Questioning Personal Tutoring in Higher Education: An Activity Theoretical Action Research Study

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Introduction

Three staff from the University of Cumbria became interested in the Personal Tutoring system as a result of a range of experiences providing personal tutoring and supporting staff to personal tutor. As a result of this interest the staff devised a small scale research project within their two departments of the University of Cumbria; the Department of Health, Psychology and Social Studies and the Department of Business, Policing, Law and Social Science. The initial research questions were:

- How do lecturers use personal tutoring?
- Does personal tutoring support employability?
- How is personal tutoring arranged and practiced?
- What issues are there in personal tutoring?
- Does practice reflect policy?

Initially the staff hoped that the insights from this research would enable them to support personal tutoring practice across their two departments. However, the results were significant and became of interest to the Academic Quality Department and Student Success and Quality Committee and shaped the future of personal tutoring across the whole university.

The Context

The Background to Personal Tutoring

In the UK a number of major policy drivers are placing emphasis on widening and increased participation in higher education. These include the Higher Education Opportunity Act (2008), the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace relations (DEEWR, 2009) and the National Union of Students (NUS, 2011). Given the increased focus on attrition rates, there is an ever-growing need for student support that maximises achievement and minimises

attrition. Personal tutoring is increasingly valued in this complex environment as a key mechanism in retention of students.

The rise of neoliberalism and effective privatisation of Universities adds to the complexity (Levidow, 2002; Olssen & Peters, 2005; Torres, 2011). Students are now consumers who 'purchase' their university experience adding a premium on student satisfaction (Woodall, Hiller & Resnick, 2014; Kandiko & Mawer, 2013; Universities UK, 2017). In addition, a range of new metrics enable student consumers to compare universities by the National Student Satisfaction Survey, by final grades and eventual rates of employability for graduates (Lincoln, 2018; Beech, 2017; Bunce, Baird and Jones, 2017). The importance of providing an effective experience for students is additionally heightened by the constitution of an Office for Students in the UK with powers over the sector (Gov.uk, 2018). As personal tutoring is often a key link between students and their university experience, these contextual changes also heighten the importance of effective personal tutoring.

The Multifaceted Nature of Personal Tutoring

The personal tutor role is not new. Today, every undergraduate student is allocated a personal tutor. This will typically be a member of the teaching team in an academic department. Personal tutors provide both academic and pastoral support (Small, 2013).

It is important to note that there are strong links between the relationships that are built between staff and students and issues such as student achievement and retention. However, for personal tutoring to work effectively, it is important that students engage with the personal tutor system and attend regular meetings with their tutors.

The personal tutoring role has evolved over time. Today, the role is all-encompassing and has been described as an "anchor" or stable point of contact between the student and the institution (Quinn, 1995:176). Specific duties include providing a sounding board for different student issues and providing students with advice on issues such as attendance, assessment and academic performance. An additional role of the personal tutor is to support students with personal development planning. Personal tutors also communicate regularly with academic staff about student progress (Ross et al., 2014; Riddell & Bates, 2010).

However, personal tutors do not only support with academic issues. Increasingly, personal tutors are being required to perform the roles of exemplar, motivator, counsellor and mentor (Kandiko & Mawer, 2013; Price et al., 2007). In view of this, personal tutors need to embrace qualities such as genuineness, trust and empathetic understanding (Yale, 2017). If a trusting and supportive relationship is established, students will feel more able to talk openly about personal and academic issues (Dobinson-Harrington, 2006). Several studies have found that when asked who they would approach if they needed help or advice, students were most likely to turn to their personal tutor (Riddell & Bates, 2010). It has also been found that students were more likely

to turn to their personal tutors than they were to consult the University counselling service for help with psychological issues (Hughes, Panjwani, Tulcida & Byrom, 2018). One of the reasons for this is that personal tutoring can be therapeutic in nature, providing a safe setting where students can express emotions authentically (Warne and McAndrew, 2008). Such support is vital in helping students to adjust to University life and feel both supported and motivated (Kandiko & Mawer, 2013; Yale, 2017). It has also been noted that a supportive, approachable and accessible tutor is extremely important in facilitating academic development (The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2014).

Personal Tutoring's Position in Higher Education Pedagogy

Despite the importance of personal tutoring it is an under-theorised aspect of pedagogy in higher education and often overlooked within universities, occluded by more prestigious high technology forms of pedagogy (Raman, 2016; Ryan & Tilbury, 2013). For example, a google search only produced five books on personal tutoring.

A literature review in the One Search database produced the following results shown in table one below.

Search terms and filters (2017-2018 publication date and English language)	
Personal tutoring in everything	2,416
Personal tutoring in everything in peer reviewed journals – any type of publication	1,499
Personal tutoring in everything in peer reviewed journals – articles only	8
Personal tutoring in title in peer reviewed journals – articles only	2

Table 1: Results for Search Terms in One Search

In the last year personal tutoring had not been monitored or evaluated in our University. There was no training in place and no support materials available for staff. The policy was due for review in summer 2018 and we believed this was an ideal time to turn the anecdotal issues and complaints that staff raised into an evidence base in order to affect positive organisational change to benefit staff and students.

Research Methods

Research design

We aimed to overcome the tripartate dislocation of research, policy and practice through this small scale action inquiry.

As such, the study utilized an action research approach. Action research is a methodology that is used when particular social issues or problems need to be solved or practices need to be improved. A distinguishing feature of action research is that it encourages reflection. Specifically, researchers are required to reflect upon the process and outcomes of their research. Action research also enables researchers to develop a systematic inquiring approach towards their own practices with a view of effecting positive change (Arthur et al, 2012). Action research is a particularly useful method to use in a teaching and learning environment. The approach can help researchers to study educational practices and resolve specific challenges that arise. Action research consists of various steps. Firstly, current practice is reviewed and an area for improvement is identified. The second step is to consider ways to improve practice. Changes are then implemented and their effectiveness evaluated. Finally, plans are made in the light of emergent findings (McNiff, 2002).

Participants
The participants consisted of 20 academic staff across two different University departments. The academic staff were lecturer, senior lecturer and principle lecturer level. Heads of department were also interview. Staff were interviewed either in person or via skype.

Data collection
Semi-structured interviews were used to obtain staff's perceptions of the personal tutoring process. The interview questions were open-ended, giving staff the opportunity to express their thoughts and feelings on various aspects of the PAT process. In the interview staff were questioned about their understanding of the role, their current practices, the way in which personal tutoring is structured in their team, the value of personal tutoring and the relationship between tutoring and issues of employability, engagement and attendance.

Data analysis
The qualitative data from the surveys was analysed using open coding thematic analysis. This is the process of identifying, analysing and reporting patterns and themes within data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The first stage in thematic analysis is to organise and describe the data. Thematic analysis is a widely used approach for the analysis of qualitative data. This process was inductive in nature. A secondary analysis reviewed the categories and themes and organised them around the headings of activity theory in a deductive process in order to enable the theory to inform our understanding of the personal tutoring system. The overall analytical structure was therefore abductive combining an inductive and deductive phase (Tavory and Timmermans, 2014).

Activity theory
The particular analytical framework that we draw upon is Activity Theory. This is a 'work-focussed' theory of practice, that proves constructive for looking at

what people do and how they do it (Allen, Karanasios & Slavova, 2011). One of its distinctive features is that it recognises that work practices are both developmental and inherent with inconsistency, paradox and tension. In this way, it provides a unique contribution to exploring the complex, tentative developments taking place in education.

The activity theoretical model is shown below in figure one.

The six elements of the activity theory model enable understanding of the different aspects of the system; its aims (outcome), the people who benefit (subject), the forms of practice (tools), the people who deliver it (community), the rules they abide by, and the way the work is divided between them. The lines between them are as important as the six elements as these show the ways in which the six elements interact complementing or contradicting one another.
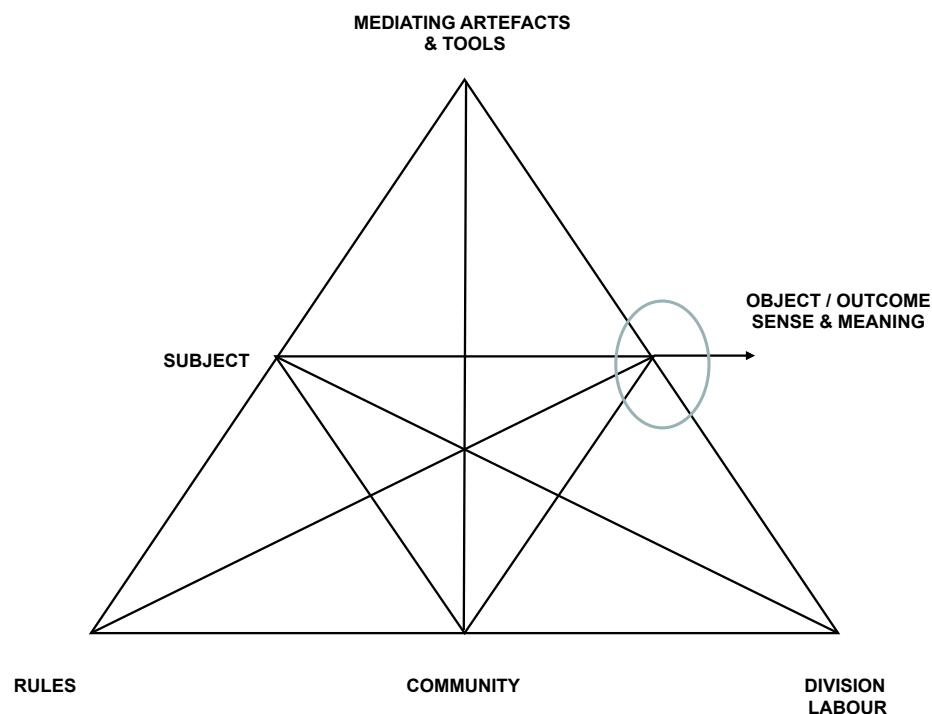
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                    MEDIATING ARTEFACTS
                         & TOOLS


                                              OBJECT / OUTCOME
                                              SENSE & MEANING
        SUBJECT




      RULES              COMMUNITY              DIVISION
                                                 LABOUR
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Figure 1: The Activity Theory System (Engestrom, 2008).

Activity theory is particularly relevant for the exploration of collective, task oriented practices that are in need of development and so are well aligned with the action orientation of action research. The activity theoretical approach also supports multivoicedness and has congruent to the emancipatory and participatory aims of action research. Activity theory also offers a pragmatic framework and a constructive vocabulary for both describing, interpreting and structuring empirical data and providing pertinent insights into the role and practices of the personal tutor. In this respect it enables participants enmeshed in the activity to see it from a critical perspective, again resonating with the critical aims of action research.

Ethics
Ethical clearance to proceed was obtained from the Ethics committee at the University of Cumbria. All participants were assured that involvement in the study was voluntary and that they could decline or withdraw without penalty. All participants who volunteered were informed about the study's purpose and signed a university consent form. Participants were also assured of confidentiality and anonymity. The data collected from the study was stored securely with access limited to the researcher only.

Findings
The findings are reported under the nine categories reflecting the elements of the activity theory system shown in figure one above.

Outcome or objective (what was the system trying to achieve?)
The data showed a wide range of interpretations of the purpose of personal tutoring:

P1:61-62: "…the Personal Tutor…is the person who should be helping with that transition [from school to University]"

P3: 1580-1582: "…It's to go beyond an academic sort of …Module, Programme level and to touch on the personal development side…again to assure the student and also to support them and challenge them"

P4: 2122-2123: "…whole point of it is a nurturing, supporting, empowering environment".

This data reveals that personal tutoring is used for a range of purposes that ultimately benefit the students; improving achievement – grades, attendance engagement through academic and wellbeing support. This will lead, in turn, to improved employment outcomes.
In addition, this outcome also benefits the University who will improve their league table rankings across a wide range of metrics.

The Subject – who benefits from the personal tutoring system

The data suggested a wide range of students who potentially benefit from personal tutoring. There were variations in the status of the students, country of origin, ages, genders, individual needs, courses studied and attitudes:

P3: 1677-1681: "…student transition, not just leaving home or returning to higher education, for the mature students and… international students who just left a place of comfort, different language, different society, different culture, different food, different weather"

P9: 6020-6031: "…dealing with issues around… mental illness…self-harm… drug use…self-esteem…sometimes we'll recruit a student and then we'll get an SPLD Report…they've got some really, really complex needs"

In addition to and due to varied demographics, students had a wide range of expectations:

P9: 6131-6136: "… some students are expecting us all to be able…to spend the time with them…or have the skills that colleagues might have had"

P4: 2023-2029: "… different students will have different things that concern them, worry them. Skills they want to develop"

It would seem difficult for the personal tutors to meet this range of expectations unless they had a wide range of tools available to them. The wide range of expectations also prompts a question as to whether the students had been given clarity on the personal tutoring system and whether this range of expectations existed despite such discussion.

Tools

The data showed variations in how personal tutoring time was structured:

P5: 3106-3107: "… people may be doing…tutorials, but the actual agenda, or what…actually going to be talking about will be quite different"

P4: 2234-2235: "…maybe it's knowing what the agenda for that session is and then…doing group sessions"

P11:8029-8031: "… practice regarding employability has really varied too. Some people have a really well-structured system and use PebblePad so that students leave with a portfolio and others do not".

The style of the sessions also varied with some personal tutors keeping sessions formal whilst others led informal sessions:

P10: 7834-7837: "…that's probably quite a formal way that we talk about…employability"

P4: 1994-1996: "before… Personal Tutor week….have 2 informal ones during induction week so we get to know the students, their career aspirations and so on"

In addition, the time spent with each student and the process for allocating time varied enormously:

P7: 3938-3941: "… Sometimes we have students that I see a lot…have a lot of problems and issues…need a lot of support…other students… never see at all…never come and see me throughout all of their 3 or 4 years…with us"

P6: 3861-3864: "…being such a…1-1 University… allow us to invest a lot more time into individuals rather than them just being…a number".

Some personal tutors would meet students on an individual basis, whilst others met them in groups:

P12: "8617-8621: "…rather than somebody knock on the door and say "can I see you, can I see you now" or "oh, are you busy"? We would always… try and say "well, you know, let's make an appointment" …"if you want to email me, let's make an appointment"

P2:1344-1357: "…only done group sessions when students have arrived…some say it's useless because you can't have an individual discussion, but others really like it because you see common themes"

P3: 1609: "…very rare that you have a 1-1"

P5: 2857-2858: "…happy having 1-1's with students".

Some personal tutors waited for students to initiate personal tutor meetings whilst others arranged sessions themselves:

P7: 3892-3893: "…tend to leave it very much up to them to contact me"

P9: 6353-6354: "…There are people who the door is always open "just come in and knock"

P9: 6358-6359: "…others it's "you need to book an appointment if you want to see me"

Accordingly there were variations in how optional or compulsory the sessions were:

P10: 7348-7351: "we've timetabled them this year… looks like they have to come…meant…had people turning up to them"

P4: 1987-1988: "…first year the personal tutoring sessions are compulsory".

If voluntary there was a possibility that some students may never access the support:

P2: 939-941: "…challenge is to make sure that you see everybody and keep everybody informed because somebody who might appear as casual, but is very shy, you might never see".

Personal tutors tended to focus on the problems that students presented rather than adopting a solution focussed approach:

P7: 3920-3921: "…come to see you when they've got a problem or an issue"

P10: 7642-7644: "…that Personal Tutor role is just to keep ironing out any problems…in order that we retain students"

P10: 7009-7019: "… offering the students the opportunity to talk about their progress…where they're at…how they are doing…do tend to focus on either students that are on the struggling step…or on the naughty step, rather than…really positive career development stuff… academic development stuff…how…get them to engage in other things on campus".

In contrast to the problem focus, personal tutors did identify a range of solution focussed styles of helping that would empower the students. This varied from a coaching approach to a therapeutic approach which is of concern:

P11: 8016: "…having a coaching style"

P13: 8918-8920: "…the ongoing mentoring that can make a really big difference to erm both how well you as an individual Personal Tutor do the job, but also how well you feel you can develop it"

P9: 6014-6018: "…do get into counselling roles... sometimes there's a danger that some of the group tutorials can become a therapeutic community…as opposed to a professional tutorial group"

P12: 8718-8723: "…staff who come from a therapy background, nursing background…counselling background..lot of them find it hard to step back".

The location for personal tutor sessions varied from in the academics office, to a café, or classroom:

P9: 6353-6356: "…door is always open "just come in and knock"…"Come and sit down, grab a brew"

P4: 2379: "…come to our office"

P9: 6434: "…students would drop in and you'd have a coffee" .

The personal tutors all identified that relational and communication skills were vitally important to the role:

P3: 1645-1649: "…being approachable and being sort of friendly and reassuring, I think normally can establish quite a good rapport with the students and for them to identify any issues that may affect the progress of studies and also to give them an enhanced student experience whilst they are doing their time with us"

P10: 7554-7556: "…they have lots of opportunity to, to see us…therefore we build quite good relationships with them"

P10: 7821-7822: "…Time keeping, communication, that and actually, we are starting to have those conversations with the students

Of most concern was the wide variety of record keeping evident. This ranged from no notes taken, through notes taken in personal notebooks, to notes stored electronically and shared with students. There was no consistent or safe place for records:

P1: 429-432: "…what I often do…go onto ICON and…print…their profile"

P1: 434: "…we talked about, so I make a note"

P2: 998-999: "…know people who even then, would quite deliberately make some notes"

P6: 3552-3556: "…I keep my notes. Normally just handwritten notes in my folder usually…most people do keep their own record as well"

P7: 4192-4196: "…there's always the issue about where those are kept. I would keep a record if… somebody told me something that…caused me concern…make a note of it and then send it to PAd"

P5: 3171-3172: "…got it set up so that we've…got a Folder…all the Lecturers have got access to where it's obviously secure".

In summary, the personal tutors varied in terms of: structure, style, formality, initiation of sessions, length and format, locations, and record keeping. There was consistency in the lack of knowledge of policy, the recognition of the need for relational and communication skills, a problem focus, and a recognition of the challenge of managing personal tutoring within the workload allocation model.

Rules (what governed the activity system?)

There were several rules that enabled and constrained the activity of personal tutoring. These included: personal tutoring policy and guidance, workload allocation policy, personal tutoring induction and training.

A personal tutoring policy and guidance did exist, but there was low knowledge of it and therefore little impact on the practice of personal tutoring:

P1: 309: "...I do have some sort of guidelines"

P1: 417: "...I have them in my office"

P2: 967-968: "...there's some ethical guidelines for Personal Tutors".

The personal tutoring policy and the workload allocation policy specify the amount of time per hour that each personal tutor is allocated. Personal tutors were all very aware of this and framed the 2 hours per year as an unworkable constraint:

P7: 3887-3888: "...we've obviously got the Policy that says how many hours we should be seeing our Personal Tutees for"

P13: 9176-9177: "...all the Workload Model gives you is the standard allocation"

P11: 8043-8045: "...really important that the University addresses this and either makes it clear what Personal Tutoring is NOT, so it is possible within the time allocated, or the time is increased"

P12: 8681-8686: "...time is a factor...especially with reorganisations within the University...15/16 years ago...time wasn't so pressurised as it is now... could spend a lot longer with people, with students, with other staff...haven't got so much of that luxury now".

There was no induction into or training for personal tutoring and as such many staff felt that they were 'thrown in', and uncertain about whether they were practicing personal tutoring appropriately:

P7: 4476-4477: "...I haven't had any training in it"

P7: 4485-4486: "...think training would be useful"

P9: 6876-6879: "...I think there could be some real positives in standardising it ...and training the staff".

Without clear induction and training, and without use of the policy, accountability was absent from the system:

P6: 3593-3594: there's nothing, no accountability as such".

Perhaps as a result of this void, people worked in small isolated communities of practice within programmes:

P11: 8105-8018: "...talked as a team about the style in which we support students...having a coaching style...approached HR for help...not yet had any training.

P12: 8196-8197: "...teams almost take on the responsibility for...portraying...what the Policy is and how it's adapted"

P12: 8584-8585: "...I think there are different systems within the Department depending on the teams to be honest".

Community (who were all the people involved?)

Data showed that the tutees (students) varied greatly. Unsurprisingly the lecturers acting in capacity of Personal Tutor also varied with their own demographic variances of age, gender, ethnicity, professional background and personal experiences. Some personal tutors were unaware of the impact this might have on students, whereas others tried to capitalise on it:

P5: 2743-2746: "...I'm a retired Police Officer and I managed numerous Student Officers in my last role...seen the benefits of how...being a Personal Tutor would work and how that benefits students"

P6: 3675-3676: "...we speak from personal experience "that's exactly what I done", "how I got my first job"

"P5: 3257-3259: "...we're lucky within the Department...got 4 individuals that have got skills in 4 different main areas".

A potential challenge of this could be the mix of student demographics with personal tutor demographics. This may create tension with the assumption that any personal tutor can work with any tutee and vice versa.

At first glance it might seem that the community would involve students (tutees) and lecturers (personal tutors). In reality however, the community of practice was wide and varied, including; the Library Information Support Service, the Wellbeing Team, the Academic Quality Department, the Student Success and Quality Committee and Heads of Department. This highlighted the need for a clear division of labour.

Division of Labour (how was it decided who would do what?)

Such a wide community of practice demands a clear division of labour, but this was absent from the system. Instead staff felt unclear of the boundaries of practice as evidenced by the sections on the outcomes and tools illustrated. In addition to these difficulties, there appeared to be a lack of clarity about who to signpost students to, how that happened, and how information should be shared:

P7: 4208: "…I think we need a much more robust record keeping system in place"

P1: 528-529: "…if I were to leave and I had the time to do a hand over, I would probably sanitise some of my notes"

P4: 2133-2136: "…Because we always tell a student that these are the things we are going to do and these are the things we've got to do, but other than that it is just like the standard academic circle who see it or the usual. Then there is no log of it".

Discussion

The Object or Outcome of the Personal Tutoring Activity System

This data reveals that personal tutoring is used for a range of purposes that ultimately benefit the students; improving achievement – grades, attendance engagement through academic and wellbeing support. This range of purposes is reflected by Small (2013) who states; "The personal tutor role can be multifaceted, capable of serving a variety of functions such as providing pastoral care and professional/clinical support, well beyond the more conventional support around academic issues" (p.1). This multifaceted nature has led some to describe it as; "a challenging experience within any academic career" (Smith, 2008, p.1). "Students needed support from personal tutors for managing physical concerns, such as accidents or illness, challenges relating to disabilities, particularly for those related to mental health, and personal commitments, such as childcare or family issues" *(*Kandiko & Mawer, 2013).

Despite the challenges that it poses, it is framed by the Qualification Authority for Higher Education as central to successful pedagogy: "A positive and supportive relationship with a personal tutor was essential to successful learning" (QAA for HE, 2014, p.8). This view is supported by other researchers who found it particularly key to students' self-esteem and motivation (Cramp, 2011). The literature further suggested that inconsistent experiences of personal tutoring could lead to poor student satisfaction leading to negative outcomes for universities in league table rankings: "There had been no significant improvement in satisfaction rates for a number of years and inconsistencies in students' experiences continued to be problematic" (QAA for HE, 2014, p.8).

Given that personal tutoring is positioned as a key to student success and therefore also university success, it would seem imperative that an effective

system of personal tutoring is well established within universities. As the introductory context suggested, this is not the case nationally, and was not the case in the University of Cumbria. This led us to propose that the status of personal tutoring is raised, the activity is supported with training and tools and metrics are established to understand its impact on student experience and attainment.

The Subject of the Personal Tutoring Activity System – The Student

The findings about the subject of the activity system (the students) reflected great diversity in the student body in terms of general demographics. This issue is not unique to personal tutoring, but applies to all pedagogical activities in universities. As GuildHE and The Student Engagement Partnership (2016) state that all demographics need to be taken into account when planning recruitment, curriculum and teaching methods. Of these, Mooney Simmie and Lang's (2016) analysis would suggest that gender is the most powerful, whilst Crozier et al. (2008) put a strong case forward for the class and wealth of both Universities and the students they recruit. The literature therefore supports the finding that students are varied and will therefore need a degree of flexibility within a personal tutoring system rather than a rigid 'one size fits none' approach.

This point is also concluded from the qualitative research of Stephen, O'Connell and Hall (2008) who; "highlights the detrimental impact of the mass system upon the ability of many staff and students to engender such connectedness" (p.449) as is needed in personal tutoring relationships. The range of expectations that personal tutors experienced from personal tutees suggests two things. Firstly, that some parameters of expectation need to be established and secondly, that these will always be varied and flexible.

The data collected in this research suggested that students arrive at university with a range of previous experiences. The literature aligns with this point, and socio-cultural research by Pratt et al., (2015) suggests that these different prior experiences lead to; "complex and differing pedagogic relations that students develop across multiple spaces" (p. 43).

Jelfs, Richardson, and Price (2009) found that personal tutoring was used to address the specific needs of students within their university on a very individual basis, but we must question to what extent one personal tutor may be able to meet the range of needs encountered at the University of Cumbria. This breadth of needs reinforces the need for a wide community of practice (see below).

The literature outlines the importance of key figures such as personal tutors in students university experiences (Kandiko and Mawer, 2013), but the broad range of demographics, expectations, experiences, needs and attitudes are a challenge for any one person to address. Hence the need for an activity system to pick up and address these issues holistically.

Tools Used to Support the Personal Tutoring Activity System

Data showed the personal tutor sessions varied in terms of: structure, style, formality, initiation of sessions, length and format, locations, and record keeping. There was consistency in the lack of knowledge of policy, the recognition of the need for relational and communication skills, a problem focus, and a recognition of the challenge of managing personal tutoring within the workload allocation model. This resonates with the work of McIntosh and Grey (2017) on the variety of styles of personal tutoring. Crozier et al.'s research (2016) highlighted that a key variable was the personality and skill of the personal tutors themselves. This indicates the need for effective staff training in personal tutoring. This would seem vital given Smith's (2008) report that 43% of students in the NUS-QAA survey reported wanting more individual contact time with tutors.

Rules in Place to Support the Personal Tutoring Activity System

The data showed a lack of guidance, training and support for personal tutoring at the University of Cumbria, echoing the findings McIntosh and Grey's study (2017). This coupled with workload model rules that restricted personal tutoring hours to 1.5 per year per student limited the staff capability and capacity to provide effective personal tutoring, supporting McIntosh and Grey's sense that; *"Tutoring in the UK has been **chronically under-resourced** and, until now, neglected" (2017, online).*

There is general consensus in literature pertaining to personal tutoring that it is a skilled activity that demands an investment of time (Smith, 2008, p.1; QAA for HE, 2014, p.2; McFarlane, 2016, p. 77). Time advocated for to both train staff and to provide the personal tutoring (Hassan, 2014, p.391).

Training, mentoring and peer observation were recommended as training tools to develop effective personal tutoring skills (McFarlane, 2016, p. 85), and mechanisms for staff support recommended to reduce the anxiety of staff dealing with traumatic student experiences (Luck, 2010: 276; Levy et al., 2009).

As such, a review of the policy guidelines and the resource assumptions connected to personal tutoring seemed important. Connected to both of these was the need to raise the importance of personal tutoring as a key aspect of HE pedagogy and mechanism in attainment and retention of students. With this link in place, resourcing assumptions can be more easily revisited.

The Community Involved and Division of Labour in the Personal Tutoring Activity System

The wide community of practice involved or invoked from personal tutoring was also reflected in the literature reviewed. The point was repeatedly made that personal tutors need to act within professional boundaries (McIntosh & Grey, 2017 online) and therefore needed a network of other practitioners or services to signpost students to once they reach those boundaries (Kandiko & Mawer, 2013, p. 55). Whilst necessary, this posed issues in many other universities (McMillan, 2011, p. 553).

Creating clarity around boundaries, referrals to and from other professionals and information sharing clearly needed to be established.

Contradictions and Tensions

Whilst mapping the six elements of the activity system generate a range of recommendations considering the ways in which they interact is also highly useful. The variety endemic in each element of the system created tensions throughout the system. These included: different expectations, different student needs, different styles of personal tutoring,

The tensions are summarised in the list below:

- Uncertainty led to staff and students feeling unsecure and unsafe
- Rigid or un-boundaried practice in the space created by lack of clarity
- Staff were uncertain about personal tutoring and may avoid it or have defended practice
- Sense that not all students access or understand personal tutoring
- The variety of expectations cannot be met by the variety of provision
- Some personal tutors and tutees do not get on (due to expectations, skills or personalities)
- The style of personal tutoring may or may not be suited to the range of students encountered
- Students were kept for too long or handed over too soon to other services with unclear protocols
- There was not enough time or resource to meet needs
- A lack of recording and clarity meant there was no evaluation, monitoring or understanding of the resources and relative efficacy of personal tutoring.

Conclusion and Recommendations

These findings led to a set of clear recommendations for future practice at our University and others nationally and globally. These are:

- To develop one single information pack shared by staff and students that explains personal tutoring, its boundaries, processes, protocols, tools. This will manage student and staff expectations and improve staff confidence and trust in the tutor:tutee relationships. This would include revised protocols for; allocation of personal tutees to tutors, changing personal tutor; record keeping; evaluation; information sharing with other departments; a map of support services. This should be developed with students and the Student Union.

- To develop a training package and allied resource pack that equips staff with the skills, knowledge and understanding to meet a range of student needs within the established parameters of the personal tutoring system.

Provision of emotional wellbeing support for staff who have dealt with difficult student issues is also recommended.

- Integrated working protocols need to be established and developed with staff across departments understanding when to refer to who, processes, protocols, and how to share information appropriately.

- Reconsider the time allocated to personal tutoring in workload models as research shows it has a fundamental role in student experience, attainment and success.

- Enhance the status of personal tutoring – add it to staff meeting agendas, focus on it in the teaching and learning strategy, have it as a standing item on the academic board or student success and quality committee meetings.

- Seek to understand students' experiences of personal tutoring through annual evaluation procedures like staff student forms and module evaluation questionnaires.

- Monitor the time spent with each student through personal tutoring, develop measures of the student and staff perception of the efficacy of personal tutoring.

The research team presented the findings and recommendations of this small-scale action research to the Student Success and Quality Committee at the University of Cumbria. The work was discussed in the meeting and the Deputy Vice-Chancellor and Dean for Student Success and Head of Academic Quality Department subsequently met with the researchers to establish a fuller understanding of the work to inform the revision of the personal tutoring policy throughout the summer of 2018. We are optimistic this will lead to positive change for staff, students and University alike. This work also illustrates the power of practitioner action research to effect change. We encourage future research into personal tutoring as a key aspect of HE pedagogy and plan to research students perceptions of personal tutoring ourselves to further inform work at the University of Cumbria.

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