

MULTIPLE STUDENT VOICES: WHAT MAKES AN EFFECTIVE TUTORIAL?



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Stellenbosch University Context

- medium-sized research-led institution
- situated in the Western Cape, South Africa
- approximately 25 000 students
- 4800 making up the first-year cohort



Situating this Study

Phase 1

- 2008: SU Economics dept & CTL embarked on 1st research project:
- "Tutoring is fun - a good experience": An Empirical Study Investigating Tutor Motivation (published in November 2009)

Phase 2

- 2008/2009: SU Economics dept, Biology dept & CTL collaborate on 2nd research project:
- "Tutors' Perceptions of Two Tutorial Programmes at Stellenbosch University"

Phase 3

- 2009: SU Economics dept & CTL embark on 3rd research project:
- "Multiple Student Voices: What makes an Effective Tutorial?"

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Rationale for this Study

- Since large amounts of time & resources are spent on providing tutorials to 1st year students on SU campus...
 - Do students find them effective?
 - What is the role of the tutor?
 - Why is review of existing modes of delivery in tutorials important for improvement?



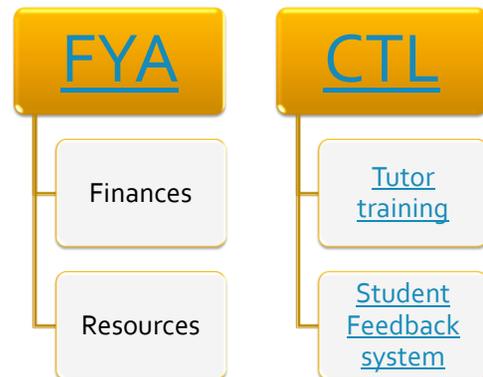
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Aim of this Study

- What do 1st-year SU Economics students value in their tutorial classes?
- Why do students attend tutorials even when they are not compelled to do so?
- What factors hinder their participation in tutorials when compelled to?
- What aspects of their tutors teaching styles should be maintained or improved?
- What should be taken into account when tutorial programmes are evaluated?

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Sketching the Scene: Available Support for Tutorial Programmes



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First-year Academy at SU

- Implemented in 2007
- Focuses on first-year success
 - Providing support for development & extension of new or existing tutorial programmes
 - Recognises that the pattern of student engagement is changing in HE
- Is therefore a “deep commitment running through the institution, which seeks to maximise the success of its students” (Yorke & Thomas, 2003)

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The SU Centre for Teaching & Learning

- Provides support to
 - Tutors
 - Lecturers/tutor coordinators
- Support from an academic development perspective in terms of:
 - Tutor training
 - Logistic & Administrative assistance



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SU Tutor Training Programme

- Upon request from depts
- Lecturers are encouraged to join
- Tailor-made according to specific needs
- 5 generic components:
 - Roles and responsibilities
 - Understanding how students approach learning
 - Facilitation & communication skills
 - Diversity & classroom management
 - Preparing for your first tutorial

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SU Student Feedback System

- In the interest of accountability, reflection of teaching is encouraged
- Promotes the evaluation of tutors & provides tutors with a formal report post evaluation
- Depts are encouraged to make use of this service to ensure tutorials are reviewed

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The SU Economics Dept

- Characterised by high-enrolment rates
- Typically 350 students/lecture
- 30 students/tutorial
- 1st-year students generally perceive Economics to be difficult and abstract (Van der Merwe, 2006)

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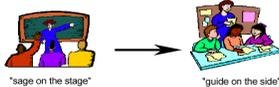
The SU Economics Tutorial Programme

- Was revised in 2005
- In 2008, it employed 23 tutors who supported approx. 1700 students
- These students include:
 - Those who are compelled to attend if they fail the EA test, or any subsequent high-stakes test
 - Those who choose to attend even though they are not compelled to do so
- Tutorials take place once a week

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Responsibilities of the Tutor

- Assisting students in applying & understanding content by working through the problem sets
- Students have to be active – not a mini-lecture – use of small group work
- Tutor = facilitator / 'guide on the side'
- Encouraged to make use of teaching aids
- Encouraged to check that students attempted the problems set
- Act professionally & show keen interest in the performance of their students



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So, what is an Effective Tutorial?

- This approach to the theory is based on the understanding that learning is constructive, cumulative and active
- In the context of the SU Economics dept, considerable emphasis is placed on:



- [Student engagement](#)
- [Peer-assisted learning](#)
- [Role of the tutor](#)

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Promoting Student Engagement

- Student engagement = one of the better predictors of student Success (Astin, 1993)
- The more students study or practice a subject, the more they tend to learn about it. Likewise, the more students practice and get feedback on their writing, analyzing or problem-solving, the more adept they will become (Carini, Kuh & Klein, 2006)
- Responsibility of the teacher/tutor as facilitator of learning experiences & opportunities (Smit et.al. 2005)

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Peer-Assisted Learning

- PAL = group of strategies involving active & interactive mediation of learning through learners who are not professional teachers" (Topping & Ehly, 2001)
- Peer tutoring is a form of PAL
- PAL is interpreted as a subset of collaborative learning



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Role of the Tutor (1)

- Tasked with facilitating learning & stimulating cooperation (Schmidt & Moust, 1998)
- Needs to challenge students to clarify ideas, check for inconsistencies & consider alternatives
- Helps students organise knowledge, resolve misconceptions
- To do this, tutor needs a suitable knowledge base, willingness to become involved in an authentic way & the skill to express ideas in a language understood by students (Schmidt & Moust 1998)

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An Effective Tutor therefore...

- Should have cognitive congruence (Schmidt & Moust, 1995)
- Should be sensitive to problems students may experience
- Should know when to intervene and what to offer
- Theory of effective tutor merges two perspectives:
 - The personal qualities of the tutor, ability to communicate informally, empathy
 - The tutor's subject-matter knowledge

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Methodology (1)

- May 2008: 800 students completed a tutorial student feedback form
- Form consisted of four sections:
 - 1: questions regarding the tutorial programme in general
 - 2: questions regarding the tutor in general
 - 3: open-ended questions regarding the compulsory nature of the tutorials
 - 4: open-ended questions regarding the aspects of the tutor's teaching style should be maintained or improved

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Methodology (2)

- Students rated their opinion on a Likert scale of 1 – 5
- Categories collapsed into 'disagree' and 'agree'
- Neutral not included for ease of interpretation
- Open responses grouped thematically and trends are highlighted

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Results

- Reports the students ratings of:
 - The organisation & logistics of the tutorial programme
 - Their tutor's performance in general
- Reports on the open-ended responses regarding:
 - The compulsory nature of the tutorials
 - The aspects of the tutor's teaching style should be maintained or improved



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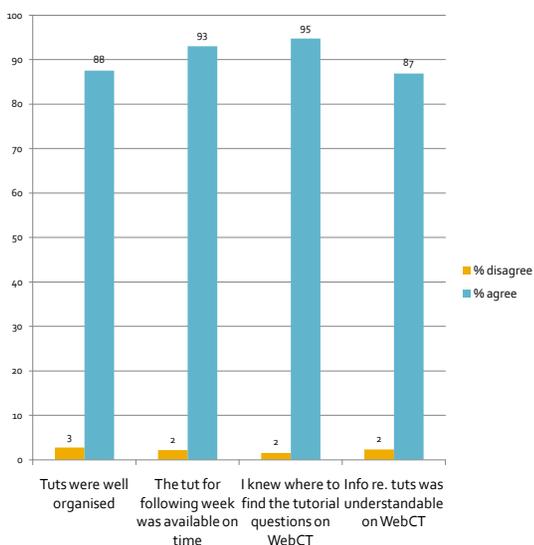
Students general perceptions of the programme

- 97% agreed that the material covered and discussed in the tutorials was course-related
- 78% agreed that "the tutorials in this module are essential for my academic success"



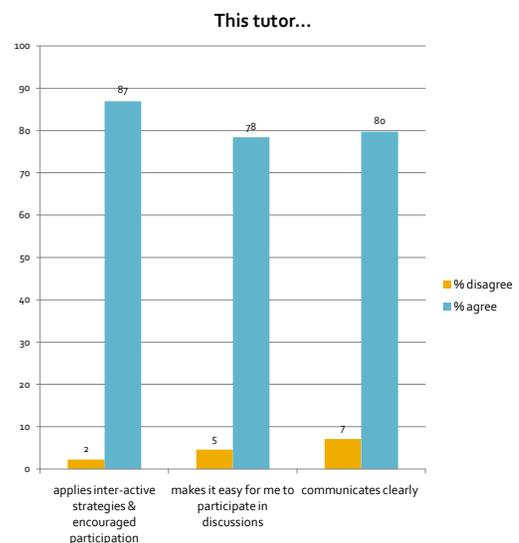
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Tutorial Programme Admin & Logistics



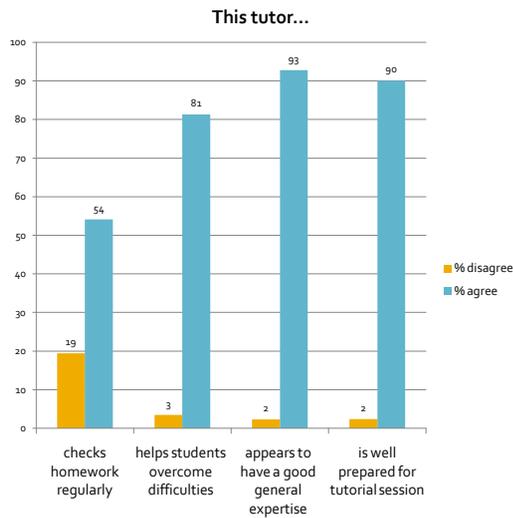
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Tutor's Teaching Attributes (1)



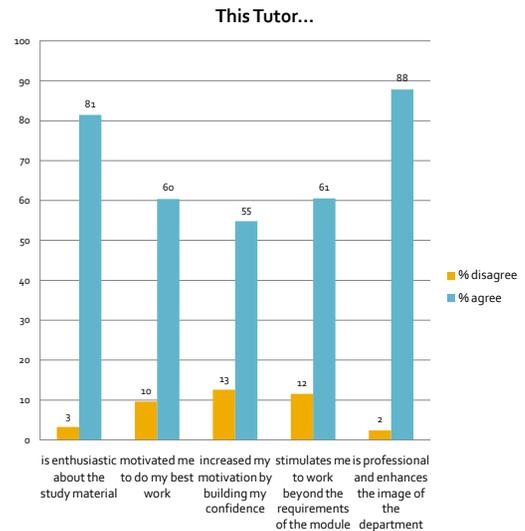
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Tutor's Teaching Attributes (2)



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Tutor's Personality Attributes



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If you are not compelled to attend the tutorials, why do you attend?

To gain better understanding /insight & to learn	136
To practice/revise	91
Because the tutorials are helpful	75
For test and exam preparation	34
I want to do well in Economics/improve my marks	17
Other	27
TOTAL	380

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If you are not compelled to attend the tutorials, why do you attend? (2)

- "it helps to understand the calculations and how to answer questions"
- "difficult module, need extra practice"
- "tutorial class has helped me considerably since I started attending it"
- "to make learning easier for exams"
- "I want to cum [laude]!" (translated)
- "explanations in small groups is better" (translated)

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If you are compelled to attend the tutorials but do not do so on a regular basis, please indicate why

Tests, class clashes, other assignments, sporting commitments	39
Issue of compulsory tutorials	12
I was ill	11
I didn't see the need/value	10
I use the time for self-study	7
Other	19
TOTAL	98

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If you are compelled to attend the tutorials but do not do so on a regular basis, please indicate why (2)

- “[I don’t attend because of the] **stress of other tests**”
- “I have second year subjects that **clash** with the tut periods”
- [I am] **over-worked, I guess**”



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State aspects of the TUTOR's teaching style that you think should be maintained

He/she explains well	95
He/she promotes group work/interaction	74
He/she is friendly & promotes a relaxed environment	47
He/she is well prepared and has good expertise	46
He/she is enthusiastic, willing to help & is professional	40
He/she extra examples & refers back to previous tutorials	31
His/her presentation & communication style	28
He/she makes good use of teaching aids	21
Other	23
TOTAL	405

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State aspects of the TUTOR's teaching style that you think should be maintained (2)

- “[h]e **explains well**; takes it slow from the start. I never left a tut not knowing what and how to do the problems”
- “[t]he tutor **uses class participation** as a big part of her teaching”
- “[h]e’s very much like a friend and creates a **relaxed environment** in which we can all enjoy doing economics”
- “...[h]is communicating with the class, his personality. He always makes **concepts easily understandable** by referring to daily things or sports”
- “[t]he **slides help a lot** and drawing the graphs on the board step by step helps to understand the work”

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State aspects of the TUTOR's teaching style that you think needs improvement

His/her communication style	57
His/her explanations	33
He/she moves too quickly/slowly	27
His/her use of teaching aids	16
He/she should increase his/her confidence	9
He/she should check homework regularly	9
He/she should increase his/her enthusiasm	8
Other	80
<i>TOTAL</i>	239

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State aspects of the TUTOR's teaching style that you think needs improvement (2)

- “[g]ood knowledge of ecos – **battles to communicate** to students”
- “sometimes we don’t know which answer goes with which question and then **she just goes on**” (translated)
- “[s]ometimes confusing, too detailed, **takes too much time for his lesson**”
- “[h]e **should check** that we’ve actually prepared by doing the **work** otherwise it’s easy to get lazy or forget when you know no one’s going to be bothered”
- “[h]e needs to be **more confident** within the answers he gives and the way in which he teaches. If he is unsure of what he says then we become unsure”

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Where to from here?

- Need to review the key elements that students have identified as crucial to effective tutorials
- Even though tutors are hand-selected, attend training & receive on-going support, the quality of the learning experience within the tutorial is dependant on these elements



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What do first-year SU Economics students value in their tutorial classes?

- Tutorials that are interactive and encourage participation
- Tutors who can communicate clearly
- Tutors who are well prepared and professional
- Tutors who are enthusiastic and build confidence
- Tutors who check that the homework is at least attempted before the tutorial

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Concluding comments

- What is the impact of the students' emphasis of checking homework on 'student-centered learning'?
- Even though the students rate the tutors highly in most instances, what does this mean for the objectives set out by the programme?
- How well does the department's understanding of student engagement translate into practice in the classroom?
- What implications do these considerations have for tutor coordinators and trainers?

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