

Reflective Piece**Incorporating Ubuntu principles in a tutor training programme to promote academic success and wellbeing**

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ABSTRACT

Tutoring is one of the important components of student support designed to enable students to achieve their learning goals and improve overall success rates. Due to the pandemic, the use of educational technologies has moved from being a secondary mode of conducting learning interactions in the tutoring space to being the primary mode of learning. A question worth asking is: "what does tutoring look like when most students are no longer on campuses?" In an online environment, tutors are not only expected to support students with their cognitive and academic skills but also need to offer support on other skills such as social, affective, technical and metacognitive skills. This requires a paradigm shift in the roles and responsibilities of tutors. This reflective paper reports on the Tutor Professional Learning Programme (TPLP) which identified Ubuntu as a principle that tutors can utilise to support students to develop a range of skills required to succeed in an online learning environment. Characteristics that are associated with Ubuntu include but are not limited to: being caring, humble, thoughtful, considerate, understanding, wise, generous, hospitable, socially mature, socially sensitive and virtuous. These are identified as desirable characteristics that online tutors should possess.

Introduction

Tutoring is one of the important components of higher education designed to enable students to achieve their learning goals and improve overall success rates (Morillas & Garrido, 2014). Tutorials in higher education have been in existence for many decades to improve content knowledge, enhance problem-solving skills and develop particular skills such as practical work in the laboratory (Johns & Mills, 2021). The etymology of the word 'tutor' is associated with words such as home teacher, coach, mentor, guardian, and watcher. This involves a range of support from formal tutoring in the classroom to sharing information in a social setting and can be one-on-one or small group teaching (Colvin, 2007). In higher education, most tutors are predominantly senior students and for that reason, they are referred to as peer tutors. Nowadays, tutoring is increasingly being used as a collaborative method to improve literacy skills such as reading, writing, listening and speaking as well as enhancing knowledge and discipline-specific skills (Tanrikulu, 2021).

Due to the pandemic, the use of educational technologies has moved from being a secondary mode of conducting learning interactions in the tutoring space to being the primary mode of learning. However, the sudden change creates a challenge for tutors to rapidly enhance their skills in the use of educational technologies for online tutoring (McBrien, Chen & Jones, 2009). Online learning is still trying to find appropriate patterns in responding to the challenges of students' educational development during this pandemic. For that reason, conducting tutorials in the online mode requires creative ways of content delivery from tutors to ensure holistic support that goes beyond academic support, but also looks into social, emotional and educational technology support (Adnan & Anwar, 2020). This can be a challenge for tutors as they are still in the process of finding their feet on using digital tools to facilitate tutorials in an online learning space, which may create fear and anxiety for the tutors and their students (Stefanovic, Drapsin, Nikolic, Scepanovic, Radjo & Drid, 2011).

To improve their online tutoring skills, tutors need to undergo training on how to use various educational technologies to conduct student-centred tutorials that promote active and collaborative learning (Alawamleh, Al-Twait & Al-Saht, 2020). However, such training should not only focus on the processes of providing online tutoring and student support that requires a set of new, innovative and extended skills, but should also focus on the application of values such as compassion, care, kindness, humanity, respect, solidarity, and interdependence, which are at the heart of the African philosophy, Ubuntu (Oviawe, 2016). Therefore, professional learning programmes for tutors need to incorporate a set of values that are enshrined in the philosophy of Ubuntu. Even though tutors are

expected to provide students with timely feedback through communication functionalities embedded in the institutional LMS, their responsibility should go beyond the call of duty to include support, guidance and advice through informal communication platforms that go beyond the LMS such as social media platforms and telephonic communications.

The Community of Inquiry Framework (CoI) identifies three elements that are important for a successful online learning experience which include teaching presence, cognitive presence and social presence (Swan, Garrison & Richardson, 2009). Emotional presence, which is not part of the identified presences, can be considered as part of social presence; however, we agree with Majeski, Stover and Valais (2018), who indicate that emotional presence should go beyond social presence as it may include elements such as self-efficacy, openness and expanded self-awareness which are crucial in the context of the pandemic. From the African context, we identified Ubuntu as a philosophy that tutors can utilise to support students in developing the emotional and affective dispositions required for one to function in society and succeed in online learning.

This reflective paper reports on our attempts to incorporate the principles of Ubuntu in the training of tutors by ensuring that tutors understand that education of students is by society for society and is, therefore, a shared responsibility. As part of the university society, tutors have a moral obligation to offer meaningful tutoring that stimulates and fosters student engagement, learning and personal wellbeing, and to ensure that undergraduate students are holistically supported. Ubuntu, which is part of the Zulu phrase "Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu", is an African philosophy that emphasises that a person is a person through other people. Characteristics that are associated with Ubuntu include but are not limited to caring, humility, thoughtfulness, considerateness, understanding, wisdom, generosity, hospitality, matureness, sensitivity and virtuosity (Mawela & Van Wyk, 2020). These are desirable characteristics that tutors should possess to offer effective and diligent support to students. Ubuntu is guided by the following principles, as illustrated by Mawela and Van Wyk (2020):

- Ubuntu as respect
- Ubuntu as fellowship
- Ubuntu as sharing
- Ubuntu as human dignity

In higher education, the principles of Ubuntu are important as we cannot exist without other stakeholders; tutors need students and other colleagues, and this also applies to students as well.

This means that as we develop training programmes, we need to think about participants because we exist as academic developers because of these participants. A large proportion of students enrolling in higher education are first-generation students. They are the first in the family to acquire a degree and, therefore, success in their studies will earn them respect and dignity in their communities and families. We thus need to bear in mind that the success of an African child in higher education is collective, not only for the maternal parents and other family members but the whole community, as it takes a village to raise a child, as the proverb goes. Higher education tutors have a huge responsibility to ensure that these students succeed and, with the knowledge gained, that they can uplift and give back to their communities.

The principles of Ubuntu can inform the way tutors engage with students, empowering them to “combat exclusion and employ inclusive pedagogies that aim to reach all learners” (Teaching for All, 2019:26). Recognising the relationship between Ubuntu and tutoring is important in exploring the South African educational space to create intellectually- and culturally-relevant tutoring systems (Oviawe, 2016). Thus, professional learning programmes for tutors should sensitize them to the core elements of Ubuntu, and ensure tutors utilise these principles as a guide when organising and engaging in tutorial sessions. Therefore, tutors also need to be open-minded and have the ability to create an engaging and accessible learning environment that can cater to the needs of diverse students to improve students’ success rates and to enable students to achieve their learning goals. Therefore, the aim of this reflective paper is to provide recommendations for the improvement of online tutoring to address the needs and challenges of an individual tutor to make it more inclusive and transformative.

As mentioned earlier, this study takes a reflective stance in exploring the approach taken to support tutors in their preparation to take up their tutoring role. Reflective research is defined as identifying issues and problems relevant to the present time and immediate area (Colomer, Vila, Salvadó, and Casellas, 2013). The purpose of this approach is to explore and appreciate the process followed in tutor professional learning and the underpinning ideological principles. In order to achieve this, we followed the three steps suggested for reflective research: reconstruction of reality (we captured details on every aspect of the tutor programme so that we could obtain a holistic picture of the approach, what is actually done and how it is done), interpreting reality (the reconstructed reality was then explored to identify how we are working in our context to prepare tutors for their tutoring role), and reflection and reflexivity (which involves identifying what seems to be working well and how the practice might be improved going forward to support tutors).

Reconstructing our reality: The tutor programme

The Tutor Professional Learning Programme (TPLP) was developed to support tutors with the necessary knowledge, skills and values to enable them to diligently execute their tutoring responsibilities guided by the principle of Ubuntu. This programme catered to a range of tutors with different duties as per appointment, including faculty-appointed senior students, postgraduate students, teaching assistants, academic interns and experienced staff members. An institution-wide advertisement was made via the university's communication channels to invite appointed tutors to sign up for this TPLP through their departmental tutor coordinators. Tutors enrolled in the programme attended training workshops and engaged with additional resources on the LMS at their own pace. The training consists of synchronous and asynchronous sessions. The synchronous sessions were conducted through Microsoft Teams and included two two-hour training sessions on different days. The first part of the training focused on pedagogies for online learning as well as tutoring in the higher education context that incorporates Ubuntu principles. The second part of the workshop focused on how to use the available virtual platforms for meaningful and effective tutoring purposes that stimulate students' learning. The asynchronous part of the workshop included extended learning materials and activities focusing on the following topics:

- Exploring tutoring in the South African higher education context during COVID-19
- Facilitating and supporting learning in the tutoring space
- Online and blended learning in the tutoring space
- Educational technologies for online teaching and learning (including the institutional LMS and external tools)

Overall, the approach taken in the workshops was guided by a framework that we developed to support thinking and activities that encourage more care, communication, and collaboration between tutors and students. This was important considering that teaching approaches during the COVID-19 pandemic have disadvantaged many students, especially those from less advantaged contexts (Czerniewicz, 2020; Baticulon, Sy, Alberto, Baron, Mabulay, Rizada, Tiu, Clarion & Reyes, 2021). Informed by the Ubuntu concept mentioned earlier, we came up with the 3C'S framework described below and depicted in Figure 1.

- **Communication:** Effective communication will help tutors have a presence in the tutorial that motivates students and encourages learning; new technologies also provide new opportunities to connect with students.

- **Care:** Tutors need to take care for students' learning experiences by responding to their queries and giving feedback on tasks or activities (Nicholson & Kurucz, 2019).
- **Collaboration:** There is a need to overcome a lack of social interaction between tutors and students (McPherson & Nunes, 2014; Ferri, Grifoni & Guzzo, 2020).

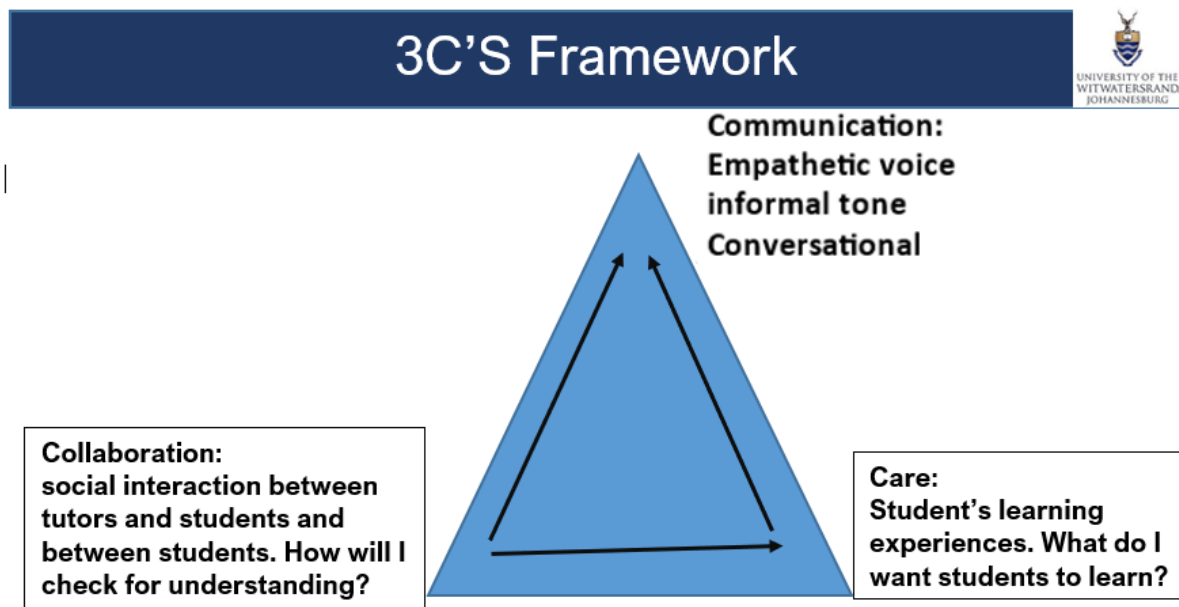


Figure 1: 3C's Framework - Care, Communication and Collaboration.

The synchronous sessions were interactive to encourage collaboration and partnership. A reflection on tutors' awareness of the elements of Ubuntu, when engaged in tutorials, was encouraged by running Mentimeter and Jamboard activities aimed at prompting tutors to think about their roles and responsibilities in an online learning space, qualities they need to facilitate learning in this space, and best practices for meaningful engagement with students. The purpose of these reflective activities was to make tutors aware that their roles go beyond facilitating tutorials but include supporting students socially and emotionally during the pandemic where mental health issues have been eminent. In addition, the purpose of the reflective activities was to model good practices that demonstrate that knowledge is co-created and therefore learning is a partnership between the tutor and student.

In addition, in the synchronous sessions, there were live demonstrations of educational technologies for online learning including tools on the institutional LMS and external tools. Since students are familiar with the LMS and it is zero-rated (meaning that it does not incur any data costs for students to access), tutors were encouraged to maximise its use both synchronously and asynchronously to

support student learning. Linked to the training programme was the establishment of a tutor Community of Practice (CoP), where tutors were invited to a quarterly synchronous meeting that was meant for sharing good tutoring practices with the purpose of learning and sharing ways of addressing recurrent problems from experience. The CoP meetings were important because after attending training workshops and being given the time to practically apply the knowledge gained from the training, it was valuable to understand their experiences and challenges so that we can find ways to improve the training programme. Before the CoP, tutors were required to complete a short online questionnaire to assist programme coordinators in focusing the conversation for the first CoP to specific challenges and best practices around tutoring during COVID-19. Reconstructing our 'lived reality' in the programme enabled us to have a broad sense of what we do and how each part contributes to the functioning of the whole system. We followed this up with an interpretation of this reality so that we could develop a perspective on the work done.

Making sense of our reality

As Mawela and Van Wyk (2020) argue, the characteristics associated with Ubuntu include but are not limited to being caring, humble, thoughtful, considerate, understanding, wise, generous, hospitable, mature, socially sensitive and virtuous. As such, it was imperative to model for tutors how they should engage with their students online. As shown in the 3Cs diagram, modelling the tools on how tutors can interact with students to encourage engagement using Mentimeter and Jamboard as examples served to imprint the principles of Ubuntu aimed at engagement between tutors and students, empowering tutors to “combat exclusion and employ inclusive pedagogies that aim to reach all learners” (Teaching for All, 2019:26; Oviawe, 2016).

Due to the lack of social interaction between tutors and students (Ferri *et al*, 2020; McPherson & Nunes, 2014), modelling was a way of providing an environment for interactive student engagement. Instead of telling tutors what to do, we opted for showing them how tutors can be creative, diligent, well-prepared, and organized. Research on pedagogies shows that significant learning gains are achieved when students participate in interactive activities. These are pedagogical practices that we envisage tutors should employ to effectively and diligently support students. Pre-workshop surveys were given out to tutors to determine their expectations and familiarity with using digital tools to facilitate tutorials online. Post-workshop feedback was useful as we wanted to hear their views on what additional content to cover and get a sense of how to structure content to suit specific tutor group needs as per their faculty- or school-assigned duties. Furthermore, this process also focused on

our weekly meetings as a team to discuss strategies for how best to assist the tutors and the efforts to engage stakeholders to discuss specific needs for their tutors.

Reflections and way forward

There is an African proverb that says "Tau tsa hloka seboka di shitwa ke nare e hlotsa", meaning that lions that fail to work as a team, struggle to bring down even a wounded buffalo. As we reflect on our journey in the TPLP, we identify collaboration as a key element of our practice as we need to draw on each other's strengths to ensure smooth transitions from face-to-face to online learning for tutors. Collaboration was not only limited to the TPLP training coordinators; there was a partnership between the TPLP and the tutors as we drew a lot of information from tutors through CoP meetings, online reflective tools and questionnaires to improve and redesign the programme for specific needs. The spirit of Ubuntu ensured that we offer training that meets the needs of individual tutors. For that reason, we hold that we do not exist in isolation, but we exist because of the tutors at our service. These are the attributes that we envisaged the tutors to have, to engage in partnership learning in their tutorial spaces. Online reflective tools offer tutors an opportunity to draw information from their students so that they can meet students' individual needs. The tutor CoP's were also valuable platforms for sharing information and practices.

From the online reflective activities, it is possible to conclude that tutors were somewhat aware of their roles and responsibilities; however, they were still unsure how to enact these roles in an online space. With tutors having attended training workshops, we are certain that the experiences simplified how they view their roles and responsibilities for online tutoring as we modelled student-centred approaches to teaching. However, we acknowledge that the TPLP is fairly new to the university, and we hope that we can encourage more participation in the programme by reaching out to more schools to enrol their tutors in the programme. In addition, for asynchronous participation, we still need to devise creative strategies to encourage tutors to participate and share their experiences in asynchronous discussions. Therefore, to encourage more participation, we have applied for the TPLP to be a short learning programme, which we hope will encourage tutors to interact beyond the synchronous learning as this will promote reflection and collaboration which are crucial for the teaching profession.

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