# 211 Investigating tutor teaching development through peer mentoring in business education

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## Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

## Abstract

This paper explores peer mentoring, one component of a tutor professional development (PD) program in a business faculty of an Australian university. Peer mentoring involves matching new tutors (mentees) with experienced tutors (mentors), tutorial observations, and mentor feedback on mentees' teaching plans and practices. We investigate the impact that the mentor-mentee relationship has on conceptions of teaching, planning, and practice as perceived and reported by a) mentors and b) mentees. This exploratory study consists of semi-structured interviews with mentors and mentees, and thematic analysis of teaching plans and tutorial observation reports. The study aims to uncover the strengths and challenges of peer mentoring. The findings will contribute to scholarship on targeted tutor professional development and peer mentoring, offering insight into how to improve tutor PD and promote a culture of excellence in teaching. This project is currently underway and ethics approval has just been received. Preliminary findings will be presented.

## Full paper

### Introduction

Effective teaching is the dominant determinant of improved student learning (Trigwell & Prosser, 2020). As tutors[1] have a direct impact on student learning (Beaton, 2017; Hitch et al., 2018) targeted professional development (PD) is critical to ensuring tutors' teaching approaches are student-oriented and contribute to student learning. There is a growing interest in peer observation of teaching as part of tutor PD programs, and how it enhances teaching practice (Bell & Mladenovic, 2008). Contrasting research has indicated the negative aspects of peer observation of teaching, namely that it is intrusive or challenges academic freedom, is not objective, representative, or accurate (Lomas & Nicholls, 2005). Yet, non-judgmental and developmental feedback may foster an environment in which these challenges can be overcome (Bell & Mladenovic, 2008). Indeed, effective peer observation of teaching can contribute to developing tutors as reflective practitioners, shifting their conception of teaching and learning and influencing their practice (Bell & Mladenovic, 2015; Cotronei-Baird et al., 2022).

Previous research exploring peer mentoring indicated that tutors (mentees) perceived peer observation of teaching to be highly valuable and that individualised feedback allowed them to reflect on and adjust their teaching practice (Cotronei-Baird et al., 2022). This suggests that this opportunity to learn from peers is a highly relevant component of PD. As such, exploration into the efficacy of peer mentoring is timely, with our study seeking to identify the strengths and challenges of the peer mentoring component of the tutor PD program and whether it contributes to a shift in teaching conceptions, planning, and practice. This project is currently underway and ethics approval has just been received. Preliminary findings will be presented.

### The study context

The PD program in a business faculty of an Australian university matches new tutors (mentees) with experienced tutors (mentors). Peer mentoring is structured as follows:

- Initial meeting between mentor and mentee (prior to the commencement of semester teaching) to discuss their first teaching plan (Appendix 1) and any other concerns or questions.
- Mentors provide feedback on teaching plans for observed tutorials.

- Two tutorial observations (one in week 4 or 5 and one in week 8 or 9 of semester)
- A debrief meeting following the tutorial observations.
- Mentors provide mentees with an observation report (Appendix 2).

The peer mentoring is confidential and not aligned with performance management. It is distinct from Bell and Mladenovic's (2015) definition of peer review of teaching due to the focus on a reciprocal, collegiate and non-judgemental dialogue.

## Research Design

To evaluate the impact of peer mentoring on teaching conceptions, planning, and practice, we employ qualitative enquiry to answer four questions.

1. What changes did mentors observe in mentees' approach to teaching plans?
2. What changes did mentors observe in mentees' teaching practice?
3. What is the impact of mentor feedback on mentees' own teaching planning?
4. What is the impact of mentor feedback on mentees' own teaching practices?

Qualitative research is selected as it captures the experience of peer mentoring from those who are directly involved (Patton, 2002).We will recruit approximately 15 mentors and 15 mentees who were involved in the PD program during 2015 and 2023. This small-scale exploratory study will utilise semi-structured interviews, and the collection of documents.

*Semi-structured interviews:* Mentors' and mentees' perceptions about their experience will be discussed, specifically focused on providing and receiving formative feedback (verbal and written) on a) teaching plans, and b) tutors' teaching practice. Semi-structured interviews will take no more than 60 minutes (Appendix 3).

*Collection of documents:* With the permissions of mentors and mentees we will collect:

1. Three teaching plans, including any feedback provided by mentors.
2. Tutorial observation report of two tutorials (Week 4 or 5 and Week 8 or 9 of semester).

## Data Analysis

Interviews will be recorded and transcribed with the permission of the participants, and thematic analysis of mentors' feedback on tutors' teaching plans and observation reports will be conducted.

## Conclusion

This research will meaningfully contribute to the literature on tutor professional development by examining the effectiveness of peer mentoring on teaching conceptions, planning, and practice. We aim to generate strategies to improve tutor PD programs by specifically targeting the enhancement of feedback by mentors to mentees. Insights gained into tutor PD programs can be adopted to influence the structure of tutor PD across different institutions.

*[1] Tutors is the term used in Australia. In other contexts, the term refers to teaching assistants (or graduate teaching assistants), graduate student instructor, casual academics, sessional staff, or teachers.*

**Appendix 1: Teaching Plan Template**

| Tutor | Subject | Tutorial | Venue |
|---|---|---|---|

At the end of this tutorial students will be able to:

1.

2.

3.

4.

| Time | Activity and objectives | Tutor activities | Student activities |
|---|---|---|---|
|  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |

| Tutor reflection after the tutorial | |
|---|---|
| What went really well in this tutorial? |  |
| What do you feel was a challenge with this tutorial and how would you improve next time? |  |

**Appendix 2: Observation Report Template**

| Criteria | Achieved | Partly Achieved | Not Achieved | Not Applicable | Comments |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **OBJECTIVES, COHERENCE & STRUCTURE** | | | | | |
| **1.** Objectives of the tutorial were made clear to the students | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | |
| **2.** Links were made in this tutorial to the previous lecture | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | |
| **3.** Links were made between the tutorial material and the subject assessments | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | |
| **4.** There was a clear introduction to the tutorial | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | |
| **5.** There was a clear summing up of the tutorial | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | |
| **STUDENT PARTICIPATION** | | | | | |
| **6.** Students readily responded to questions from the tutor | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | |
| **7.** There was active engagement of students with other students | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | |
| **8.** Students actively participated in some pair or group work | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | |
| **9.** Students were encouraged to ask the tutor and other students questions | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | |
| **10.** All students actively participated in activities and not just some | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **11.** The tutor asked appropriate questions | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| **12.** Good strategies were used to get students to respond to questions | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| **13.** Many students provided feedback and not just the same ones all the time | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| **14.** The tutor facilitated further discussion from questions | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| **15.** The tutor responded to questions effectively | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |

## ORGANISATION

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **16.** The tutorial was well thought out in terms of_pace and timing | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| **17.** It was clear that the tutor had considered what the students would be doing in the tutorial | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| **18.** The tutor considered appropriate learning tools to support the students' engagement (whiteboard, audio-visuals, activity sheets, etc.) | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| **19.** When setting tutorial tasks, the tutor was clear about the nature and purpose of the task, the time available to do it, and the outcomes expected. | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |

**General Feedback**

**Appendix 3: Semi-structured interviews**

**Mentors**

**1. Describe your experience in completing the peer mentoring component of the TBE program as a mentor**

*Possible sub-questions*

   a.  In your own words, describe your mentor role in the TBE PD program.
   b.  How many mentees did you mentor?
   c.  In what disciplines did they teach in? Is it the same discipline you teach? How did you feel about this?
   d.  Describe your experience and how you felt about your role as a mentor this semester?

**2. Describe your role in giving your mentee(s) feedback on their teaching plan(s).**

*Possible sub-questions*

   a.  Which teaching plans did you read i.e., initial/early teaching plan, observation 1 teaching plan, observation 2 teaching plan.
   b.  If you gave feedback, describe what you believe was the purpose of the feedback. What is your perception of the impact of the feedback you gave? How did your mentees' respond? (you can talk about the different responses from different mentees)
   c.  If you did not give feedback, describe what you believe was the impact of not giving feedback (you can talk about the different responses from different mentees).

**3. Tell me about the observation component of peer mentoring.**
*Possible sub-questions*

   a.  In your own words, what is the purpose of the observations?
   b.  How many of your mentee's tutorials did you observe?
   c.  How did you feel about observing the tutorials? Provide examples? Explain whether and how the experience was the same or different for each of the tutors you mentored this semester?
   d.  Explain whether you believe that the observations had an impact on: Teaching planning? Teaching delivery? Teaching development? (You can talk about the different responses from different mentees)
   e.  In your own words, what is the purpose of the observation report?
         a.  How did you feel about writing the report?
         b.  What impact do you believe the report had on your mentees': Teaching planning? Teaching delivery? Teaching development and/or anything else? (You can talk about the different responses from different mentees)
   f.  How many times did you meet with your mentee?
         a.  Explain the debrief meetings?
         b.  What was the purpose of the debrief meetings?
         c.  How many meetings did you have? What was discussed?
         d.  What was the experience like? How did you feel about this experience and your role?
         e.  What impact do you believe they have had on your mentees': teaching planning? Teaching delivery? Teaching development? and/or anything else. (you can talk about the different responses from different mentees)

**4. Any other questions**

**Mentees**

**1. Describe your experience in completing the peer mentoring component of the TBE program as a mentee**

*Possible sub-questions*

    a.  Describe your role of a mentee in the TBE program this semester.
    b.  Describe, from you point of view, the role of your mentor in the TBE program.
    c.  What disciplines did you teach in? Is it the same discipline as your mentor? What did you feel about this?

**2. Describe your mentors' role in giving you feedback on your teaching plan(s).**

*Possible sub-questions*

    a.  Which teaching plans did your mentor read? i.e., initial/early teaching plan, observation 1 teaching plan, observation 2 teaching plan
    b.  If you received feedback on teaching plans, describe what you believe was the impact of the feedback given:
        a.  on initial teaching plan,
        b.  on the first observation teaching plan,
        c.  on the second observation teaching plan
    c.  If you did not receive feedback, describe what you believe was the impact of not receiving feedback on: The initial teaching plan? The first observation teaching plan? The second observation teaching plan?

**3. Tell me about the observation component of peer mentoring.**

*Possible sub-questions*

    a.  How many of your tutorials did your mentor observe?
    b.  In your own words, what was the purpose of the observations? Why do you believe you were observed twice throughout the semester?
    c.  Explain whether you believe that the observations had an impact on: teaching planning? Teaching delivery? Teaching development?
    d.  In your own words, what is the purpose of the observation report? How did you feel about the report? What was the impact of this report? In what ways have you used the report during the semester and/or beyond?
    e.  Explain the debrief meetings? What was the purpose of the debrief meetings? How many meetings? What was discussed? What impact did they have on you? What impact do you believe they have had on your: teaching planning, teaching delivery and/or teaching development?

**4. Any other questions**

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