
Chapter 7

Supporting and Advising Students

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INTRODUCTION

For most demonstrators 'supporting and advising students' constitutes the main substance of their work – what they informally and continuously do as practical classes proceed. For tutors, on the other hand, who are characteristically concerned with teaching groups of students, the provision of support and advice is more of a supplementary – and not necessarily anticipated – activity. Accordingly, this chapter is mainly intended for tutors, although demonstrators will doubtless find aspects of direct interest to them too.

There are several reasons why as a part-time teacher you are likely to get involved in supporting and advising students – whether during class time or on a more individual basis.

- Tutorial teaching is intended to be interactive and entails helping students explore their understanding and consolidate their mastery, not just of the course content, but also of the skills required to carry out the tasks appropriate to particular academic disciplines.
- First year undergraduates are finding their feet in an unfamiliar environment. They may take some time to appreciate university and departmental procedures, or what is expected of them as learners and how they should go about studying.
- Tutorials and practical classes provide points of regular contact between teaching staff and students, and students often perceive tutors or demonstrators as particularly approachable and able to be of assistance.

The contexts within which teachers in different departments work vary in a number of respects – for example, in how well documented the course is, whether tutorials and practicals are expected to follow a set pattern, and the students' attitudes and

competencies. These departmental differences, combined with variations in teaching styles and preferences, will clearly affect the approach any one part-time teacher takes to supporting and advising students.

What is certain is that tutors and demonstrators are much better placed to provide guidance than they sometimes appreciate. They have a grasp of the key concepts and basic skills in their discipline, and will have accumulated, though not necessarily consciously, a store of useful information both about the subject and about studying. It is true that their own experiences as academically successful students may be rather different from some of the people they are now teaching and which may make them hesitant to offer advice. Nor will they want to be prescriptive about specific approaches to learning and study methods, since individuals need to develop systems suited to their own aspirations and ways of working. But tutors and demonstrators usually do have a better idea than many undergraduates how to avoid getting into difficulties, to cope with those that arise, to seek further information or to access additional resources.

More problematic for part-time teachers, whose priority commitments lie elsewhere, is setting fair and sensible limits on what assistance is given and how much time it takes up. Establishing and maintaining an appropriate balance is particularly hard for those who are new to the job or who especially enjoy helping students. While the demands of students for attention tend to fluctuate over the course of the academic year, according to the pressures exerted by coursework, tests and exams for example, other kinds of difficulties can be around at any time.¹ Moreover, teachers sometimes have to be pro-active and explicitly encourage students to consult with them, because of the general reluctance of students to impose. But

if students' needs are potentially open-ended, tutors' and demonstrators' responsibilities are not, and do not extend to trying to meet every eventuality. There are many other staff and services within the university, as well as fellow students, who can often be more appropriate sources of advice and support.

The rest of this chapter provides some ideas about:

- what can be done, within the tutorial setting in particular, to make things clearer for students and thereby assist their progress as learners (see chapter 5 for the demonstrator's role in the practical setting);
- how tutors and demonstrators can work with students and give guidance in one-to-one consultations.

MAKING THINGS CLEARER

Once at university, undergraduates take on a new responsibility for managing their own studying. Whilst there are lectures and tutorials, assigned work and library resources to help them, whether they grasp the opportunities and realise their potential depends on their motivation, previous experience and how readily they develop strategies for coping with the requirements of a different environment. To succeed, students also need to be cued into the demands and expectations of particular subjects. This more specific orientation might concern, for example, the conventions for organising and presenting work and can be done partly through course documentation, but not entirely. Accordingly tutors are likely to lighten their consultation load if they create opportunities in tutorials (whether directly or whilst focusing on other areas of work) for encouraging students' appreciation of what they should be trying to achieve and the means whereby progress can be made. What follows are some suggestions about the general and the more specific aspects of supporting students in gearing themselves up for effective learning.

The Demands of Academic Study

The *general* aspect involves students firstly, in recognising that academic work is meant to be intellectually challenging and, secondly, having access to an appropriate repertoire of study strategies and skills.

Stressing the need for real effort and commitment, coupled with indicating ways in which over time academic tasks can be mastered, has several

beneficial effects. If uncertainty about how best to proceed is accepted by students as normal rather than exceptional, they will be more inclined to target and tackle study problems rather than attribute them to their own lack of ability. They may also adopt more realistic time scales for improving their knowledge and skills, rather than seeking magic-bullet solutions. It is the case that while the demands of managing a new personal and social life may on occasions interfere with students' academic progress, most quickly recover their equilibrium.

Guidance materials. Study skills guides abound: most book shops keep a selection in stock, and they are to be found in many libraries too. Chapter 12, *Sources and Resources*, lists some recommended titles which may well be available in your own institution. By dipping into these publications students can be helped to develop productive ways of going about their academic work. But if students are struggling with their studies, they can easily become overwhelmed by reading study skills manuals cover-to-cover or misled by thinking there are sets of fail-safe rules to follow. Clearly if tutors are able to look through some of these guides themselves, it will both stimulate their own thoughts about effective studying and make it easier to point students in suitable directions.

Workshops. Another possibility is for students to attend any study skills workshops that may be offered within the university – on such topics as effective reading, making the most of tutorials, note-taking, writing essays or preparing for exams.

Tips and hints. Although general purpose study skills guides and workshops are valuable resources, they are not geared to delivering finely grained guidance, and research studies confirm the limited value of study skills advice isolated from specific subject or course settings. It is therefore worth tutors considering what kinds of guidance would be most helpful to their students. A useful starting-point is the list of handy hints given in *figure 1*, provided care is taken by tutors to adapt the list to their students' particular needs.

*To what extent would the handy hints given in figure 1 be appropriate advice for **your** students? Which of these hints would you want to modify, or perhaps leave out altogether? And what new hints would it be important to add?*

EFFECTIVE STUDYING – HANDY HINTS?

- Split large and challenging academic tasks into more manageable chunks.
- Plan backwards from deadlines, so that you know when as well as what you need to get done.
- Be realistic about how much you can achieve and build in some flexibility.
- Schedule in recreation time, take breaks and know when it is okay not to be working.
- Think about when and where you work best, and allocate prime tasks to prime time.
- Give yourself rewards for tasks completed rather than for time spent.
- Keep an appropriate balance between work, other commitments and play.
- Develop a sense of what proportion of time and effort to give to various parts of a task.
- Engage in active debate with the materials you are studying.
- Be systematic in the organisation of lecture and other notes, and consolidate materials.
- Allow sufficient time to critically review and edit work produced for assessment.
- Become proficient in information, library, computer, numeric, linguistic or any other skills which are going to be useful to you.

Figure 1

The tutorial group. Finally, bear in mind that the tutorial itself is also an excellent setting for exploring study strategies and skills. Students can increase their appreciation of how they can support and learn from one another by, for example, sharing their varied approaches to similar academic tasks, working together on joint presentations, or giving feedback. Tutors, too, can comment within the group on common strengths and weaknesses in students' oral and written work.

Procedures and Requirements

Alongside the general demands of academic study are the more specific procedures, expectations, and requirements associated with a particular course. In thinking about what guidance students might need, a first step is for tutors to become well-acquainted with the course themselves. You might do this by, for example:

- getting hold of and reading the course documentation – course booklet, handouts,

essay lists, and so on, so that you know what is available in written form to students (who won't always be as thorough);

- finding out from the course leader and other tutors about departmental practices and conventions, any changes made to course content or process, how tutorials fit with the rest of the course, and what guidance is given for their conduct;
- taking a good look at and arranging for access to any set or recommended books for the course, checking out library holdings of books, periodicals and past exam papers;
- clarifying with course staff anything you are unsure about or mystified by, regarding either your own responsibilities or what students are supposed to do;
- making sure you know who can be relied on to provide additional information as required – tutors need their own support networks securely in place too!

You can then consider what needs to be communicated to students at appropriate points in the tutorial sequence, which might involve either reminding them of written information or providing it anew. Below are some of the possibilities, which you could adapt and add to with suggestions of your own:

- requirements governing tutorial attendance, how and when to notify a tutor of unavoidable absence, and guidelines for tutors contacting personal tutors;
- expectations of the amount of time and effort students should put into preparing for tutorials and how they can get the most out of participating;
- course expectations for the presentation and submission of written work, and extension policies and procedures;
- the circumstances in which students should make contact with a tutor and how to do this – e.g. buttonholing the tutor before or after a tutorial, leaving a note in the tutor's pigeonhole, calling by at a set time, phoning or using e-mail.

ADVISING STUDENTS ONE-TO-ONE

Despite the efforts made in classes to prevent difficulties arising, students will still sometimes present themselves or otherwise come to a teacher's attention, and need to be dealt with individually.

It may be simply a matter of giving students the right information, getting them to think through the repercussions of their own actions, offering reassurance or guiding them in an appropriate direction. But some students may have difficulty in pinpointing what is bothering them or going wrong, since they often lack a framework or vocabulary for thinking about and discussing their studying. They may need diagnostic help: to identify or disentangle problems, to put these in perspective, and to decide what is most important to try and sort out first. They may also need help in searching out their positive assets – those strengths, achievements and existing skills on which they can build.

Diagnostic help initially involves listening attentively and acting very much as a sounding board. The aim is to appreciate more readily the student's own concerns and to avoid giving a stock response. If a student finds it hard to articulate a problem, he or she will need encouragement to say more about how they go about studying or whatever is the issue. Starting with questions which focus on *who*, *what*, *when*, *where* and *how* tends to be a more productive way of discovering what is happening, rather than the kind of *why* questions that can make someone feel put on the spot. By encouraging students to separate out the facts from surrounding perceptions and feelings, they can be helped to reassess the nature of their difficulties and, hopefully, cut them down to size.

In circumstances where improving matters is less straightforward and not amenable to speedy resolution, the tutor or demonstrator should aim:

- to instil confidence without promising an elusive quick-fix;
- to offer support, but not open-ended assistance;
- to clarify with the student their respective roles in tackling the problem(s).

The student has to shoulder the major responsibility for change, but can be greatly helped to appreciate where the difficulties lie, how best to move forwards, what resources can be drawn upon, and when reasonable progress has been made. Students who have put a determined effort into improving their academic work sometimes find it hard to gauge when enough is enough, and will need to be cautioned about making demands upon themselves which are unrealistically high.

In some cases, however, it will become evident that a matter lies outside the responsibility or the competence of a teacher to deal with, and considering whether to refer a student to someone else is as much in the student's as the teacher's interest.² Students may need to be referred to other academic staff (e.g. the course leader, other lecturers or the personal tutor) or to support services (e.g. counselling and advice services run by the university or student bodies).

CONFIDENTIALITY

Alongside setting limits on the extent of their involvement, part-time teachers – like their full-time counterparts – need to be aware of the thorny issue of confidentiality. As a general rule students' privacy must be respected, and considerable care taken to keep confidences. When it is felt that others ought to be consulted or alerted to a student's difficulties, the teacher should inform the student and get his or her agreement before proceeding further. Another aspect of protecting students' interests and maintaining a professional stance is to avoid getting too friendly with students or gossiping and grousing, which can be divisive and unsettling for all concerned. It is unwise for tutors or demonstrators to get drawn into discussions about individual members of staff or to be other than as supportive as they can about the course and their department.

However, when an issue does arise that needs bringing to someone else's attention, such as a difficulty with the course or the department which the students generally are experiencing, there need be no inhibitions about broaching it, tactfully but assertively. For tutors and demonstrators are a vital two-way bridge between the undergraduate students and the academic staff involved in a course.

REFERENCES

1. For a good indication of the main areas within which students may benefit from assistance, see Race, P. and Brown, S. (1993) *500 Tips for Tutors*. London: Kogan Page. The section headings are General Study Skills, Starting Off and Working Together, Lectures and Written Work, Learning Resources, Various Kinds of Assessment, Life Skills.
2. For a helpful discussion of role boundaries and when to decide to refer students, see Earwaker, J. (1992). *Helping and Supporting Students*. Milton Keynes: Society for Research in Higher Education & Open University Press, pp. 78-85.