

# Southern Regional Hub-funded project

Project Report

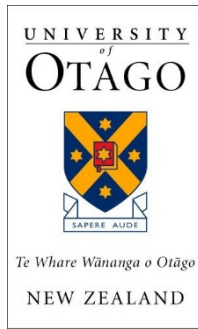


## Peer observation and mentoring 'tool kit'

For staff wishing to provide  
professional development for casual  
teaching staff in the post-compulsory  
teaching sector

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## Introduction

This tool kit has been developed from the project 'Using mentor and peer observation to enhance the practice of short term contractual (tutoring) staff'. In this initiative, tutors, students, professional, and academic staff worked together in a supportive environment to provide professional development for short-term, contractual (tutoring) staff. The project spanned multiple divisions from the University of Otago and involved six tutor-mentors and 12 mentees from diverse ethnicities.

Data was collected through focus group interviews with mentors and mentees, and audiotaped mentoring sessions. Transcript data were imported into the qualitative research software HyperResearch, and an inductive process was used to identify key themes.

## Recommendations summary

The project team has found that there is great potential in a peer mentoring programme for sessional staff based on video observation of the teacher's practice. This report identifies nine significant 'tips' for academic developers to consider when establishing such a programme.

### 1. Support your mentors

Being an effective mentor is a challenging yet rewarding role. In our study, we have tried to make the steps involved with mentoring explicit by providing the mentors with a mentoring guide (see further on). In addition to providing consistency between mentors, this guide helps to reinforce the notion that we are all looking at ways to enhance our teaching – rather than thinking of teaching as being either 'good' or 'bad'.

### 2. Be flexible

Some mentees will be more comfortable than others with video recording their session on their mobile devices. Although there is a great benefit in teachers being able to see themselves as their students see them and also seeing how students react to their teaching, video recording is not fundamental to the mentoring role. Instead, mentees may wish to invite their mentor to observe their teaching. Likewise, mentors should also be open to their mentee observing their tutorial. Similarly, mentees' self-reflection can include using annotated video recordings (using TurboNote) or paper-based reflections whilst reviewing the video. The important step is for mentees to review the video before meeting with their mentor.

### 3. Match teaching context but not content

Mentors should have experience with the type of teaching that the mentee is doing; whether it be one-to-one tutorials, laboratory-based work, or group-based discussion tutorials. To ensure that teaching is the focus of discussion/observation, we recommend that the mentors and mentees be partnered based on their different subject areas. This was a clear recommendation that came from the participants in the study and differs from many studies that investigate peer mentoring and video observation. It was very helpful for the mentees to have a clearly identified 'area of focus' or something that they wished to enhance in their teaching before their first meeting with their

mentor. It was also helpful when the mentees were provided with a job description of what was expected of them in their role as a tutor.

#### 4. Select mentors carefully

The literature clearly states the characteristics of a good mentor, which were echoed in our project. For instance, mentors should be knowledgeable, approachable and good communicators. Additionally, our findings revealed that mentors need to be good at managing schedules and coordinating their mentees' milestones. Effective mentors display great attention to detail, including booking rooms in advance for meetings

#### 5. Use staff champions

Staff champions are key to identifying suitable mentors and assisting with the pairing of mentors and mentees. However, for the programme to succeed, staff champions need to believe in the programme and care about teaching.

#### 6. Provide a timeline

Providing a timeline was crucial to the success of the programme. Our timeline took into consideration busy times of semester, including when assignment deadlines or mid-semester breaks. We strongly suggest that you try to avoid running your programme during the busiest teaching times, if possible, and recommend confining the mentoring programme to the first five weeks of the semester. In addition, we suggest having regular check-in meetings with the mentors to ensure that milestones are being met, and to discuss any problems that may arise.

#### 7. Start, Stop, Continue exercise extremely valuable

Our mentees commented that they often felt that they were 'teaching in a vacuum'. They were not encouraged or expected to get constructive, formative feedback on their teaching. The 'Start, Stop, Continue' exercise to get informal, anonymous feedback from students was invaluable in gaining the students' perspectives into what was going well and what could be enhanced. This technique simply involves students anonymously writing down something that they wish their tutor would *start* doing in the tutorials, *stop* doing, or *continue* doing in their teaching. The tutors collate the responses, decide on the appropriate actions, and disseminate this information to their students in a subsequent session.

#### 8. Formal recognition of programme important

For our study, we provided our mentors and mentees with a certificate of participation. Many of the participants commented that formal recognition was an important piece of evidence regarding their commitment to professional development.

#### 9. The ratio of mentor to mentee and level of commitment

Our recommendation is one mentor per two mentees. The workload for each mentor is at least 2-4 hours of work. Although this is highly variable and contextually dependent, it is helpful for budgeting purposes to have a rough figure, to begin with.

# Summary of the tutor peer mentoring and observation process

1. Organise an initial meeting with the entire project team, mentors, and mentees to discuss the aims of the project, roles and responsibilities, explain how to annotate with TurboNote, filming requirements, and answer any questions (1 hour)
2. (Optional) Mentors invite mentees to observe one of their tutorials (or part of a tutorial). This provides an opportunity for the mentee to reflect on their teaching, and may address any power differentials in the mentor-mentee relationship. (20 minutes)

## Five-step Mentor and Mentee procedure (see figure 1)

1. Mentees obtain anonymous written feedback on their teaching from students in their tutorial in the form of 'Stop/ Start/ Continue'. This is usually conducted from week 3 of the teaching semester/term.
2. Mentors meet with their mentee to discuss what is going well and to identify areas for improvement (30 minutes, audio recorded).
3. Mentees video record a 5-10-minute segment of their tutorials, which they then annotate using the Chrome browser plug-in tool 'TurboNote'. The video segment becomes the basis of a follow-up discussion. Mentees are encouraged to record a segment of their teaching that they wish to seek feedback on from their mentors.
4. Mentors meet again with their mentee to review the video recording, discuss areas for improvement, and develop a teaching action plan (45 minutes, audio recorded). [The video is used to encourage reflective thinking around teaching. It will give insight into whether what tutors hope to achieve is actually happening in practice.]
5. 'Close the loop session' – Finally, mentees hold discussions with their students about any changes to their teaching they plan to make.



**Figure 1:** A five-stage model for sessional staff professional development

## A guide for providing mentor support\*

One of the roles of a mentor is to enable your mentee to improve and enhance their teaching. How do you do this? What follows is a ten-step guide to assist you in this process. Your actual process of mentoring is likely to be a bit messier and less linear than what is presented, but these simple steps will help you understand the process.

1. **First meeting.** Meet with your mentee to gauge where they are at in relation to teaching: How do they feel about teaching and about themselves as a teacher? How confident are they? What do they think they are doing well and what can be improved? What are they concerned about and what are they interested in? Finally, what do they want from the mentoring relationship?
2. **Assist your mentee to move to a space where they can tackle improvement and enhancement.** Some mentees aren't ready for mentoring because they are in an unsuitable frame of mind, so the next three steps are about how you can help them take a different perspective about their teaching.
3. **Reassure and build confidence.** If a mentee lacks confidence or doesn't feel efficacious as a teacher, then they will find it difficult, if not impossible to improve. So, your first step is to create a foundation of "I'm OK as a teacher" so that your mentee is able to undertake improvement. This requires them to see their teaching difficulties as opportunities for learning, not as indicators that they are bad teachers.
  - Normalise the struggle in teaching. Point out that all teachers struggle with their teaching. These problems and issues don't make them a 'bad' teacher, they are an inevitable and essential part of being a teacher.
  - Difficulties are necessary for learning to teach. Emphasise that we learn to teach in a University by trying something, noticing problems and difficulties, and then improving and enhancing what we do. Thus, any problems the mentee may be facing are just one step on the journey to learning to be a teacher.
  - All teaching is a learning process. Point out that teaching is always a learning process. For example, all teachers have to learn how to teach the particular students they are faced with. No matter how good a teacher is, they will face students who do not respond to the methods they normally use, and who expect something different from what the teacher expects. All teachers have to learn to deal with this challenge every time they teach.
4. **Invite them to take an enhancement attitude to their teaching.** Invite your mentee to see their teaching as a process of improvement and development. All teachers, no matter how novice or how experienced, can develop, improve and enhance their teaching. When we take an 'enhancement attitude', we look at feedback from students; such as in the 'Start, Stop, Continue' exercise as an indicator of what worked and what didn't work for students, and how we might improve student learning. Thus, encourage your mentee to see student feedback as not about them, but about the impact of their teaching on their students.
5. **Identify something to enhance, work on, or inquire into.** Assist your mentees to find something that they can focus on that will motivate them to improve and enhance their teaching. This will likely be something about teaching that they are interested in, concerned about, or which they want to improve or enhance. Relating to them as if they are 'broken' or 'bad teachers' will not inspire them to improve, so we need to assist them to identify some inspiring result they want to achieve.



6. Gather evidence about the impact of their teaching on their students, for example:
  - Observe their teaching
  - Read feedback data from the 'Start, Stop, Continue' exercise
  - Talk with your mentee about how they teach and what they do
  - Talk-through and/or read their session plan
  - Talk with their students
7. Judge what might be changed to improve or enhance student learning.
  - We first hypothesise about what might be 'blocking' or 'restricting' student learning. For example, students might say that they are not be benefiting from classroom discussions. But after observing a video of the tutorial, we might realise that the underlying issue is actually that the mentee calls on the same people in the class to share their ideas and not everyone feels that their ideas are being heard.
  - Then, we hypothesise about what might enhance the teaching to deal with the 'blocks' or 'restrictions'. For example, the mentee could make a point of thanking the people that always volunteer information, but suggest that other people need to be involved as well.
8. Action plan. Assist your mentee to design what they will do differently in their teaching, and how they will evaluate whether these changes have enhanced student learning.
9. Action. They make the changes in their teaching!
10. Evaluation and feedback: We finish by considering what they did and what happened as a result, including what they observed and any other evaluation evidence they gathered, and we use this to judge if the changes worked. If the changes worked, congratulate them and assist them to refine and embed the changes so they become part of their normal teaching practice. If the changes had no impact, then we go back to step 6.

\* Adapted with permission from Golding (2017)

Golding, C. (2017, April 5). Mentoring teachers. Retrieved from <https://clintongolding.com/blog-thinking-about-teaching/>

## Suggestions for effective video-based reflections

Although the use of video can be daunting for those that have not used this technique before, all of our participants who took part in video reflection found the exercise valuable.

Our participants used a simple tripod to record their session. They suggested that it was worthwhile making sure that they knew before hand:

- what they were going to record and for how long
- whether it was important to film the students in their class, themselves as a teacher, or both?
- that the mobile device is on 'selfie' mode so they can see what is being filmed.

### **Additional points to note:**

- It is important to stress to the mentees that only they and their mentor will see the video.
- The mentor can choose when they film and for how long.
- The purpose of the video is to see different insights that they might not have seen otherwise. Always, the aim is to enhance their teaching – it is never judgemental.
- It is useful to view the video within 24 hours and definitely prior to the meeting with the mentor (the mentor and the mentee often noted different things from the video).
- It was also very useful to write down their reflections – whether this was done in TurboNote, or simply writing notes on paper.

