Program 1: Tutor and Demonstrator Support program in the Melbourne School of Engineering (2008 – to date)

Background

The Tutor and Demonstrator Support Program (TADS) program, initiated in 2005 in the Department of Computing and Information Systems, has been successfully conducted for the last eight years in the department. This program brought a significant culture shift in the department of Computing and Information systems, exposing tutors to best practices in teaching and student learning. The success of the program was a contributing factor in the Melbourne School of Engineering (MSE) rolling out a school-wide program to expose best practices among tutors across departments (2008 -to date).

Tutor and Demonstrator Support Program

The motivation behind the TADS program is based on a need to improve student-learning experiences in both tutorials and laboratory classes as identified on the University's Quality of Teaching surveys. As a part of the TADS program, casual staff are trained and supported to provide quality teaching for our students. The program includes a range of activities for casual staff across the semester. All tutors and demonstrators (new and experienced) are required to undertake the training at least once a year. This program is coordinated by an academic, Dr Antonette Mendoza, who is a member of the Education Learning Unit (ELU) in the MSE. Apart from the academic, the ELU also employs a contract education consultant to facilitate the program.

The program starts with a School-wide Professional Development Days (PDD) for all new and experienced casual staff in the MSE at the start of every semester (conducted by Dr. Antonette Mendoza and Education consultant). The PDD is a three-hour program. During the PDD, tutors are introduced efficient ways to:
- plan and prepare for a tutorial/lab;
- apply effective teaching practices and strategies;
- manage diversity in classrooms; and
- manage problematic situations in classrooms through scenario- based interactions.

Also, during the PDD, a representative from the Human Resources in the MSE provides information on pay claims, Themis and contracts.

In addition, a series of 5 teaching and learning development sessions are organized for ***new*** casual tutors and demonstrators in the MSE. While the series of 5 sessions are advertised within the MSE for new casual tutors, and strongly encouraged during the PDD, at this stage, these sessions are voluntary. As a part of the five teaching and learning development sessions, the following aspects are covered:

Session 1 begins with reflecting on practice. For this and the following four weeks the first 20-30 mins is where tutors form small groups as they arrive and discuss their teaching. They are asked to reflect and share: what went well and where any difficulties arose. The class session aims to capture both aspects – applauding the former and providing strategic guidance for the latter. Often these sessions raise class management issues such as getting students to participate. In this session, tutors are also trained on 'provocative questioning' strategies. They are then encouraged to write questions from their teaching content across the cognitive taxonomy.

Following reflection on practice, in session 2, tutors are asked to write down what they believe they are doing well and where they might improve. These are handed back to the teaching and learning expert that facilitates the program. The staff member then observes their tutorials and provides feedback to them.

Session 3 has two foci – group work and culture's impact on learning. Activities are conducted that get tutors thinking about their cultural inheritance and acquisition and how they 'teach themselves'. That discussion moves into group work and a discussion on strategies for managing student groups.

The content in session 4 is often shaped according to the needs of each semester class. During session 2, the program facilitator collates from tutors, their particular concerns or desired learning. It may be issues related to time management, developing confidence or getting students actively participating. These issues are addressed in this session. Also, in this session, some time is spent talking about feedback and assessment.

Finally, in session 5, each tutor is asked to deliver a five-minute "micro-tutorial" and then they receive feedback from the group. The friendships that have developed over the past five weeks pay off in both giving and receiving incisive critical feedback. Everybody learns from every other person's capabilities and aspects that need improving. There's always lots of laughter and fascination with the breadth of topics under the engineering umbrella. While at the start, this session is one that all tutors and demonstrators are nervous about, but end up enjoying immensely.

A certificate of completion is offered to all tutors and demonstrators. In order to qualify for the certificate, they need to have attended all sessions (or complete a make-up task); attend an experienced tutor's tutorial (wearing their tutor hat) and write a paragraph on what they took away from that experience (guidance sheet provided). The other task is to read the article on Scaffolding for Learning and to write a couple of paragraphs on which scaffolds they are presently using and what scaffolds would be useful to implement. At the conclusion of each semester's program, the program facilitator emails out a feedback sheet for the program. This is collated and distributed to the senior academic responsible for the program. The feedback has always been extremely positive.

Furthermore, some departments within the MSE also provide additional continuous support to both **new** and **experienced** casual tutors/demonstrators in the departments. For example, in the Department of Computing and Information System, an academic known as the TADS coordinator (Dr Antonette Mendoza) is a point of contact for casual tutors and demonstrators. Based on specific needs, Department-tailored activities are conducted that include: self-evaluation, peer observation, staff observation and a quality of casual teaching feedback is administered to students in the department at the end of semester. Apart from these activities, the TADS coordinator also provides one-on-one support for tutors and demonstrators if they require it. This allows the department to create a 'community experience' among new and experienced casual tutors and demonstrators. Also, it provides ongoing one-on-one support (if needed by the tutor) in matters related to effective teaching strategies including conflict resolutions, work-life balance and pay claim queries. This one-on-one support is viewed as a 'pull' factor rather than a 'push' factors and is initiated by a tutor. Recently, this one-on-one support is extended to tutors in the MSE that need assistance if required.

Finally, 'tutor teaching excellence awards' are presented to the best tutors every semester (selected based on the quality of casual teaching feedback from students and feedback from subject coordinators) in most departments in the MSE. The awards have encouraged tutors to lift the quality of student experience. As a way of appreciating the contributions of tutors and demonstrators, the MSE has an annual teaching awards ceremony and rewards the best tutors in the MSE.

Outcomes:
During this time, over 2000 tutors have successfully completed the program. Some departments in the MSE (for example CIS), conduct a Quality of Casual Teaching (QoCT) survey at the end of every semester as a a quality assurance measure. In the last few years, QoCT scores and the successful completion of the program have become a benchmark for future casual employment opportunities in some departments. The success of this program is evidenced by feedback from tutors. For example,

"As a new tutor with no prior tutoring experience, this program has helped me define my role as a tutor. I have learned that it is my responsibility to get the students to learn how to think and effective ways to do so, such as by posing deeper questions or by encouraging thoughtful class discussion…I now know how to effectively get students into groups and to increase participation without feeling awkward if no one responds" [Casual tutor comment]