



Tutor training across disciplines: expanding aid and enabling student entrepreneurship

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Presentation abstract

As learning developers, we frequently find ourselves constrained by institutional structures and disciplinary areas of expertise. At just one of the University of Toronto (U of T)'s three campuses, we have no fewer than five distinct undergraduate faculties, thereby creating a complex ecosystem that compounds the difficulty of supporting all students, even beyond the issue of understanding the expectations of multiple programs of study. While the Centre for Learning Strategy Support has dispersed members of our team across the St. George campus to focus on distinct student needs, varying funding and staffing structures have led to uneven support for our students in different disciplines, with many turning to external tutoring services of unreliable quality.

While learning developers may be limited to their own education and experience, we are uniquely positioned as experts in teaching and learning: we may not always know the ins and outs of what students need to study, but we have valuable insights in how to do so.

Over the past several years, we have built a curriculum of modules supporting effective and ethical peer-to-peer learning, based on strategies that are core to a learning developer's work. Upon completing the University of Toronto Tutor Training Program, or UT3, and after securing the reference of a postsecondary subject matter expert, academically successful students are enabled to bring their discipline-specific knowledge to others as independent contractors on our Tutor Directory. With this combination of training and directory, we have built a new marketplace for all undergraduate students to find trustworthy tutors, and for our trainees to make money by supporting their peers. This presentation spotlighted the development and launch of the UT3, including the initial needs

analysis and consultations, the creation of our curriculum, and our progress in training students to enable hundreds of tutoring sessions since our launch.

Keywords: tutors; training; interdisciplinary; entrepreneurship; expanding aid.

Community response

The presentation was thought-provoking and sparked conversations, ideas and questions for participants. For example, an attendee remarked:

On the one hand, it seemed such a good idea to confront harmful business models head-on, rather than following the usual approach most of us are taking (me included): distancing ourselves, advising students not to use it and hoping they do (which is a bit washing our hands in innocence if we're honest). On the other hand, there is the danger that by transferring any risk to the student entrepreneurs, the university engages in a different form of supporting a much milder form of privatising support (compared to employing students to provide peer support) and it could raise questions about potential devaluing of the work professional Learning Developers (LDers) do if the university is visibly supporting a model that relies on students with a much lower level of expertise as a paid model, rather than a 'peer' support offer. The presentation fully acknowledged the complexities involved, which made it such a valuable contribution that helped question some of the positions we (as in LDers) tend to take as a default and (positively) forced listeners to consider some of our blind spots that inevitably arise when we try to defend best practice in a messy and not always 'best' environment. It would be great to hear how this experiment is progressing and to do some research on the impact it has on students seeking support, students providing it and the perspective of LDers working alongside this model with students.

Elsewhere, one attendee saw parallels for how a similar tutor scheme could potentially be used in their institution to help alleviate the growing demand for digital skills support that is difficult for current staff to monitor. Another aspect that stood out, and is perhaps familiar to all Learning Developers, was the complexity within and across sources of support and different provisions in Jonathan's institution. This is certainly something that attendees recognised in their own institutions, which can create confusion and/or a sense of overwhelm for students that can push them to external, predatory aid that may *seem* easier and more straightforward. It was interesting that this was one of the primary motivators for the Toronto scheme, and it would be interesting to know if this has had any impact on students accessing those unreliable external aids.

As with all new sources of support or interventions, there can often be a level of 'fear' in terms of how it could potentially negatively affect existing sources of support. Therefore, it was really interesting to see how Jonathan highlighted that use of tutors mostly took place outside of 'office hours', and therefore did not detrimentally impact existing provisions and aid centres. It would be interesting to know if this availability of evening and weekend support plays a role in how tutors are marketed and promoted to students!

For another attendee, the UT3 modules that tutors have to engage with and complete before they can join the directory and begin supporting other students was particularly illuminating, in shining a light on the core skills needed by Learning Developers themselves, such as questioning, assessment literacies, learning strategies and ethical approaches. Thinking about what skills tutors will need to successfully tutor other students was a useful approach in also thinking about the skill-sets that make Learning Developers effective and successful in our own roles.

Author's reflection

I share the concerns of the first commenter about privatising existing student support: I agree that it should be resisted in our provision of quality higher education for all. At the same time, as we all noted in our conversation, as learning developers we frequently find ourselves in situations where we have limited or no in-house resources to which we can refer for course- or discipline-specific supports. I would argue that initiatives like the U of T Tutor Directory should only serve to supplement existing supports, as we have done.

In surveying the students who have hired a peer as a tutor, all of them cite the free resources' limited capacities and lack of support on evenings and weekends as a reason for using the directory. Students praised the support they received, but were direct in admitting that they would have used free resources if they could have done so. To my colleagues in other institutions who are considering a similar foray, I strongly recommend a full environmental scan of resources and needs in order to adapt to the 'not always best' and improve the current situation for your students.

As the last comment above indicates, we have a unique position as learning developers to help grow our trainees' skills: this project has been one of the most interesting and

consuming initiatives I have worked on in years. Not only does sharing elements of our best practices help tutors and their peers in turn, but it also facilitates a type of entrepreneurship that rewards the tutors for their academic and andragogical abilities. For instance, it has been gratifying to see how frequently trainees note the value of the 'Ethics in Tutoring' module in building their skills: a large majority report appreciating the guidance on how to maintain academic integrity in supporting other students' learning. We hope that with time, we will be able to replace the external, occasionally predatory market, and will be keeping our ears to the ground.

And at this point, we have not yet leveraged the evenings-and-weekends element in our promotion, but as has been pointed out above, this is a natural selling point and one we will likely be using at midterm season. One of our current promotional slides, aimed at incoming students this September, is below (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Promotional slide.



Acknowledgements

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Author details

Jonathan Vandor is a graduate of the University of Toronto and York University, and has over two decades of experience in teaching, tutoring, and coaching. He has been a learning developer with the Centre for Learning Strategy Support at U of T since 2015, focusing on peer-to-peer programming since 2020. He is the current chair of the Canadian Tutor Standards.

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