Mitchell, C. (2007). A + B = 1:1, formula required? Reflections on learning development and one-to-one teaching from a new learning development tutor. In C. Fraser & L. Ayo (Eds.), *Anchoring our practice: Perspectives, partnerships, projections: Refereed proceedings of the 2006 Association of Tertiary Learning Advisors of Aotearoa New Zealand Conference.* (pp. 56-63). Auckland: ATLAANZ.
ISBN: 978-0-9582889-0-3

A + B = 1:1, formula required? Reflections on learning development and one-to-one teaching from a new learning development tutor.

Catherine Mitchell
Unitec
New Zealand

Abstract

This paper provides some reflections on my first year of practice in learning development. It takes the form of a personal narrative interwoven with a review of literature from this field of study and culminates in a number of recommendations for introducing new practitioners to learning development work. From the outset of my time as a learning development tutor, I have been met with a wide range of new and challenging situations and I was concerned that my teaching should be consistent with, and to the same standard as, other more experienced learning development practitioners. I sought a formula or prescription that could guide my one-to-one teaching in particular. As kind and willing to assist me as my colleagues were, I found them strangely disinterested in providing me with this formula! What has become apparent to me over the last year is that a student-centred approach that recognises each student's specific learning challenges and allows for a tutor to engage his or her own personal teaching style and professional judgment may be more important than consistency of approach.

The role of a learning development tutor is complex (Bartlett, 2005) and often misunderstood by those outside the field (Devlin, 1995). Those entering the learning development arena come from a variety of different educational backgrounds and frequently enter without specific learning development qualifications (Percy & Stirling, 2004; Sherpa, 2000). The highly variable dynamics and processes of one-to-one consultations represent one area that can be challenging to the new learning development tutor. This paper seeks to consider one-to-one teaching from the perspective of someone new to the learning development field and provides a short narrative exploration of my experiences as a learning development 'neophyte'. While more scientific approaches to research in the learning development field are important, the use of personal narrative as a research method has its strengths for thinking about the complex processes of induction to one-to-one learning development practice. Writers such as Holman Jones (2005) see personal text as a form of critical intervention in the social, cultural and political realms. She believes that "looking at the world from a specific, perspectival, and limited vantage point can tell, teach and put people in motion" (p.763). It is hoped that the recommendations included in this paper will be valuable for the induction of new learning development tutors.

One of the most significant features of one-to-one work is the conversation about learning that takes place. Many authors have spoken about the importance of conversation in learning development. Varvara Richards, in her keynote speech at the 2003 ATLAANZ conference observes that "whether it is concerned with syntax or calculus, in whatever discipline at whatever level… our main mode of teaching is through conversation". Murphy and Sherwood (2003) also point out that tutoring "is collaborative" and "grounded in interpersonal transactions" (p.1). This aspect of learning development practice, that is, the ability to work closely with students and engage them in conversations, is part of what attracted me to a learning development role in the first place.

Indeed, my journey into learning development began about two years ago with a series of conversations with two remarkable women. Both women possessed a significant breadth of experience in tertiary teaching and shared their knowledge with me in numerous generous ways. In our conversations I talked about my love of learning, my desire to work closely with students (kanohi ki te kanohi) and my desire to work in a field where I could help (awhi) others in a tertiary education setting. I expressed particular interest in working with students coming from non-traditional backgrounds similar to mine. Both of these women, in different ways suggested tutoring, foundation studies work and importantly for me, learning development work. It was a life-changing suggestion because, prior to this, I had only a limited awareness of the student learning centre at the university where I was working and like many others in the academy, did not fully understand what was involved in a learning development role (Devlin, 1995).

Through my friends' coaching, mentoring and support I began to seek out a position in learning development. This led me to Te Tari Awhina at Unitec (Unitec is an Institute of Technology located in Central Auckland, New Zealand. It has a dual sector focus and provides degree-level programmes and vocational training). Te Tari Awhina, like many other learning centres, provides a range of academic support services to students. Tutors teach a variety of workshops (both generic and course-specific); provide a drop-in service and online resources, in addition to one-to-one consultations. Tutors at Te Tari Awhina do not teach course content, but work with students to develop their academic skills in a variety of areas such as academic writing, referencing and critical thinking.

In terms of staff time, a significant part of the work of a Te Tari Awhina tutor is made up of one-to-one consultations. One-to-one sessions can be 25 or 50 minutes in length and can be focused on a variety of academic skills or literacies. In most cases, students make bookings with the Te Tari Awhina administrator before meeting with a tutor.

As I undertook my first one-to-one sessions I realised how rich and diverse my role would be. It also became very clear that learning development work demanded a significant array of skills and competencies. This is particularly true in the one-to-one context as, in the normal course, a tutor does not see a student's assignment before meeting with them and therefore needs to be able to make decisions quickly about the best way to work with the student and their writing. While I brought with me some experience of teaching in this way, I was concerned about how to undertake these teaching sessions in a learning development context.

My colleagues offered me their time and support and as the first days and weeks went by I began to seek specific guidance in how to approach my one-to-one teaching. My colleagues spoke about the values and philosophies they thought were particularly important and I was gradually acculturated into my role. However, it became clear that they would not give me a formula or blueprint for this kind of teaching.

I became concerned about a number of aspects of my one-to-one teaching and looked for greater direction. I was particularly concerned about the difficulties I was experiencing in finding language to structure a session. I was unsure about where boundaries lay in terms of the support I was providing to a student and wondered whether I was providing too much or too little help. I was also unsure about what was common practice in our centre, for example I wanted to know if it was acceptable to consult with another tutor during a one-to-one consultation (with the student's permission). I questioned whether, if I found a one-to-one session difficult, it was because I was doing something wrong, or because there were clear challenges in working with a particular student? I also wanted to know whether I was providing a similar standard of service to that provided by other more experienced tutors. Of course, I asked questions about some of these issues. However, sometimes I did not feel as though I could ask certain questions for fear of exposing my ignorance, or I was not sure exactly what my questions were.

Ideally, one-to-one teaching as part of learning development practice should be located in the theoretical landscape of learning development. My engagement with this literature is a retrospective one, made more difficult by the fact that, as Percy and Stirling (2004) claim, "the foundational principles informing LAS expertise are by no means apparent to a newcomer to the field" (p. 53). Olliver-Richardson and Bowker (2003) similarly note that a significant issue facing a new learning advisor is an apparent lack of comprehensive literature that discusses one-to-one teaching pedagogy or provides practical strategies for one-to-one teaching. This leads a new learning development tutor to wonder if one-to-one teaching is something that is straightforward, or is something one should be able to do intuitively. However, Grasha (2002) is of the view that rather than being something simple, "one-to-one teaching involves close and professionally personal relations which are complex" (p. 139) and this complexity has contributed to a lack of literature on this subject. He goes on to identify up to ten roles a one-to-one teacher can play in a session including that of a "prescriptive advisor; questioner, mini-lecturer, coach, role model, active listener, discussion facilitator consultant, resource person and provider of feedback" (p.141).

As I reflected on my initial reactions to my first one-to-one sessions it became clear to me that a prescriptive set of rules would not fit well with the work of a learning development tutor. As Silverman and Casazza (2000) state, "learning is best experienced in settings that acknowledge the uniqueness of individuals" (p. xi). In other words, learning development is student-focused and the approach taken when working with a student is shaped by the individual's situation, personality and needs.

In addition, a detailed set of prescriptive approaches or processes does not allow for a tutor's professional judgement or personal teaching style. Biggs (1999) notes when discussing tertiary teaching, "there is no one single all purpose best method of teaching" (p. 2). He is of the view that teachers have to adjust their methods to suit the particular subject they are teaching, the resources they have available and their own individual strengths and weaknesses.

Moreover, some of the literature that does address approaches to one-to-one teaching can seem contradictory. On the one hand, writers such as Brooks (2003) advocate for a hands-off approach by tutors. Brooks notes that tutors should not be editors and rather, should encourage the student to own their paper and "take full responsibility for it" (p.170). However, others such as Shamoon and Burns (2003) take the view that these student-centred, non-directive practices can become orthodoxy and that directive tutoring is often an effective approach. Obviously, these viewpoints reflect an ongoing debate within the learning development field on how student learning can best be facilitated, however, for a new tutor they can add further complexity to what is an already complex issue.

Over the course of my first year of practice, I have conducted many one-to-one sessions and learned a lot from the students I have worked with. I also had a number of conversations with my colleagues about my practice. These conversations led me to reflect on my first year in learning development and identify what was helpful in guiding my development and what I think I could have benefited from. Drawing on this experience, I have some suggestions to offer about how to support a new learning development tutor and to promote their one-to-one teaching skills. These suggestions are intended to be practical and by that I mean they are things that could be done without large inputs of staff time or other resources.

Firstly, I suggest that a resource folder be given to a new staff member containing key handouts organised by learning development subjects such as academic writing and exam skills. This means handouts are easy to find and peruse and I found this was immensely useful for me when I first began. In addition, I believe providing a new learning development tutor with a list of questions that are often used in one-to-one sessions could be very useful. Using questions in the one-to-one context is important for the engagement of a learner and a new tutor may struggle with finding appropriate questions. Another addition to a resource folder could be a list of carefully selected readings about learning development practice and one-to-one teaching. For example, I found the piece '*Learning to talk one-to-one 101',* (Olliver-Richardson & Bowker, 2003) written from the perspective of new

learning development tutors to be particularly worthwhile and would include it on a reading list for new tutors.

Another suggestion to help a new learning development tutor would be to ask the administrator, where possible, to gather extra information about the learning development subject a student wants to focus on, when the student makes a booking. A brief note could be added in the booking information for the tutor to check before seeing a student. This could be done in the first few weeks of a tutor's tenure and would give the tutor an opportunity to prepare for a session.

Although I did not observe my colleagues teaching in a one-to-one context, I would also like to suggest that 'shadowing' experienced colleagues during these sessions could be extremely helpful. When observing a one-to-one session the new tutor can pay attention to their colleague's use of language and the way the more experienced tutor interacts with a student and builds rapport. Although this may involve some input of time and organisation, particularly in terms of seeking a student's permission before a session, its potential return for a new tutor makes this undertaking worthwhile.

What I benefited from most was participating in conversations about learning development practice with other tutors. Professional conversations between colleagues can be thought-provoking and can foster reflective processes which result in learning (Haigh, 2005). Palmer (1998) comments when discussing teaching, that "the growth of any craft depends on shared practice and honest dialogue among the people who do it" (p. 144) and it is clear that conversation as a tool for professional development has been explicitly identified as being important in several teacher training initiatives (Haigh, 2005).

In addition to making time available for staff to interact in informal and unstructured ways, it is important to have team discussions about one-to-one teaching. Participating in these discussions was highly beneficial for me. This can be facilitated by setting some time aside, perhaps, in a fortnightly or monthly meeting where there is a structured discussion. Each person in the team can speak to specific questions and these can provide focus to the session. In our centre we have used the following questions as prompts for discussion:

- What enjoyable or positive thing(s) have you experienced in your one-to-one teaching?
- What difficulty (ies) have you experienced in your one-to-one teaching?
- How did you deal with this difficulty (ies)?

These questions can serve to stimulate the conversation and often allow for quite interesting reflection. A session such as this can go a long way towards helping a new tutor understand the issues surrounding learning development practice. It can shed light on a lot of the concerns that a new learning development tutor can have, particularly in terms of common difficulties or challenges all staff may face in the one-to-one context and can provide opportunities to identify useful strategies. Feedback from other staff in our centre was that they too found these sessions to be affirming and useful. As Clark (2001, as cited in Haigh, 2005, p. 10) notes: "Good conversation feeds the spirit; it feels good; it reminds us of our ideals and hopes for education; it confirms we are not alone in our frustrations and doubts, or in our small victories".

As I draw to a close I would like to raise a question for those in the learning development field. Would the creation of a set of practice notes or guidelines about one-to-one teaching be helpful? Could a set of guidelines that addresses one-to-one teaching contribute to a learning development pedagogical framework in the New Zealand context? I am wary of advocating for anything that could contribute to what might look like a 'cookie-cutter' approach to working with students and I am not sure how these possible guidelines would be generated or deployed. However, on the basis of my experience and given that the work of learning development tutors often includes a significant amount

of one-to-one tutoring, in addition to the complex nature of this kind of teaching, it seems clear that a set of non-prescriptive teaching guidelines would be useful.

In conclusion, further conversations should be had about how we support those entering the field and how we construct our work. It is hoped that my reflections can stimulate some conversations about one-to-one teaching and how new learning development tutors can develop their skills in a supported and effective way. As Biggs (1999) states "through reflection we come to some conclusion about how we may do our particular job better" (p. 2). Finally, I would like to acknowledge my colleagues from both Te Tari Awhina and Maia for anchoring my practice in my first year as a learning development tutor in what has been for me, largely unchartered waters. This support has allowed me to grow into my role and I look forward to my next year in learning development with great enthusiasm.

Ngā mihi nui, ngā mihi mahana ki a koutou.

References

Bartlett, A. (2005). 'Knowingly constructing' our future. In S. Milnes & A. Bartlett (Eds.), *Critiquing and reflecting: LAS profession and practice: Proceedings of the Language and Academic Skills in Higher Education Conference* (pp. 45-54). Canberra: Academic Skills and Learning Centre.

Biggs, J. (1999). *Teaching for quality learning at university*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Brooks, J. (2003). Minimalist tutoring: Making the student do all the work. In C. Murphy & S. Sherwood (Eds.), *The St Martin's sourcebook for writing tutors* (pp.169-174). Boston: Bedford/St Martin's.

Devlin, M. (1995). Metacognition and the cognitive apprenticeship model in tertiary learning support. In M. Garner, K. Chanock, & R. Clerehan (Eds.), *Academic skills advising: Towards a discipline* (pp. 6-16). Melbourne: Victorian Language and Learning Network.

Grasha, A.F. (2002). The dynamics of one-on-one teaching. *College Training, 50*(4), 139-146.

Haigh, N. (2005). Everyday conversation as a context for professional learning development. *International Journal for Academic Development, 10*(1), 3-16.

Holman Jones, S. (2005). Autoethnography: Making the personal political. In N. K. Denzin & Y.S. Lincoln (Eds.). *The sage handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed., pp. 763-792). Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications.

Murphy, C., & Sherwood, S. (Eds.). (2003). *The St Martin's sourcebook for writing tutors*. Boston: Bedford/St Martin's.

Olliver-Richardson, Y. & Bowker, N. (2004). Learning to talk one-to-one 101: A new learning advisors perspective on one-to-one tutoring. In V. Young & M. Brown (Eds.), *Learning to talk" Proceedings of the Association of Tertiary Learning Advisors Aotearoa/New Zealand Conference* (pp. 163-174). Hamilton: The University of Waikato.

Palmer, P. (1998). *The courage to teach*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Percy, A., & Stirling, J. (2004). Coming of age: Developing a genealogy of knowledge in the LAS field. In K. Deller-Evans & P. Zeegers (Eds.), *In the future: Proceedings of the 2003 [Biennial] Language and Academic Skills in Higher Education Conference* (pp. 53-61). Adelaide: Student Learning Centre, Flinders University.

Richards, V. (2004). The talking writing nexus: Developing voice. In V. Young & M. Brown (Eds.), *Learning to talk: Proceedings from the Association of Tertiary Learning Advisors Aotearoa/New Zealand Conference* (pp. 1-11). Hamilton: The University of Waikato.

Shamoon, L. K., & Burns, D. H. (2003). A critique of pure tutoring. In C. Murphy & S. Sherwood. (Eds.), *The St Martin's sourcebook for writing tutors* (pp.169-174). Boston: Bedford/St Martin.

Sherpa, C. (2000). Developing as a profession. In Gill, K., & Melhop, V. (Eds.), *Professionalism: Proceedings from the Association of Tertiary Learning Advisors Aotearoa/New Zealand Conference*. Christchurch: Christchurch Polytechnic Institute of Technology.

Silverman, S. L., & Casazza, M. E. (2000*). Learning and development: Making connections to enhance learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.