Making personal tutoring work

By Phil Race and Leeds Metropolitan University Teacher Fellows

leeds
metropolitan
university

Contents

About this booklet

The aim of this booklet is to bring together various ideas and models about personal tutoring, so that you can build on a range of experience to make personal tutoring work well for your students – and of course for yourself. In a large university, personal tutoring necessarily takes different forms across the institution, depending on subject discipline, class size and course design. When personal tutoring goes well, students remember their tutors for years, and often maintain contact with them.

An audit on the use of personal tutors conducted by KPMG for Leeds Metropolitan University in 2010 (KPMG, 2010) suggested that:

• guidance and training for personal tutors on the role should be formalised

• consideration should be given to actively seeking feedback on the personal tutoring role from students

• specific student feedback on the allocation of personal tutors should be considered and best practice on allocation identified at Faculty level.

This booklet, drawn from experience across Leeds Metropolitan University, is intended to provide guidance for colleagues working towards optimising personal tutoring for students, and to share best practice already in place in the University.

There are numerous good reasons for building in face-to-face time with students, both individually and in small groups. Not least, feedback from students in the National Student Survey confirms that one of the things they most want from higher education is suitable contact with staff.

"I just wanted you to know that I learnt a lot from you during my life in Leeds. I still cannot understand how a teacher can balance everything as you did. You were friendly, helpful, thoughtful, protector and understanding all the time. I just want to thank you again for everything you have done for me."

Acknowledgements

Ten ways to help your tutees

1. Help your tutees to become ready for assessment

This is the sharp end of personal tutoring, not least because most forms of assessment involve winners and losers – and it is very uncomfortable to be a loser. Perhaps the most important attribute of excellent tutors is the ability to be perceived by students as helping them to put their best foot forward in the assessment battle. Even when tutors are going to be doing the assessment themselves, it is helpful for students to feel that everything possible is being done by their tutors to maximise their chances of succeeding at the assessment hurdle. Preparing for assessment should not degenerate into the 'guess what's in the tutor's mind' game – there should be no guesswork involved; students should have a clear idea of what their tutors are looking for.

In particular, it helps when personal tutors strive to help students to make sense of what they have learned, so that they have turned it into their own knowledge and have a sense of ownership of their achievement well before the time when they are required to demonstrate evidence of their achievement of the learning outcomes.

2. Negotiate agreements with tutees

Some call these 'learning contracts', but there's something more positive about the word 'agreement' even when it boils down to a contract. The main advantage of learning agreements is that they help students to take ownership of the need to learn, and that because it is an agreement they feel they have played a part in

working out the timescales involved, deciding what to learn, and how best to go about learning it, and at what level the learning needs to take place. The best ways of making it feel like an agreement to students is to ensure that they see that their tutors have their own parts to play in bringing the agreement to fruition.

3. Help your tutees to make sense of their targets

In particular, help your tutees to see exactly what is meant by the intended learning outcomes. It is all very well to use phrases such as 'demonstrate your understanding of...' but students need to know exactly how they are expected in due course to do this. They need to know what the evidence will look like when they have 'understood' something to the level required, and what standards will be applied to this evidence. They need to understand the contexts in which this evidence will be generated – whether it is exams, coursework, practical work, independent work and so on. If you can help your tutees to see clearly what they are trying to achieve, they are much more likely to succeed in achieving it.

4. Help your tutees to see the importance of becoming better at learning

Study skills are important, not just in the context of helping students to succeed in their present studies, but for life in general. At the heart of lifelong learning are well-honed study skills. Your tutees will continue to need to learn new things far beyond the years when

they are involved in formal study, and the better they are able to take on new learning targets, and work systematically and purposefully towards achieving these targets, the better the quality of their future lives will be. Even when an element of learning has proved unsuccessful, there are usually useful study skills lessons to be gained from the experience. Study skills cannot be directly 'taught' – they are (like just about everything else) learned by doing, practice, trial and error, and experience. As a personal tutor you can help your tutees to respond to the trial and error, and learn productively from each experience.

5. Help your tutees to manage their time

Time management is not only an essential study skill – it is a life skill. Probably the most important single element of time management is getting started on each task. Therefore you can help your tutees to get their learning underway, not least by pointing out that it is human nature to find 'work avoidance tactics' which delay getting started, but which when recognised as such can be addressed head-on. A task that has only been started for five minutes is much more likely to be completed than a task that has not yet been started. Therefore, where possible help by making sure that tasks get started in face-to-face contact time, even if only for those vital minutes that will allow your tutees to go away and continue them in their own time and at their own speed.

6. Help your tutees to set their own (realistic) deadlines

This goes hand-in-hand with formulating learning agreements. For most people, it is human nature to need deadlines. Any editor will confirm how important deadlines are in getting authors to complete articles or books – even when the deadlines are missed for good reasons. If there are no deadlines, many tasks falter in progress. Suggest to your tutees that they set their own deadlines for assignments and revision at least a week or two ahead of necessity. It is a great boost to their confidence to feel ahead of the game – and confidence breeds success.

7. Help your tutees to balance their act

An important addition to good time management is good task management. In other words, help students to prioritise their tasks. This involves making sure that the important ones get done, and the less important ones aren't given too much time. You can help your tutees to work out what exactly are the most important tasks, and to put these at the top of their agenda. You can also help by advising on sensible limits for the important tasks, so that they don't swallow up all of your students' available time and energy, leaving other important tasks unstarted. Help your tutees to see that it can be better to do an hour's worth on each of three tasks than to spend all three hours on one task, especially if all three tasks contribute to the assessment agenda.

8. Help your tutees to identify questions and seek the answers to them

"If I knew what the exam questions were going to be, I could easily prepare for the exam", many students say. But they *can* know what the questions are going to be. "Any important piece of information can simply be regarded as the answer to a question" is a useful way of helping students to think in terms of questions rather than information. Once they know what a question is, they can find out the answer in any of the following ways:

- Look it up in a book or handout

- Look it up on the internet

- Ask other students and see if they know the answer

- Ask other people

- Ask expert witnesses – their tutors.

Encourage students to make question banks of their own. In other words, get them to jot down all the questions which they might some day need to be able to answer, to demonstrate their learning. It is useful to start with the intended learning outcomes, and turn these into long lists of very short, sharp questions, so that students get the message that if they can answer lots of straightforward questions, they can in fact usually answer much more complex questions.

It can be particularly useful to get students to make question banks in small groups, so that the range of questions is better, and to help them to learn from each other's questions. As a personal tutor you may be able to give valuable responses regarding which questions are the really important ones, to help to steer your tutees towards the main agendas of their learning.

9. Help your tutees to become better readers

Not all students come from households where walls are lined with bookshelves. Not all students devour books. Indeed, for many students, reading is not a particularly pleasurable activity, unless they are reading about something about which they are already passionate.

You can help your tutees to realise that they don't have to devour books, but that all that may be needed is to use them successfully to find information from them. In other words, *information retrieval* (whether from books or websites) does not necessarily mean reading everything in sight, but homing in to what's important. This goes back to starting reading with questions in mind. If students read a page of text pre-armed with five questions, they are much more likely to get what is intended out of the page than if they just 'read' it.

Help your tutees to become better at making good use of headings, sub-headings, contents pages and the indexes of books and journals. Help them to read in 'search and retrieve' mode, so they are looking for particular things and noting them down as they find them, rather than simply reading page after page vainly hoping that some of the information there will 'stick'.

10. Help your tutees to get their revision act together

Most students regard revision for tests or exams as a bore. This is all too often because they have previously tackled the job in boring ways. They have tried to 'learn' their subject materials in non-productive ways, and become disillusioned.

A good start is for personal tutors to reinforce that revision is simply about systematically becoming better able to answer questions – that's what exams and tests actually measure. As with anything else, the best way to become better at something is to do it – and do it again – until it becomes second nature. Students who have practised answering a question seven times in a fortnight are very likely indeed to get it right the eighth time – in the test.

Another way you can help your tutees with revision is by alerting them to what *not* to revise. There's no point spending a lot of time and energy on learning something that won't or can't be the basis of a sensible exam or test question. Similarly, anything that isn't directly related to an intended learning outcome is not on the revision agenda – if it were important it would have been there among those intended outcomes.

You can remind your tutees that what is measured by tests and exams isn't what's in their heads – it's usually what comes out of their pens. In other words, it's their evidence of achievement of the intended learning outcomes that is the basis for assessment, and the best revision processes involve purposeful practice at evidencing that achievement.

What exactly is personal tutoring?

Everyone who is involved in tutorial work agrees that there is no clear dividing line between academic and personal tutorials. Academic tutorials may be subject-related, while personal tutorials are normally thought of in terms of development of the 'whole student', but either kind of tutorial is likely to spill over into the other domain. Personal tutorials are usually regarded as one-to-one encounters between a student and a tutor, where the purpose is not to extend or deepen the academic understanding of the subjects being studied, but to support the student's learning in a much broader sense.

The tutor may be one of the lecturers involved in the student's course, or may be a teaching assistant or research assistant with some tutorial duties. Students are often assigned a 'personal tutor' for the duration of a year of their course, or (better) for their entire time at university. These tutors are normally expected to exercise a counselling or advisory role when necessary, with the wide agenda of anything that may be causing concern to their respective students. However, the success of personal tutorial support in higher education is, at best, patchy. Some tutors take it very seriously, get to know their students well, and remain well briefed on the progress of each student. For many students in higher education institutions, however, their personal tutor is just a name.

A result of this situation is that for most students, the majority of personal tutoring happens in the context of the contact they have with academic staff in those teaching-learning situations where the staff-student ratio is low enough for advice and counselling to be available, and that often means in what are intended to be academic tutorials.

There is no agreed definition of a tutorial, as tutorials can fulfil many different roles, including:

- addressing students' motivation, helping to increase their confidence in their abilities to handle the curriculum successfully
- providing students with feedback, from each other as well as from the tutor, helping them to find out more about how their learning is progressing
- giving teaching staff opportunities to find out what problems students may be encountering with the subjects they are learning
- helping students make sense of the concepts they are learning
- allowing students to ask questions which they may not be able to ask in large-group sessions
- providing students with opportunities to learn by doing, practising applying things that have been covered in lectures, handouts and learning packages.

"I want to thank you for your kindness in helping me with my studies."
(Student with mitigation issues)

What do students need?

In a survey of Leeds Met Teacher Fellows, the following list of the most common student concerns emerged, emphasising the need to consider carefully the diversity in our university community.

- Assessment issues: anxieties about poor marks – needing help to improve
- Adapting to life in the UK
- Visa renewal
- Accommodation issues
- Questions about the operation of the UK HE system
- Practical questions about the course
- Trouble reconciling academic needs with the demands of part-time work
- Anxiety about finances
- Tensions encountered in interpersonal dynamics in practice settings
- Choice of course (profession)
- Sickness, missing parts of course – a real issue where students have a set number of hours to complete for registration
- Worries about parents, worries about living away from home
- Difficulties coping with group work
- Relationship issues, for example marital breakdown
- Childcare.

Building on good practice

The internal audit of Leeds Metropolitan University by KPMG (KPMG, 2010) identified several features of excellent practice in the design of personal tutoring, including:

- Students meet their personal tutor at induction, and the personal tutor role is outlined to them, often supported by an explanation in writing
- A personal tutor will usually be a lecturer who teaches the student
- The level of personal tutor contact is considered as part of course planning at Faculty level, and timetabled where appropriate
- The time required for the personal tutor role, and the number of tutor groups per personal tutor, are considered when allocating lecturer time for the year
- Students are able to have access to their personal tutors for non-timetabled meetings if required
- Mechanisms are in place to identify whether a student has insufficient access to a personal tutor, and for the workload of a personal tutor to be reallocated if necessary.

The wider perspective

The diverse backgrounds of today's students mean that the role of personal tutor is more important than ever. As the student population expands and changes, traditional expectations of the tutor's role may no longer be accurate. Harriet Swain published a short piece in *Times Higher Education* in 2008, collecting together views from around the sector, including the following (reproduced by kind permission of *Times Higher Education*):

"Personal tutors should avoid making judgments about students' lives based on their own university experiences. Students' increasingly diverse social, cultural and religious backgrounds mean new pressures. If you are open to that you can get their confidence more quickly. ... It is vital to establish good relations with student services staff. This is especially important when there are issues that you find difficult."

(Annie Grant, Dean of Students, University of East Anglia)

"A good personal tutor is one who listens without judging. The important thing is for students to make their own decisions."

(Wes Streeting, former Vice-President for Education, National Union of Students; NUS President 2008-10)

"Establishing a rapport with your student is essential, but not always easy. You need to be a known face in that first week. Gather all your students together so that they can meet each other at the same time. Then send an e-mail to them at the beginning of every semester welcoming them back and reminding them of your contact details. If you

are part-time, where possible make sure that you are not matched with part-time students or it may be impossible for you to meet. If you have to go on long-term sick leave or are absent for another reason, make sure the students know who else to contact."

(Lindsey Neville, Senior Lecturer in Counselling Psychology, University of Gloucestershire, and editor of *The Personal Tutor's Handbook*)

"You have to know what other things are happening in [your tutees'] lives – what pressures they are under – so you target your advice and suggestions appropriately. And, of course, you need to know where to refer them if problems come up – and having telephone numbers and names to hand rather than just pointing them down a corridor. ... It is no good saying 'if you have problems pop in and see me', because often students with real problems do not ask for help."

(Margo Blythman, Director of Teaching and Learning at the University of the Arts London)

"Students want staff who know and care about them. Students can get a great deal of information from written documents. What they want is what human beings have always wanted: personal contact."

(Paula Hixenbaugh, co-editor of *Personal Tutoring in Higher Education*)

Towards a role specification for personal tutors

David Jaques (1992) describes the role of a personal tutor as follows:

• to be a 'friendly parent' to students who feel lost in the comparative anonymity of higher education

• to act as agent at the interface between the personal and the academic.

The following 'general' and 'specific' responsibilities are adapted from Jaques (1992).

General responsibilities as a personal tutor

• To acquaint yourself with the services that are available within your institution and to understand how the various processes and procedures that students may need to use function

• To respect tutees' rights of confidentiality, to make this clear to them and to get permission from them if you need to speak to others about their difficulties

• To recognise that some students may not get on with you and to accept and facilitate, if necessary, their seeing someone else

• To respect any tutees' right not to seek or accept support or help, even though this might appear to be to their own disadvantage.

Specific responsibilities as a personal tutor

• Provide a personal contact for the student within what might otherwise feel like a large, impersonal institution

• Liaise between the student and course tutors where appropriate

• Offer advice or assistance when it is within your competence

• Recognise when the assistance required is beyond your competence

• Refer students, when necessary, to appropriate sources of specialist help and support

• Help students review and reflect on their own progress and identify ways of improving it

• Maintain an overview of students' progress and help them with any learning problems

• Pick up from students informal feedback on the course

• Help students in making choices regarding courses, modules or options

• Participate in training events about the role of the personal tutor, the counselling service and the problems that students encounter.

An example of a Leeds Met personal tutor specification

The guidance below is derived from one particular example of how the personal tutor role is specified at Leeds Met.

Personal tutors are expected to:

- Have a personal tutor group that they are responsible for and be the first point of contact for their group
- Pro-actively monitor student progress and welfare
- Have a one-hour surgery every week for their group and be available for consultation at other times by appointment
- Have module contact with their tutees in Level 1 semester 1
- Meet students individually and record each meeting and its outcomes or problems on the relevant proforma, keeping completed proformas as a paper record, where necessary showing how appropriate academic and personal support has been identified, actioned and recorded
- Be responsible in years 1 and 2 for student references
- Recommend assignment extensions as necessary
- Summarise student feedback on induction, course, modules, problems, etc and pass to the year tutor
- Deal with another personal tutor's students should the need arise

- Ensure that any student contemplating withdrawal or transfer is counselled and then directed to the course leader *before they leave the course.*

Explaining to students how personal tutoring is intended to work

The Faculty of Business and Law at Leeds Met has provided the following description, written for students, of the role of the personal tutoring scheme, containing guidelines both for students and tutors on what is involved.

Objectives of the personal tutor scheme

- To establish and maintain personal contact with students
- To provide academic guidance and counselling for students
- To encourage the development of students as independent learners
- To provide pastoral care in the academic sense as it affects the learning capabilities of students
- To ensure students are aware of and have access to appropriate expert services where required
- To ensure that confidential help and support is made available to students.

What your personal tutor expects from you:

As a student, you are expected to take responsibility for:

- responding promptly to requests to see your personal tutor

- respecting the specified times at which personal tutors make themselves available to see students (remember they will have other responsibilities and commitments)

- keeping the admin team and your personal tutor informed of any relevant circumstances which may have an effect upon your studies

- making sure you are aware of the way in which appropriate University personnel can be contacted in the event of an emergency outside of office hours

- ensuring that the admin team are updated about any personal detail changes, e.g. term-time address, home address, email address, telephone numbers.

What you can expect from your personal tutor:

Your personal tutor will provide academic counselling and pastoral care in the academic sense as it affects your learning capabilities. This will help to highlight any reasons for academic difficulties at an early stage and identify any support available to help overcome these difficulties.

Personal tutors will monitor and supervise your overall academic progress by:

- liaising with the admin team to arrange regular one-to-one meetings with you to discuss your academic progress and ensure you receive adequate academic guidance

- being aware of circumstances which may inhibit your academic progress

- providing guidance on matters such as electives, changing routes, and University regulations

- monitoring your academic development and offering general study skills advice or, where necessary, referring you to the appropriate service

- promoting the understanding that the University regards students as individuals and encouraging you to accept responsibility for your own learning.

"I have really appreciated the support and advice you have given me over the last year."

Personal tutors will provide pastoral oversight for non-academic problems and advise you on the availability of appropriate assistance offered by the University. This means they will:

- be the academic point of contact within the scheme with whom non-academic problems and difficulties may be discussed in association with the admin team
- respond to your requests for advice on non-academic matters and refer, as necessary, to the appropriate university service those matters outside their expertise.

Your personal tutor may provide advice on the following:

- Academic matters in association with module tutors
- Issues related to careers and/or prospective placements in association with the Faculty Placements Office
- The support services offered within the University in association with the admin team
- University policies and practice.

"I have to tell you, how grateful I am for all that you have done for me. I REALLY REALLY appreciate it, I will always remember your kind gestures, and your going out of the way to help me every single time. I hope you know that I am really obliged for all your kindness."

(Partner of a student whom I helped to find a suitable course to suit her interests, strengths and career plan)

Interacting with students: mapping personal tutor 'interventions'

The following ideas are adapted from Jaques (1992), who breaks down the complex matter of interacting with personal tutees into various kinds of interventions including 'enabling', 'supportive', 'prescriptive', 'informative' and 'confronting', which of course may well overlap and coincide in particular instances. The main characteristics of these various kinds of interventions are explained below, focusing on possible actions by the tutor in each context.

'Enabling' interventions

An enabling intervention seeks to make it possible for the student to learn and develop by self-direction and self-discovery, not only within the context of the tutor–student situation but also beyond it. As a personal tutor, you can:

- give free attention – making eye contact in a supportive and respectful way, demonstrating by your posture and your facial expression that the student has your full and relaxed attention, and avoiding or minimising distractions

- use effective listening behaviours and check for understanding

- use discreet self-disclosure – telling the student something about yourself that helps her/him to see you as a partner in the human predicament

- provide problem-solving structures – getting the student to see a problem from the outside by identifying what the problem really is, generating several possible solutions and choosing the most suitable ones to try out

- assist with analysis of options – help the student to recognise that there is more than one path ahead and that a careful check on the thoughts and feelings involved in taking each option may reap rewards.

'Supportive' interventions

A supportive intervention affirms the worth and value of the students. You can:

- make yourself available – thus demonstrating you care enough to make time and a suitable venue for your meeting with the student

- express care and concern – give verbal and non-verbal indications that you want to understand and have some empathy with the student's feelings

- provide validation – encourage better student self-esteem by adopting a positive, warm and non-judgemental attitude, responding positively to appropriate change and action and avoiding obvious criticism.

'Prescriptive' interventions

A prescriptive intervention is one that explicitly seeks to influence the behaviour of the student, especially (though not exclusively) behaviour that is outside or beyond the tutor-student interaction. With respect to the student's future behaviour you may:

- give advice

- suggest or command a course of action

- request something of the student

- demonstrate how to so something

- rehearse with the student a problem activity, such as presenting a talk, solving a problem, or writing an essay.

'Informative' interventions

An informative intervention may seek to impart new knowledge and information to the student. You may:

- share your knowledge with the student – for example factual, practical or theoretical knowledge about the course, the institution, the choices of module available

- provide information that students require to meet their own individual needs and interests

- offer your own interpretation of the student's present and/or past experience and behaviour.

'Confronting' interventions

A confronting intervention may directly challenge any restrictive attitudes and beliefs or apparent incongruities in what the student may be doing. In order to bring the student face to face with his/her own behaviour, its consequences and possibly the institution's requirements, you can:

- give direct feedback

- interrupt a pattern of behaviour where you want to draw attention to it or to avoid an unproductive process

- hold up a mirror – describe to the student what you see and hear her/him doing

- ask a direct question in order to elicit specific information

- discipline students should they overstep the bounds of rules and regulations, or of reasonable behaviour.

Actions beyond personal tutoring meetings

Jaques recognises that a very significant part of the role of a personal tutor is concerned with actions beyond actual meetings and encounters with students. He suggests that outside meetings with a student you may need, from time to time, to:

- liaise with other staff who are involved with the teaching or organisation of the course

- monitor the progress of the student through the course

- refer – know the most appropriate person to help the student deal with a particular issue and decide how, where and when best to make contact with such a person

- represent – speak on behalf of the student to other staff on issues that affect students on the course

- feed back information derived from the student to other staff on issues that affect students on the course

- act as referee – make reports about the student to other people, such as prospective employers.

"I always appreciate your kindness that helped me to get through such deep water at that time."
(A student whom I helped to find a suitable Creative Writing Master's programme and who has since published her first novel in China)
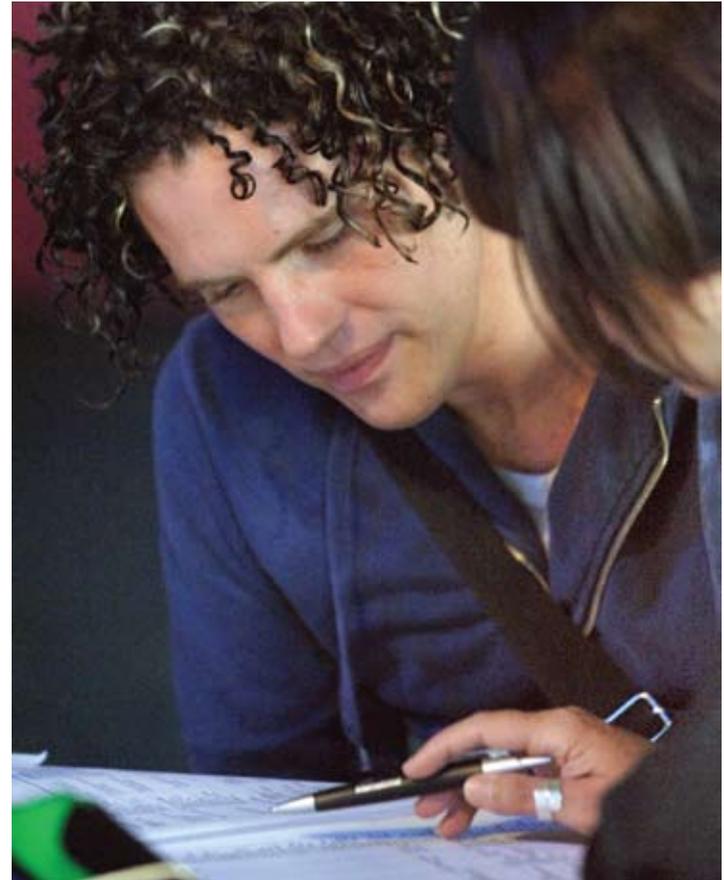
Personal tutoring in practice at Leeds Met

The comments below are drawn from personal tutors at Leeds Met.

What can personal tutors actually do?

- We have group tutorials and one-to-one tutorials. Each student in the department has a one-hour weekly session on their timetable, some of which are group tutorials and some are one-to-one. In addition, each team member has fixed 'appointment times' in their calendar (e.g. two or three different slots over the week) and students know they can make an appointment via reception to meet us if they have a problem or question outside the timetabled times. In the past students used to just email me and arrange to meet me or call in to my office on the off-chance but a procedure agreed across the Faculty required all staff to implement an appointment system instead of more ad *hoc* methods.

- In practice it's a mixture of academic, pastoral and professional (career and employability) work. It begins in induction week with an intensive programme of one-to-one and group meetings, followed by a whole-week residential with the personal tutor and Carnegie Great Outdoors staff in the Lake District. There is a heavy emphasis on team building and identifying personal strengths. Formative and summative assessment is achieved through interviews as part of a Personal Development Planning module (fortnightly session with the personal tutor, alternate weeks with the level leader in the lecture theatre). The

personal tutor then follows each student to Level 2, becoming a work placement tutor too. At Level 3, the personal tutor is also presently the dissertation tutor, but this is something we are looking to change so that alternative perspectives can be provided. Students are encouraged to see their tutor additionally as required.

- Work includes the induction of students into the University and the programme. Then there are regular reviews with students on their development (both University and practice development) and their achievements, recording progress.

- I am the first point of contact for any issue: thus I fulfil a gatekeeper/signposting role as well as initiating interventions (if within my sphere of competence). It depends on the student and the time of year. The role has to be customised depending on students' needs.

- We provide motivational support and reassurance, help students with personal problems, discuss the relevance of applications for mitigation, redirect to counselling department, finance support, learning support when necessary.

"The point is, after our tutorials the day always seemed to go so much better. You made me feel happy inside and confident that no matter what I was doing I could make a difference if I wanted."

What else would you like to be able to do as a personal tutor?

- I should probably be more available, but that would make it impossible to do the rest of my work effectively. Our team has always prided itself on the quality of the relationships we build with our students. I am certain this is at the heart of our consistently high score in the National Student Survey.

- We could perhaps attempt to arrange student support groups, so students struggling with non-academic issues can see that they are not alone.

- If we had better intelligence (for example about students' grades, attendance and overall progress) we could be more effective at making earlier interventions when necessary.

- An open door policy is vital. It can be a five-minute 'chat' on the spur of the moment that can save a student, or otherwise see them walk away from the University.

- It is important to know your limits: you do not have time to be a counsellor and you are not trained as one. You need to know your professional limits and the boundaries of your role, and to make use of every opportunity to talk to other experienced personal tutors to help you know when you need to call in someone who is trained to help students with more serious problems.

Important qualities for a good personal tutor

In a survey of Leeds Met Teacher Fellows, the following qualities were among the most frequently mentioned.

- Knowing about different services across the University in order to help students in the best possible way

- Showing by actions and words a personal interest in students' welfare and a desire to help them to succeed rather than catch them out

- Being a good listener

- Genuinely caring about the students

- Empathy

- Knowing how to ask the right questions

- Approachability

- Accessibility

- Friendly nature, able to gain a good rapport with the students, but able to be firm where necessary

- Knowledge of the subject

- Sensitivity to each individual student (background, intellect, experience)

- Calmly helping the student to keep things in perspective

- Personal awareness of what you can manage (and cope with)
- Helping tutees, right from the first day, to look out for and care about one another and trust you enough to tell you if they are worried about a fellow student
- Convincing tutees that requests for help are genuinely welcomed, otherwise too many students just don't ask
- Experience to spot when someone is clinically depressed, suicidal, or just anxious
- Being non-judgemental.

How did you learn to be a personal tutor?

The following comments from Leeds Met personal tutors show that most learned the role by experience – by doing it. However, it may be helpful for new personal tutors to browse through these comments, not least so that they can be prepared for the developmental nature of the journey towards becoming an experienced and effective personal tutor.

- I just made it up, based on what the students needed, and developed it over time. Now we have a standardised approach across the department and Personal Academic Tutorial meetings. We also put frequently asked questions on X-stream [the Leeds Met Virtual Learning Environment].

- What worked for me was mentoring and advice from experienced colleagues.
- I previously received personal tutor role training as an associate lecturer with the Open University, and have acted as a personal tutor elsewhere. The role builds on many activities undertaken as a mentor of students in practice.
- Through a combination of a lot of years' experience + some mistakes! + reading what has been published on students' concerns and difficulties and expectations. It worries me that many personal tutors have little or even no training for this often challenging role.
- I learned it by osmosis. No-one taught me and I'm not convinced I had any particular role models. Initially I was fortunate that the role was a combination of pastoral and academic coach with a number of clearly defined interventions and checkpoints built into the scheme of work around student progress and wellbeing.
- My previous role in the NHS mentoring 'junior' staff (new graduates) was an advantage. I based much of it on what I myself had wanted to know as a new student, and as an about-to-be graduate.

"Thank you for replying to my emails so promptly, very impressive!"

Identifying barriers to effective personal tutoring

In many contexts, personal tutoring is like coaching. In an internal paper by Paul Ratcliff about 'academic coaching' at Leeds Met (Ratcliff, 2009), four barriers are identified, and the significance of these barriers in the context of personal tutoring is relatively clear.

• **Staying in touch:** Coaches are reporting difficulties in contacting students, particularly those whom they need to talk to about their progression. To maintain confidentiality they are directed not to leave detailed phone messages or use non-secure email (hotmail etc), both of which are the preferred communication medium for the student. The scenario emerges where students are advised to regularly check their secure student email accounts at the start of the academic year and yet little information of consequence is contained on it at that time, and their habits lapse as a result. Unfortunately by the time the coach builds a better picture of those he or she needs to contact and help, these students tend to have stopped checking their email.

• **Willingness to engage:** Not all students need much coaching, but the sad irony is that those who definitely need help and guidance all too often do not engage in this support, and in some cases actively avoid it. While skilled coaches, as will be seen in the cases presented below, make as many opportunities as possible for contact, these can rarely go much beyond the resources they have to hand.

• **First experiences:** Relationships take time to build and rarely go much beyond the first base unless there are incentives in place. For the coach this presents a problem as the natural uncertainties presented by the induction activities are their first contact with their new students, and unlike the module tutor who has the incentive of helping students to pass a module as a reason to maintain a relationship, the coach typically has no such scheme. Students will probably meet the coach informally two or three times before any of the normal course issues are spoken about. Quite naturally, if no problems emerge in these first engagements the student sees the role as unneeded and opts out of attending the sessions.

• **Identification:** Most academic coaches by the very nature of being employed in such roles were successful in their own studies. Additionally they studied in a world where to do a university course was a five- or six-day-a-week commitment and as such it was a big part of their life. In contrast, most of the students who need the most help and support are not like these academic coaches, who were normally high-flyers, making it difficult for some to relate to their coach and for the coach to relate to them. Additionally, university is only a small part of most students' lives today, especially when compared to the coach's experience of being a student.

Getting specialist help

Personal tutors need to know where to direct students, and when tutees may need expert or specifically-tailored help and support. Many personal tutors worry about this aspect of their role. It is important to know when to step back and refer the student to a specialist: professional pressures coupled with a natural desire to help can lead to problems being improperly handled or prolonged and to tutors placing themselves at risk. Tutors also need to maintain a professional distance from their tutees and avoid becoming emotionally involved – for their own protection as well as the student's. As Annie Grant, Dean of Students at the University of East Anglia, commented:

"Effective referral is key. Know your own boundaries and when to refer them to someone else. … It is often possible to talk about a problem without disclosing a student's name or breaking confidentiality. And not everything is automatically confidential. Know what the boundaries of confidentiality are and make them clear to the students early on. … One of the most dangerous things is people who try too hard to help a student and get out of their depth."

(Swain, 2008)

As with many other parts of the job, this too is learned by experience, by talking and networking with other personal tutors, and also by getting to know the most useful channels of help for students with particular needs or problems. And sometimes, of course, all a student really needs is for someone to listen – an important part of the role of a personal tutor. One personal tutor comments:

"I have found it hard to approach the issue of specialist help in some cases where it was needed. Many students really don't want or feel they need to get 'special help'. They just want their tutor to listen. I frequently tell them that they'd be surprised how many of their fellow students experience the same difficulties (in their minds I want them to feel that they are normal and not mad or stupid or weak and useless!) but of course I wouldn't ever say it in that way.

"Whenever I can, I try to explain that previous students have told me a particular service really helped them, and that it's entirely confidential and quite separate from the rest of the staff who teach them, and they will be able to offer much more effective support than I can because I am not an expert."

Here are some of the sources of help and advice that have been used by Leeds Met personal tutors:

- The Students' Union
- NHS Direct
- The walk-in health centre
- The local genitourinary clinic
- The police (for an attempted assault)

- The finance support office (for students who had bursary trouble or loans that didn't appear on time and so on)
- The international students' group (for international students who were lonely)
- Disability support: "My work is full of mistakes even when I check it carefully"
- Counselling: "My grandma has died"/ "I've split up with my girlfriend" and so on
- Careers Service: "Don't know what I want to do so feel aimless and can't choose elective modules"
- Library staff: "I can't find the stuff I need for my assignments, I don't know how to search for things"
- The University chaplain (for a student new to the University with a strong faith who didn't know which church to join)
- 'Skills for Learning' sessions
- Occupational Health
- Family planning
- The International Student Advisor
- Helpzones
- AV loans
- Volunteering Office.

Possible sources of help at Leeds Met are listed on pp. 28-29.

Success stories

Paul Ratcliff's article on academic coaching (Ratcliff, 2009) continues with some success stories, as follows. Most coaches can relate stories of their efforts being rewarded by success. Stories by their very nature are anecdotal, yet have the power to encourage further successes in students and staff alike. Five examples from Paul Ratcliff are outlined below; in each case names are changed. These success stories are followed by two from other sources at Leeds Met. In each case, one or two learning points are appended by the author.

Case 1

John was a senior lecturer whose home was a considerable distance away from the University and this meant his travel arrangements were such as to avoid rush hour traffic. His preferred pattern of working, which complemented his late classes, was for three nights a week staying late until 9.30pm–10pm. His Level 2 coaching group were awkward to catch up with and so he regularly scheduled himself to walk past the foyer they all filed through after they were leaving their last class, being conscious that some students who had been meaning to come and talk to him would see him and either be reminded or engage him in conversation. His technique worked and a few times he managed to bump into students he was concerned about; the relative informality of these first conversations made it easier for further meetings to be arranged.

Learning point: where possible, try to go to where students are at, rather than hoping they'll come and find you.

Case 2

Michael's class group had a core set of students who regularly turned up to his scheduled first-year sessions, and as with most classes where participation is encouraged, some group members were more vocal than others. One such member was a 'loner' named Andrew who was older than the others and was always willing to offer comments and views on the subject being discussed. Normally these were welcome and occasionally had to be limited so that others in the group could have their say. Initially Michael thought it was just age giving Andrew confidence but then noticed that Andrew was the last of the group to pack up and leave the room. By week 3 of the delivery Andrew was actively hanging back and trying to engage Michael in further discussion. Despite Andrew's verboseness, Michael was patient and encouraged him to talk more. Andrew eventually revealed his back-story and why he had come into education later than was typical for his course. He disclosed that he was nervous of being in education. These sessions became regular after-class discussions and as these discussions developed, Michael's classroom contributions lessened and as a result more of the other students could contribute, resulting in his peers finding him more approachable than at the beginning of the module. Eventually Andrew's classmates started to include him in their social life, despite the age difference.

Learning point: there's often a reason behind what seems like strange behaviour.

Case 3

After observing David in staff meetings many would say that he was of the 'old school': deliberately argumentative and rarely shy in putting his opinions forward. For Edward, the Scheme Manager, this was the only mode he'd seen him in. To Edward's surprise David expressed his concerns about Punjip, an overseas student he was coaching. Intrigued, Edward encouraged David to pop by his office later and explain what he knew. Once inside his door David started to reveal the full story of events that had led to his concerns: David had noticed that Punjip did not sit with the other students, come in or leave with them, rarely made eye contact and was nearly always sleepy, if not actually asleep when the lesson was in full flow. He asked Punjip to stay behind for a chat and found that he was living with his uncle and to pay his way was working in his uncle's warehouse every night. He was not paid, and when he protested to his uncle, he was told that the small room and one meal a day were all that he had earned, and if he told his family his uncle would tell his father that he was a poor student. David arranged for him to talk to counsellors and the international office and soon he was found a new place to live and part-time work with reasonable hours; as a result his grades improved and he graduated successfully.

Learning points: there's often much more going on in an individual student's life than we are aware of – and it's often useful to find out about the bigger picture.

Case 4

Nesta saw her coach every week; sitting at the front of the class writing down every word and smiling regularly, she was seen as the ideal pupil. Formative work was always completed and feedback acted upon. Jane, her coach, talked favourably of Nesta to other staff, saying her life would be much easier if all students were like her. It was only when questioned further that Jane started to realise that Nesta was not at all independent of her and rarely thought for herself, life skills that would be much needed after she graduated the following year. Jane started to be much less directional when meeting with Nesta and instead kept asking her opinion. Eventually Nesta started to act a little for herself and to make decisions without too much consultation, and Jane learnt to keep her opinions to herself more. Much later on Jane commented that she and Nesta didn't meet as often as they used to and that despite this Nesta appeared to be coping fine without her. When they did meet she said they chatted much more like colleagues than tutor–student.

Learning points: personal tutoring is about helping students to take charge of their learning. Just acting like 'an ideal student' is not necessarily best for them.

Case 5

John was running a studio recording module where a coach group of 25 students would be broken into four sub-groups, one sub-group for each available studio. After three weeks of the groups settling into their respective projects, two students approached him complaining that the other four students in their sub-group were always standing back and not engaging. After patiently listening he enquired about the previous experience of the two students who had complained, and learnt they themselves were confident with the facilities, having used similar ones in previous courses. Further enquiries with the whole group's academic coach revealed that the other four had never been in an environment like a recording studio, although they were keen to learn. John talked later that week to the two experienced students and explained the benefits of them helping the less experienced members. Although initially resistant, the two tried the approach and soon found they took to the role quickly, and in trying to explain to others found their own understanding grew and the overall project functioned much better. Interestingly, the less experienced members, as their confidence grew, put forward many creative ideas, increasing the level of mutual respect.

Learning points: help students to see how much they can learn by explaining what they already know to peers who don't yet know it. 'Working with others' is a skill highly valued by employers.

Another case study from a Teacher Fellow

Several years ago I was the personal tutor of a student who was mildly homesick at the beginning of the first year. She broke up with her home-based boyfriend within the first six weeks. By Christmas she wasn't sleeping and her attendance was dropping off. Because students had to get undressed in practical classes, my colleagues happened to notice that this student was losing weight and seemed apathetic. She did not disclose on arrival that she had a history of depression. When she went to her GP, he picked up on her worsening depression and she started treatment.

I am not saying that all students who have a series of traumatic, stressful episodes will go on to have a depressive illness but it is important to be aware that students can have mental health problems. It helps if personal tutors pick up on the key issues, take students' problems seriously and refer on to GPs appropriately. I am more aware now.

Learning points: remain vigilant for any signs that a student could be distressed or over-anxious. Human beings (whether students or tutors) are unlikely to say outright that they have a mental health issue – often they don't even realise this themselves, especially if the onset is gradual.

... and a story with a difference!

Some years ago I did A-level English Literature at evening class with a friend. It was two evenings a week with two tutors – one taking the first evening and the second a different evening, both covering different parts of the syllabus. My friend absolutely loathed one of the tutors and refused to attend his classes but went to the 'nice' tutor's classes. So every week on the day after the 'loathed' tutor's class I would cycle over to her house and update her on what he had taught us. The upshot was that we both passed our A-level exams but she got a better grade than I did. I don't know if this tells me I am a better personal tutor than I am a student but it certainly proves the theory that you take in so much more if you need to teach it to someone else!

Learning points: we all learn better from someone we like, and we like different people to different extents. Encourage students to learn from each other, as well as from tutors.

"Thank you doesn't seem a good enough word for what you've done for me. I will never forget the way you have brought out the best of my abilities and gently guided me throughout this year."

References and further reading

Bourner, T. & Barlow, J. (1991) *The Students' Induction Handbook*. London: Kogan Page.

Earwaker, J. (1992) *Helping and Supporting Students*. Oxford: SRHE/ Oxford University Press.

Jaques, D. (1989) *Personal Tutoring*. Oxford: OCSD.

Jaques, D. (1992) *Being a personal tutor: further induction pack* III. Oxford: Oxford Polytechnic.

KPMG (2010) Internal audit report to Leeds Metropolitan University.

Neville, L. (2007) *The Personal Tutor's Handbook*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.

O'Connor, K.M. & Oates, L. (1999) *Academic Tutoring*. SEDA Special No 11. Birmingham: SEDA.

Ratcliff, P. (2009) *Lessons learnt from 10 years of academic coaching in Innovation North*. Internal Faculty paper: Leeds Metropolitan University.

Swain, H. (2008) The Personal Tutor. *Times Higher Education*, 3 January.

Thomas, L. & Hixenburgh, P. (eds) (2006) *Personal Tutoring in Higher Education*. Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham Books.

Wallace, J. (2000) *Supporting and Guiding Students*. In: Fry, H., Ketteridge, S. & Marshall, S. (eds) *A Handbook for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education: Enhancing academic practice*. London: Routledge.

Wheeler, S. & Birtle, J. (1993) *Handbook for Personal Tutors*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Wisker, G., Exley, K., Antoniou, M. & Ridley, P. (2008) *Working One-to-one with Students: Supervising, Coaching, Mentoring, and Personal Tutoring*. London: Routledge.

"Thank you for the reference. I don't know what you put but it definitely did the job! Sorry I have not told you this sooner by email but I wanted to get you a card to show how much I appreciate all your time, advice and personal support over the last three years. It is only because of you that I have achieved my 'impossible' dream of becoming a teacher. I wish you the very best always and your family too."

Resources at Leeds Met

Helpzone
Each campus has a helpzone and the helpzone website is designed to give a complete list of services and facilities within the University and the information you need to make use of them.
0113 812 3115/0113 812 3176
helpzone@leedsmet.ac.uk
helpzone.leedsmet.ac.uk/

A-Z of Student Services
www.leedsmet.ac.uk/helpzone/Student_Services_A_Z.htm

Students' Union Advice
0113 812 8408
su.studentadvice@leedsmet.ac.uk

Financial Advice
Contact the helpzone for support and appointments.
www.leedsmet.ac.uk/financial_advice/

Financial Support
0113 812 6701
sfss@leedsmet.ac.uk
www.leedsmet.ac.uk/helpzone/9387550679FE45FAA17166CB3844AF0F.htm

Careers and Education Guidance
0113 812 5995
careers@leedsmet.ac.uk
www.leedsmet.ac.uk/careers

Jobshop
0113 812 6700 (City Campus), 0113 812 7444 (Headingley Campus)
jobshop.info@leedsmet.ac.uk
www.leedsmet.ac.uk/jobshop

Disability Support
0113 812 8519
disabilityservices@leedsmet.ac.uk
http://disability.leedsmet.ac.uk/main/index.htm?mid=1

Accommodation Office
0113 812 3278
accommodation@leedsmet.ac.uk

Unipol
0113 243 0169
www.unipol.org.uk/leeds/

Libraries
0113 812 3106/ 0113 812 5968 (City Campus)
0113 812 3164/ 0113 812 7467 (Headingley Campus)
infodesk.lc@leedsmet.ac.uk
http://libraryonline.leedsmet.ac.uk/

Skills for Learning
Runs workshops on building study skills – for example essay/report writing, note taking, IT skills, giving presentations – and sessions on personal development such as time management.
0113 8125487 or skillsforlearning@leedsmet.ac.uk
http://skillsforlearning.leedsmet.ac.uk/

International Students
www.leedsmet.ac.uk/internat/advice.htm
International Student Advice: contact the helpzone for support and appointments.
English language support during study: 0113 812 7440
elt@leedsmet.ac.uk
www.leedsmet.ac.uk/international/english/index_ecis.htm

Childcare
0113 812 6701
www.leedsmet.ac.uk/helpzone/6BC48CE457454930A6832CDEADADBE0B.htm

Travel
www.leedsmet.ac.uk/metoffice/estateservices/transport/

Equality & Diversity
Includes information on the Dignity and Respect Network, Mediation Services and Student Equality Groups and Forums.
0113 812 5472
diversity@leedsmet.ac.uk
www.leedsmet.ac.uk/diversity

Counselling
0113 812 5974
counselinfo.students@leedsmet.ac.uk
www.leedsmet.ac.uk/counselling/

Samaritans
08457 909090
www.samaritans.org

NHS Direct
For a list of GPs in Leeds, drop-in centres and medical advice.
0845 4647
www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk
NHS drop-in centre: 0870 818 0003

Chaplaincy
A multi-faith team provides support for all.
0113 812 3184
chaplaincy@leeds.ac.uk
www.leeds.ac.uk/chaplaincy

Student Safety
www.westyorkshire.police.uk

Neighbourhood helpline
0113 343 1064
neighbourhoodhelpline@leedsmet.ac.uk

Citizens Advice Bureau
www.citizensadvice.org.uk

About the author

Phil Race has been, since June 2009, Emeritus Professor at Leeds Metropolitan University, and worked there part-time from 2005 as Visiting Professor: Assessment, Learning and Teaching. He was awarded a National Teaching Fellowship in 2007, and is a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy.

Originally a scientist, for most of his career he has been involved in helping higher education staff to enhance their teaching, re-design their assessment processes and instruments, and develop ways of getting better feedback to more students in less time. Phil continues to travel around the UK (and far beyond) giving keynotes and running workshops on assessment, learning and teaching in further and higher education contexts.

Extracts from many of his publications can be downloaded from his website: **http://phil-race.co.uk**

Contact: **phil@phil-race.co.uk**

Other publications in this series

Other publications available from Leeds Met Press include:

In at the deep end – starting to teach in higher education
By Phil Race
ISBN 978-1-907240-00-3

Hands-on internationalisation
By Leeds Met International Teacher Fellows
ISBN 978-0-9555017-9-1

Cultural inclusivity
By Yasmin Valli, Sally Brown and Phil Race
ISBN 978-0-9560099-2-0

Writing and using good learning outcomes
By David Baume
ISBN 978-0-9560099-5-1

Using peer observation to enhance teaching
By Phil Race with Leeds Met Teacher Fellows
ISBN 978-0-9560099-7-5

Designing First-Year Assessment and Feedback: a guide for university staff
By Ruth Pickford and the Leeds Met First Level Assessment and Feedback project team
ISBN 978-0-9560099-8-2

A student guide to University Assessment
By Ruth Pickford and the Leeds Met First Level Assessment and Feedback project team
ISBN 978-0-9560099-9-9

The Leeds Met Book of Resilience
By Lucia Poole and Ruth Lefever, with Jacqueline Stevenson, Sean Dirrane and Amanda Wilson
ISBN 978-1-907240-04-1

Course design for increased student satisfaction
By David Baume
ISBN 978-1-907240-05-8

Learn with Leeds Met: top tips towards your success
By Phil Race
ISBN 978-1-907240-07-2

Using assessment to support student learning
By Graham Gibbs
ISBN 978-1-907240-06-5

A short guide to oral assessment
By Gordon Joughin
ISBN 978-1-907240-09-6

Ordering
To order printed copies, singly or in bulk, or to enquire about site licences to customise publications for your own institution, please email **publications@leedsmet.ac.uk** or telephone 0113 812 9257.