accident that most organisations learn poorly. The way that they are designed and managed, the way people's jobs are defined, and, most importantly, the way we have all been taught to think and interact create fundamental learning disabilities (p. 18).

He further asserts that “learning disabilities” occur not because people are ignorant, uncommitted, or close-minded. Rather, they occur in organisations with very bright, committed, and open people. The drawbacks come because of ingrained belief systems rather than ineffective practices. He also claims that they could be fatal in organisations where they go undetected. Thus, he argues, it is important for organisations to identify the learning disabilities in order to create a learning organisation. While the concept of learning disabilities is just one sub-topic of Senge's contribution of learning organisation (1990), this paper focuses on the learning disabilities in order to understand, support and facilitate a learning environment for the university as an organisation. This is because tutors potentially play a key role in identifying and addressing learning disabilities amongst students. Lecturers encounter learning disabilities, or rather the results of them, after the event; in essays and exams. However, tutors, with their frequent face-to-face interactions with students are confronted with them as they occur, and so are in a much better position, if trained and supported properly, to assist students to learn better. Despite the strategic position of tutors within the university learning process, there is a paucity of literature on tutor development (only Sutherland, 2004 and Barrington, 1997, have conducted in-depth research into university tutoring in New Zealand).

**Training needs analysis**

This paper describes a training needs analysis of new tutors which was carried out in a New Zealand university in October 2004. In this paper, the term “tutor” refers to tutors, demonstrators, sessional assistants, teaching assistants and part time limited term contract teaching staff. A survey questionnaire was sent to 174 new tutors of which, 72, i.e. 41% responded. Further data includes face-to-face semi-
structured interviews with tutor coordinators, course co-ordinators, tutors and class representatives. This survey was carried out in the university in order to analyse the teaching needs of the tutors in a pragmatic way and was aimed at programme development and implementation. The survey questionnaire consisted of four sections. The first section collected personal information about the tutors such as age, gender etc. The second section gathered information about prior tutoring/teaching experience and the third section on current tutoring responsibilities. The final section of the survey gathered information on two aspects: usefulness of workshops and tutors’ experiences of tutoring. Owing to space constraints this paper focuses on this final section which has rich qualitative data.

The analysis of data in this study was based on the process of category development as introduced by Constas (1992). This approach is based on combining perspectives from the literature and the study.

**Findings and Interpretation**

The survey findings revealed some positive responses towards the tutor training programmes. The key positive findings relate to tutors’ abilities to clarify their role, understand their responsibilities and expectations, facilitate student learning, and to overcome initial fears in teaching. In addition there was a recognition of the need to appreciate and understand good teaching practices, engage and motivate students, maximise class participation, provide useful feedback for students’ progression, facilitate effective classroom management, and network with other tutors in university.

In interpreting these findings, this paper approaches the data from the conceptual perspective of Senge’s “learning disabilities”. This is done for two reasons: First, the learning disabilities contribute to the understanding of tutor development at the university; Senge’s barriers to learning, bear relevance. Second, this allows for an attempt to shift “learning disabilities” to learning abilities and to turn problems into opportunities. This is not to say that this is an easy process, but merely to recognise that the identification of problems is the first step to solving them.

Senge identifies a number of ‘learning disabilities’, of which six are relevant in this context.

**I am My Position**

This disability implies that a person focuses on his/her position, disregarding the interactions of all other positions that make up for the overall effectiveness of an organisation. Tutors are enthusiastic and eager about their tutoring role (Sutherland, 2004; Barrington, 1997) and tend to focus on themselves (Prieto, 1995), thus, ignoring the needs of the students and the teaching and learning goals of universities. The findings of the study reveal that 68% of the tutors are currently enrolled in either undergraduate or graduate courses. These tutors perceive themselves and describe themselves in interviews as ‘one-step’ ahead experts in terms of their students and not someone as stakeholders in the academic education of the university. For example, a tutor commented:

*I am just a tutor. I do what I am supposed to do for the 3 hours of tutorial. The course responsibility is with the course co-ordinator.*

This thinking is not only found among the tutors but also some course co-ordinators who reinforced the idea during interviews. For example a senior course co-ordinator commented:

*Most of our tutors are also our students. We need to bear this in mind. They do what they are paid for. They behave like students, just like they do enough to get a particular grade.*
While all the course coordinators interviewed felt that tutors must be trained and skilled at teaching, the above quote and other comments from the course co-ordinators imply that the university cannot expect the tutors to think beyond their job. Seeing their identities as tutors and students limits and disempowers tutors, causing them to believe that they do not need to instigate meaningful impact for the university in terms of students’ learning. This disability limits interaction across the university, such as with the tutor co-ordinators and course co-ordinators, because it creates little sense of responsibility for any other position or other people within the organisation. Along the same line, the findings show that 85% of the tutors have not visited the teaching development unit for any consultation or teaching resources that are available to them. If tutors and co-ordinators are simply focused on their personal role expectations, the value underlying learning and teaching is likely to be undermined. Course coordinators and tutors need to work as a team in concert with administrative staff, Heads of Departments, lecturers, students and each other. The challenge for the university is to break down the barriers so this can be achieved.

The enemy is out there

This refers to the tendency for employees and organisations to find someone or something outside to blame when things go wrong. Senge (1990) stated that extracting oneself from the dynamics of the problems, by setting up an adversial “us and them” relationship, limits the understanding of how organisations handle problems. Tutors encounter problems in the course of work that could be surmounted with better tutoring skills. In one-to-one discussion with tutors on their teaching evaluations, most of the tutors explained and interpreted their unsatisfactory ratings as a problem that resides with students’ behaviour and attitudes in the classroom. This may be a rationalisation in line with Biggs’s (1999) blame-the-student theory of teaching. Interviews with tutors sometimes revealed statements defending tutors’ lack of enthusiasm or motivation to acquire more knowledge or upgrade teaching skills competency. Only one reason was offered and that was, tutors are not paid to attend any other workshops except the 3-hr paid workshop on ‘Introductory Tutor Training for New Tutors’. This suggests that teaching effectiveness and personal development are viewed as an organisational responsibility and not as part of their willingness to develop themselves in becoming better teachers.

While the argument could be made for the university to put more money and resources into training tutors, that may be only part of the solution and the challenge for the university is to create programmes that tutors acknowledge as valuable for their personal professional development. Underlying this must be the recognition of the contribution that tutors make; only by doing this can the university get tutors out of the defense mechanism of blaming students or course coordinators for their poor performance (if and when poor performance occurs).

The illusion of taking charge

While employees are encouraged to be proactive and to take charge of events, “all too often, proactivity is reactivity in disguise” (Senge, 1990, p.21). Tutors tend to think that they have set up their sessions well and the students will respond to their preparation. However, the survey shows that tutors regularly encounter problems with students such as lack of participation (89%), lack of preparation (84%), lack of motivation (77%) and poor attendance (41%) in their classroom. It can be argued that some of these problems may be due to poor course design, rather than the inadequacy of students or tutors, but tutors are left to cope with the problems. As Senge states, “true proactivity comes from seeing how we contribute to our problems”. This means course coordinators need to think through their contribution to the problems rather than blame tutors and students.

Whatever the limitations of course design, tutors have to take charge of their tutorials in conjunction with school-based support and regular meetings to help them manage their tutorials effectively. Although various development workshops that provide useful techniques and tools for effective teaching are offered and publicised prior to commencement of each trimester, not many tutors accord importance to such learning opportunities. Interviews with tutors further confirmed that these are common problems they encounter but somehow they cope with them. Tutors also have the illusion of being proactively in charge but in fact are reactively muddling through. The role of
educator training is not only training people to do things but more importantly to recognise and analyse the problems, especially if they lie within themselves.

Fixation of Events

People are conditioned to see life as a series of events and for each event, people think “there is one obvious cause” (Senge, 1990, p.21). However according to Senge, the actual causes of problems are too complex to explain with one event. Nevertheless, organisations often divide their staff into units based on functional series of events, so few people are aware of the interconnectedness of things. In the university, for example, most tutors are not involved in the design of assessment and yet their contribution could be extremely valuable; they know the students, their strengths and weaknesses, much better than the lecturers. According to Ramsden (2003, p.177) “assessment is a way of teaching more effectively through understanding exactly what students know and do not know”. This means course co-ordinators and tutors need to cooperate in looking carefully at the design of assessment and evaluation of students’ learning. Although they do not have a hand in designing assessment, tutors are often used to do a lot of the ‘donkey work’ of marking. In the university, tutors assess 40 to 50% of the overall assessment in some undergraduate courses through assignments, presentation and class participation. Some tutors surveyed seem to have a fixation on marking and returning the assignments to students within the scheduled time frame, at the expense of adequate feedback. This appears to be the thinking behind the evaluation process. For example, a tutor summarised his/her experience as:

Maybe to make Marking & Feedback session compulsory to those tutors who mark students’ work. I think some of them just do not take it seriously enough. Especially to those students who have cultural barriers, they deserve more helpful comments rather than a returned piece of work with no feedback at all.

One of the reasons noted from the interviews of tutors and course co-ordinators is that tutors are under pressure. Generally, marking assignments is considered a very time consuming activity (Ramsden, 2003; Kuism, 1999). The survey shows that 75% of the tutors are students themselves who may be busy complying with their own course assignment commitments. Also, the interviews with some tutors showed the general concern about being underpaid since marking takes more time than that is expected by course co-ordinators. This may imply that the evaluation process may be undermined by lack of time management and equity issues.

It is commonly accepted that marking and providing feedback is an important element in teaching and learning (Dalziel, 1998) and is equally important that all those involved in the evaluation process should be trained. However, the findings show that 46% of new tutors surveyed did not attend the workshop on ‘marking and feedback’. Why is this the case? During interview comments, such as the following by a course co-ordinator, we can see that this has implications for individual and organisational learning:

All tutors must attend the ‘marking and feedback workshop’, but we cannot force them to attend.

The findings suggest that tutors are concerned with meeting course coordinators’ expectations, that is, marking according to guidelines and within the time frame. This fixation results in the failure to see the wider implications of actions and events and it also hinders their understanding when opportunities are provided for learning in the organisation. It is important for tutors to understand that assessment contributes to students’ learning process and helps the tutors to gauge whether the course objectives have been achieved (Jarvis, 2002). This is further emphasised by Ramsden (2003) who states “assessment’s educational value depends on our understanding of its multiple purposes and how they are related (Ramsden, 2003, p. 205). Having said this, at the organisational level, if the university
considers assessment as a serious element in student learning, it must position this within the tutoring system. Tutors must be motivated, rewarded and monitored on assessing student work. They must also understand why and how assessment is set, and if possible, play a role in decisions about assessment.

The delusion of learning from experience

The “most powerful learning comes from direct experience” (Senge, 1990, p.23), but many of the important decisions have little real participation from employees in a well-rounded way and so they are unable to learn from the outcomes. Not being involved in the decision-making and the setting of goals, they are often unable to see the connection between objective and outcome; if we do not know the objectives how can we ascertain whether the outcomes achieve them? The university situation in respect of tutors is consistent with the general business that Senge is describing. In line with Senge's analysis, the tutors do not participate in any decision making of course design and as such do not gain experience. This is because the tutors are usually hired after a course is designed. Also, tutors are usually not briefed by former tutors, thus, they do not have access to ‘institutional memory’ about tutorials and so do not have the opportunity of learning from the experience of the past. Also, most tutors seemed to learn from their own experience as students and as tutors they think they have a considerable control over their environment.

However, in general, tutorial experience tended to be very limited. The survey shows that around 60% of the tutors do not have any form of prior tertiary teaching experience. As pointed out by a tutor in the survey:

_I think the university should control the quality of all tutors, including their knowledge, ability to teach/mark._

Despite this lack of experience and training, what they do in tutorials can have a profound effect on students. They can facilitate or hinder student learning. Moreover, as noted above they typically have control over 40-50% of the overall marks of a particular course. Nevertheless, it is unclear how much course coordinators learn from their tutors. Year after year, the university conducts thousands of tutorials and it might be thought that course coordinators might have learnt from tutors’ experience. As Senge claims, that may be a delusion.

Myth of management team

In theory, course coordinators and tutors work together as a team. Senge suggests that instead of working collectively, teams largely fight for turf but give the “appearance of a cohesive team” that hides the underlying differences that are never dealt with. How true is this in the tutorial context? In management situations, we get a turf war because of contestation between functions (e.g. human resource versus finance) as well as personalities. In the university tutor situation that is described here, turf wars of this sort are not a major issue. The problem is a lack of communication between course coordinators and tutors. They do not fight, but nor do they communicate enough. The interviews with tutors reveal that most of them feel that course co-ordinators do not communicate adequately, as can be seen from the comment by a tutor:

_The lecturer thinks that I know everything because I have tutored before. That's not true. Lecturers run different courses differently. I can't blame him because he is very busy. Even then, he needs to communicate every now and then, so that I can feel comfortable to bring out my problems or anything about tutorials._
Myths are manifestations of what we consider desirable. Management teams, that is tutors and course coordinators working as a team, are clearly desirable. Tutors need to develop effective interpersonal communication with their course coordinators in order to help them to make sense of the overall objective of tutoring in a particular course/module (Meyers, 1996). The challenge is to change the myth into reality.

**Conclusion**

The above discussion draws on Senge’s concept of “learning disabilities”, which is considered an important part of understanding the underlying and fundamental causes to self-limiting behaviours that inhibit organisational learning. Universities, like other organisations, need to learn about their inadequacies in order to do better. They can only do this by analysing and utilising the experiences of the people who make it up (Cullen, 1999). In this context, that means tutors, course coordinators and students. This paper has described a survey of tutor training needs analysis complemented by continuing discussions and interviews with tutors, course coordinators, tutor co-ordinators and class representatives. Though the majority of respondents reported that the introductory tutor training has been helpful in making them confident and better tutors, the interviews signalled several problems and challenges faced by tutors. The ‘learning disabilities’ identified explain some of the disjunction between the prescribed ideals of teaching practice and those of tutorials in the university. The study illustrates that in spite of efforts put in by tutors and course co-ordinators to improve teaching and learning in the university, there are still more measures that can be put in place so that tutors’ contributions are more effective.

In sum, the paper has attempted to bring to the fore the ‘learning disabilities’ that were evident in the findings of this study. All the pertinent issues surfaced demonstrate the way tutors perceive teaching, learning and training in the university. This is a systemic barrier to effective teaching and learning. From this discussion, the paper contends that universities cannot afford to ignore the benefits of tutor development workshops (Sutherland, 2004; Meyers, 2001; Barrington, 1997; Nyquist, Abbot, Wulff & Sprague, 1991). Indeed, a principal implication for universities of this study would be the need for the development of a holistic tutor training programme, that is, to provide a programme that covers introductory tutor training skills, techniques of marking and providing feedback and a microteaching session. Also, two additional workshops have been identified to meet the needs of the tutors. The development of training would contribute to the effective development of tutors and teaching practices in university. Also, the paper suggests that training needs to go beyond just practical skills to address deeply rooted assumptions such as clarifying and changing mental models about effective tutoring and creating effective dialogue and interpersonal communication between tutors and course coordinators.

In conclusion, given the crucial role that tutors play in the university from facilitating student learning to providing feedback to course coordinators, the “learning disabilities” identified in this paper need to be addressed seriously. This paper contributes to the existing small pool of research on tutor training in New Zealand (Sutherland, 2004; Barrington, 1997). Future research is recommended into an understanding of students’ expectations of the role of tutors and how tutors can enhance students’ learning. Another fruitful avenue is comparative research on the role and utilisation of tutors in other universities in other countries. However, research does not take place in a conceptual vacuum, and the paper argues that organisational theory, and specifically Senge’s Learning Organisation concept provides a valuable framework within which to analyse the role of tutors and to seek ways in which the university may learn to deploy them better.
References


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