

# **Principal's Teaching Award project 2008-9: Widening Peer Mentoring Among Postgraduate Tutors Using a Wiki**

## **Final Report February 2010**

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### ***Background to and Aims of the project***

The School of Divinity as a whole is keen to find ways to better support our postgraduate tutors. Tutors themselves had reported that informal sharing of resources, techniques and experience with their peers, particularly those more experienced than themselves, was among the most effective teaching support they received. Yet this support could be sporadic and hard to come by, particularly for postgraduate tutors working at home rather than on campus, or studying part-time, or for those who did not know any other tutors well. This project looked at formalising peer-to-peer mentoring online, using a wiki.

The aims of the project were as follows:

1. To trial formalised peer support as an effective means of enhancing PG tutor support in team-taught tutored courses.
2. To trial use of wikis as suitable means for sharing expertise and resources among PG tutors.
3. To produce a repository of helpful material for tutors in future years.
4. To give postgraduate tutors experience of shared use of an e-learning technology.

### ***Progress of the Project***

1. The cohort

The project involved the postgraduate tutors for the 8 first-year School of Divinity team-taught courses, four in each semester. There were 20 tutors in the first semester, and 18 in the second, of whom 10 had not tutored in the first semester. The tutors were identified as either Mentors (M), meaning they had tutored before on the specific course they were currently tutoring for, or Novices (N), meaning they had not even if they had tutored or other courses in the School or elsewhere.

The tutors on the individual courses broke down as follows:

#### **Semester 1 courses:**

History of Christianity as a World Religion 1A:	2M, 2N
Religion 1A:	2M, 4N
Biblical Studies: An Introduction:	1M, 3N
Christian Ethics: Sources:	1M, 5N

### **Semester 2 courses:**

History of Christianity as a World Religion 1B:	1M, 3N
Religion 1B:	2M, 4N
Christian Theology 1:	2M, 4N
Biblical Texts in Translation:	2N

## 2. Initial training

All students were offered a choice of one of two computing lab-based training sessions before the first semester began, to familiarise themselves with the wiki and to have the project explained. A further session was offered before the second semester. Those who were unable to attend any of these before their course began were trained separately. All tutors were paid for attending the hour's training.

## 3. Ongoing support

Ongoing support, both technical and pastoral, was advertised and available throughout the project.

## 4. The peer mentoring scheme

In the first semester each week, before the tutorial met, by a deadline agreed among the tutors for each course, the mentors posted either advice or resources on the upcoming tutorial. After each tutorial, the new tutors reflected online on how the tutorial had gone.

In the second semester, this formal approach was discontinued and the tutors encouraged to agree among themselves an approach that worked for their group. They could post either before or after the tutorials, or both.

In both semesters the tutors were advised to spend only an hour a week on this (including writing their own posts and reading other peoples), for which they were paid at tutor rates, and were encouraged not to spend any more time than this on the project (as had been agreed with the Director of Postgraduate Studies).

## 5. Feedback

Feedback was sought via focus groups (organised in groups of tutors on the same course) and from online anonymous questionnaires. There were three online questionnaires, at the end of the first semester, beginning of the second semester and end of the second semester. These had little take-up: 4 out of 20 respondents in semester 1, 4 out of 18 at the beginning of semester 2, and 3 out of 38 at the end of the project.

The focus groups at the end of each semester were better attended and more informative: 14 attended in the first semester, 10 in the second. The findings of the

questionnaires were, moreover, more or less exactly in line with those of the focus groups, so the online questionnaire statistics are not given separately here; the detailed focus group findings are included as Appendix A.

### ***Outcomes I: Project Findings***

The main finding was that each group used the wiki in a different way, both physically and pedagogically. Some groups produced one long page, others had a page per week; some used the comments button, others wrote directly on the wiki page. Some reflected on the content of each seminar; others on the practicalities of their particular course. The larger groups found the wiki most helpful as a means of communication with one another; the smaller groups saw it more as a repository of valuable information for future years. All tutors participated to some degree, but the amount written dropped considerably during the year, especially in the second semester. There were few difficulties reported with the technology, and little use was made of the pastoral or IT support.

#### **Positive features reported by the PG tutor participants:**

- Groups of tutors that were larger and disconnected (not working in the same labs, or working at home) found the networking aspect particularly helpful: the wiki was deemed to be an effective means of passing on information and sharing resources
- Some used the wiki to get background information on the mechanics of the course- when to pick up essays to mark etc.
- Novices, on the whole, felt supported
- Some mentors recognised that the wiki would have been useful when they were new tutors
- The project built up a sense of community among tutors
- The project gave tutors a feeling of being more recognised and valued
- Some groups of experienced tutors bonded in the common project of producing a useful resource for future novice tutors

#### **More negative features observed:**

- Some groups (especially those working side by side in the same computing labs!) felt face-to-face informal support would be better
- Some individuals didn't see any point in the project for them – they had wide experience of teaching anyway and felt no need to bond with a group
- Some mentors felt they were pressurised by the novices to give a lot every week, without feeling they were getting much back, while some novices wanted more support than the mentors were willing to give
- Some found the mentor/novice division unhelpful in not addressing the 'halfway house' of those who had been teaching assistants elsewhere
- There was little cross-over between the subject areas – groups didn't look at what the other courses were doing

- Some tutors felt the weekly wiki write-up became just an extra chore/burden – one more pressure on their time
- There was little evidence of the tutors reflecting on their own tutoring (possibly because the wiki was felt to be too public)

## ***Outcomes II: The aims of the project realised***

### 1. Trialling formalised peer support

The project found that an opportunity for formalised peer support was welcomed by many, though not all, of the tutors. However, the tutors' needs were very diverse, as was their ability to meet one another's needs. Identifying 'novices' and 'mentors' within each group had advantages and disadvantages. Some really felt like novices and wanted all the support they could get; others felt the term was patronising, as they had some expertise already, or felt the scheme introduced a false division into the group, that worked against team bonding. Some mentors, meanwhile, effectively built up an extra layer of teaching skill and experience in supporting their peers, which they have been able to put to use since. (In the second semester, the groups were encouraged to abandon the mentor/novice idea if they so wanted, which most did.)

### 2. Wikis as a suitable context for peer-to-peer support

The perceived usefulness of the wiki, not surprisingly, depended very much on the tutors' normal opportunities for face-to-face interaction. The Biblical Studies tutors were particularly well bonded already, since they all worked in the same computing labs every day; the only use they found for the wiki was to build up a resource for future tutors. The Church History tutors used it in a similar way, although they also enjoyed the opportunity to report how the tutorials had gone. The larger groups, such as Christian Ethics, and Religion 1, felt it helped them communicate as a group in a way which would have been impossible otherwise. The ease of uploading documents onto the wiki was also appreciated, as tutors could easily pass on resources they had made for themselves in the past.

### 3. A repository of helpful material for tutors in future years.

Some of the groups put a lot of work into this aspect of the project in particular. The wiki was made available to this year's tutors as a resource.

### 4. Giving postgraduate tutors experience of shared use of an e-learning technology.

We expect that tutors will find this most useful when they come to apply for jobs and are writing up their teaching experience.

## ***Outcomes III: Dissemination***

The findings of the project were presented formally on three occasions:

University of Edinburgh Teaching and Learning Forum, May 12, 2009

Presentation available at:

<http://www.docs.hss.ed.ac.uk/divinity/About%20the%20school/Elearning/Widening%20peer%20mentoring%20presentation.pdf>

ALT-C conference 'In Dreams Begins Responsibilities', Manchester, September 8-10, 2009

Presentation available at:

<http://www.docs.hss.ed.ac.uk/divinity/About%20the%20school/Elearning/In%20dreams%20paper.pdf>

The Shock of the Old Digital conference, Oxford 2009: Digital Literacy: the role of new media in the HE curriculum

Poster available at:

<http://www.docs.hss.ed.ac.uk/divinity/About%20the%20school/Elearning/Widening%20peer%20mentoring%20poster.pdf>

### ***Outcomes IV: Immediate Benefits of the Project and Future Plans***

1. The course-specific repository of materials produced during the project has been made available to this year's Divinity PG tutors.
2. One of the most experienced and successful 'mentors' was employed on the basis of his excellent work on the wiki to co-produce a general PG tutoring handbook for School of Divinity tutors, in conjunction with Dr Steve Sutcliffe, the Director of Undergraduate Studies and Dr Jessie Paterson (joint PI on this project).
3. The findings of the project concerning the training needs of Divinity PG tutors have contributed to a general overhaul of our PG tutor training provision with the introduction of two annual training sessions for all tutors..
4. Stronger networks can clearly be seen among the PG tutor cohort who took part in the project.
5. The findings of the project are feeding into current longer-term School discussions about the future of postgraduate tutoring in the light of the current financial situation. This project has helped foreground the need for training, mentoring and support should we move to a position where much PG tutoring is done in the context of career-building scholarships. The experience of this project will contribute to the search for creative and effective ways of supporting our PG tutors in this and other contexts.
6. We expect to take this project forward in the School (and, we hope, the University) in a number of ways which are still emerging. Our future plans include an article in the HEA journal *Discourse* which will include a report on the wiki project in the context of a larger study of PG tutor support and training.

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# **Appendix A Principal's Teaching Award project 2008-9: Widening Peer Mentoring Among Postgraduate Tutors Using a Wiki**

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### **Appendix A: Focus Group Feedback by Course Tutor Group**

#### **Religion 1A (6 tutors; 5 attended)**

1. IT issues.

Some people reported that the site was not available when they wanted it.

2. Likes.

This group found the idea of the mentor really helpful; [one student] in particular had been fantastic, and the new tutors had really appreciated his advice. The wiki had worked like a helpful network of the very disparate people who teach on Religion 1A. It was also a good way of sharing experiences, so that one would realise the experience of a number of the students dropping out before the end was quite usual. The mentor gave one an idea beforehand of things to think about before the tutorial.

3. Dislikes

The grades page- counting the lines was not easy and it was a shame they didn't do the adding up for you. The network sometimes had access problems.

4. Mentor/novice idea- did it work?

The 2 'old hands' had agreed to split the burden of making substantial comments different weeks. Mentors felt they needed a bit more encouragement to keep up the good work, and could have used more feedback on whether their advice was helpful- sometimes their advice felt like it was vanishing into a vacuum.

5. What would they like to do differently?

Not have the grades page.

6. Worth doing without pay? Yes

#### **Christian Ethics: Sources (6 tutors; 4 attended)**

1. IT issues.

No problems.

## 2. Likes.

Good to have the mentor give tips. CE tutors exchanged info on the wiki that needed to be exchanged, e.g. managing size of tutorial groups, essays etc. (This could have been done by email, but the wiki was a good place to do it.) Everything related to the tutorial was in one place. It was easy to share helpful guides, documents etc. It was very helpful to have weekly advice. But the after-tutorial comments were quite task-oriented [I couldn't figure out if this was a like or a dislike!- SP]

## 3. Dislikes

Exchange of ideas useful but limited & a bit stilted- no development in the level of discussion was in evidence. It was also hard for CE because there was only 1 mentor, so there was no 'conversation' before the tutorial. The sharing practicalities side of the wiki was more useful than the week-to-week discussion.

## 4. Mentor/novice idea- did it work?

More or less- it was quite hard on the one mentor in this class. The novices would have liked more help on what are the important areas to focus on in the readings.

## 5. What would they like to do differently?

It might be worth having a 'general' page as well as the week to week pages, so more general questions could be asked.

## 6. Worth doing without pay?

Probably not- at least not every week. The CE tutors felt they were already quite overburdened with essays, tutorial sheets, attendance, reading etc. Occasionally they didn't post even when it was paid, so without any extra money it would probably not be at the top of the list! However, it was felt the wiki was very useful as a forum for discussion/information exchange.

## **History of Christianity as a World Religion 1A (4 tutors; 3 attended)**

### 1. IT issues.

Mac problems with attendance sheets but IT easy in general- sometimes the page was not available, and there were problems with posting a picture.

### 2. Likes.

Simple to use; would be good for inexperienced tutors (all tutors on this course had taught before in other contexts); the wiki did make you reflect; it was very helpful to have a written record, and the broader survey of the material was very helpful.

### 3. Dislikes

Because the tutorial was Friday afternoon, those with no at-home online access would not be able to post until the Monday. The grade-book.

4. Mentor/novice idea- did it work?

Not really in this group, as it didn't take other teaching experience into account; it would have been better for everyone to chip in at once. Real value will be for next round of tutors.

5. What would they like to do differently?

All post at the same time.

6. Worth doing without pay?

Maybe it would even be better without the money, as people didn't have something new to say every week, and it might be better doing it only sometimes. But writing up does dovetail with the tutorial preparation.

### **Biblical Studies: An Introduction (4 tutors; 2 attended)**

1. IT issues.

At one point the page was reformatted and a lot of content was [or seemed to be] lost, which was discouraging.

2. Likes.

The real value of the info on the wiki would be for the next round of new tutors.

3. Dislikes

The way the BS discussion evolved, with one long list of comments providing a running commentary throughout the term, was not necessarily a very helpful way of doing the wiki, as it was hard to read through and see if there was anything new.

4. Mentor/novice idea- did it work?

Not really- all the tutors involved knew each other well, and found it easier just talking face to face.

5. What would they like to do differently?

Notification of updates would be helpful

6. Worth doing without pay?

Probably not.