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Future ready tutors: Articulating and evidencing tutoring skills for employment outside the university

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Abstract

Many academics began their careers as tutors or teaching assistants, but the number of tutors working today mean that this is not a viable path for all. In this paper we describe a tool developed from a New Zealand funded project exploring "invisible attributes". We discuss how the tool, originally designed for students, might help tutors to explore and document skills and attributes gained through tutoring which might be applied in the wider workforce.

1   Introduction

In many universities, tutors take on the majority of small-group, face to face teaching, particularly in first-year classes where numbers are large. They lead small classes, deal with questions about study and assessment and help students to navigate the vagaries of the university's systems. Many tutors also deal with students who are experiencing hardship or who require personal support of some kind.

Our institution, a medium-sized New Zealand university, employs between 600 and 700 tutors annually. Many academics began their careers as tutors or teaching assistants, but numbers mean that an academic career is not viable for all tutors today. We have tracked the experiences of our tutors for many years and found that, though many aspire to an academic career, a large percentage have no intention to continue teaching (Sutherland and Gilbert, 2013). This has led us to consider ways in which we can help tutors to understand and document their experiences to enhance their future employability outside higher education.

Our training of tutors is founded on Boyer's (1990) notion of scholarship (Hall and Sutherland, 2013) supported by a values-based approach that focuses on respect, responsibility, fairness, integrity and empathy. This forms a good foundation for a career in academia, but we have argued that it also supports those who wish to take their careers in a different direction (Sutherland and Gilbert, 2013).

Tutors often report that tutoring leads to maturing of understanding in their disciplines and, subsequently, an improvement in grades. However, tutoring experience extends so much further than grades. It is these other skills, the interpersonal and unmeasurable aspects of tutoring, that we wish to encourage tutors to explore and document. In this paper we show how

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the SEEN framework, a method for describing students' skills and attributes (Kensington-Miller et al, 2018), has been adapted to be applicable to tutors.

1.1   From invisible to SEEN

The SEEN framework was defined as part of a NZ funded project which focused on "invisible" attributes that students develop throughout their university careers (Kensington-Miller et al, 2018). Attributes are "invisible" in that they are not formally assessed and are difficult to measure or describe. The SEEN framework was applied in the creation of a tool that provides a structure for articulating skills that do not appear on university transcripts. It comprises four domains of description of the attribute: Specify, Explain, Embed and Nudge. Each domain is described in terms of aims/objectives, teaching or learning activities, and observable behaviours (see Figure 1).

Name of attribute	Learning objective	Teaching or learning activities	Observable behaviour
SPECIFY	What is an example of (A) in your discipline?	How do teachers develop (A)?	Can students identify an example of (A)?
EXPLAIN	What are the relevant features of (A)?	How do teachers help learners to understand (A)?	How do students describe (A)?
EMBED	How would a student be able to demonstrate (A) in the classroom?	How do teachers help learners to do (A)?	How do students demonstrate (A) in the classroom?
NUDGE	How might a student be able to apply (A) outside the classroom?	How do teachers help learners to apply (A) more generally?	How might students demonstrate (A) outside the classroom?

Figure 1: The SEEN Framework

The tool has been used with students to help them describe specific attributes they have developed, and with staff, both to identify their methods of teaching important attributes in their disciplines and to describe their own academic development in terms of attributes (Gilbert and Knewstubb, 2018). Tutors, many of whom are students who teach, sit between these two groups; attributes may arise from their teaching but are documented with respect to tutors' own development. We were interested to see how this would work in practice.

Completion of the tool relies on the identification of salient attributes. With teaching staff, this involves a discussion around their values based on an understanding of their disciplines. In the original project, academics and employers were interviewed about key disciplinary attributes. Identified attributes were often discipline specific, but similar attributes were evidenced in different ways (for example, cultural awareness in law and dance were described very differently). Elements of the framework were expanded on through reflection and discussion. The completed tool/framework provides a clear description of how an attribute was developed.

For students, the procedure is slightly different. Important attributes may be signalled to them either by teaching staff or prospective employers, or identified from their own reflections. In workshops with students, we have used a series of questions to help them identify valued attributes. Questioning addresses skills that they have already observed in themselves as well

as those they need to develop. Their reflections become the basis for completing a simplified version of the tool.

2   Describing tutors' attributes

Tutors develop a range of skills that will benefit them in other work environments. As with students, they need to reflect on their experiences and consider where and how the benefits might lie. In our workshops we begin by asking them to work in small groups to identify a skill or attribute that they believe helped them to become a tutor, and one that they have developed through their tutoring. We then ask them to reflect on how tutoring has changed them personally. Groups share ideas and we create a wordcloud using Mentimeter© to highlight common ideas and prompt further reflection. We then ask the tutors to focus on one attribute that is important to them and to complete questions based on the SEEN Framework (see Figure 2).
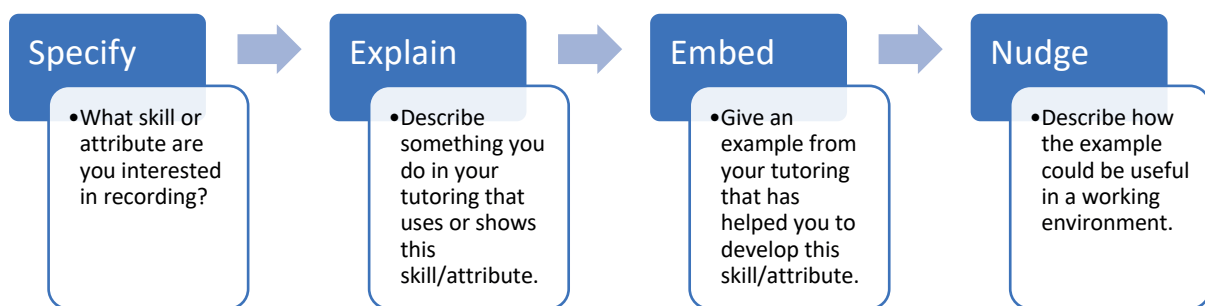
Specify	Explain	Embed	Nudge
•What skill or attribute are you interested in recording?	•Describe something you do in your tutoring that uses or shows this skill/attribute.	•Give an example from your tutoring that has helped you to develop this skill/attribute.	•Describe how the example could be useful in a working environment.

Figure 2: Questions enabling description and documentation of an attribute developed through tutoring

In the second part of the workshop we ask tutors to choose a different attribute, either from the wordcloud or from their own reflections, that they wish to focus on, and to answer further questions based on the SEEN framework (see Figure 3).
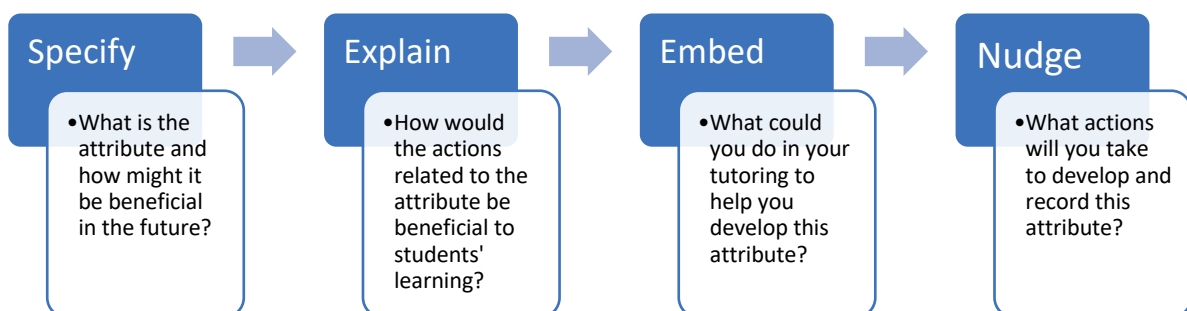
Specify	Explain	Embed	Nudge
•What is the attribute and how might it be beneficial in the future?	•How would the actions related to the attribute be beneficial to students' learning?	•What could you do in your tutoring to help you develop this attribute?	•What actions will you take to develop and record this attribute?

Figure 3: Identification and planning for an aspirational attribute.

3   Tutors' examples

The tool has been trialled in a series of workshops with tutors, usually in the context of a professional development day offered at our university. The following are examples of outcomes achieved during one of these workshops.

3.1   Accountability

Mirjam is a tutor in the Business School. She has been tutoring for some years and is considering entering a human resources position in a government department. She selected accountability as an important attribute developed during her time as a tutor. In explanation, she highlighted the importance of being accountable to her students to support them in their learning. She felt this was embedded in her tutoring by her providing information about expectations and discussing goals with her students as well as providing timely feedback to them about their progress. She considered this attribute to be important in her future employment as it related to trustworthiness and implied care and responsibility for others.

3.2   Resilience

Ben, a relatively inexperienced tutor, did not have a clear idea about his future employment goals but was clear that tutoring had made him more resilient. He related a story where a student questioned his judgement about an assessment topic and responded aggressively to his explanations. He described how he reflected on the situation and was able to resolve it without loss of face on either side. He believed his experience would help other students in future as he was able to model resilience to them. He chose to focus on resilience rather than conflict resolution because he wanted to focus on his own development and to draw attention to the strength he had drawn from managing the situation. He believed he was much better prepared to deal with any challenging situation as a result of his experience.

Overall, tutors recognized the importance of identifying and recording invisible attributes. For them, key attributes included resilience, versatility, collaboration and diversity awareness. Having the ability to explain how they came to develop these and to provide evidence supporting them is a vital part of acknowledging the value of tutoring as part of the university experience.

4   Conclusion

Our aim has been to help tutors begin the process of documenting attributes that they have developed or aspire to develop through their teaching which might be applied in future work. The SEEN framework is useful because it provides a clear structure for reflecting on and describing aspects of tutoring which can translate to other contexts. A resource for tutors that can be utilised as part of their professional development is currently being developed. We consider this to be an important part of our responsibility to prepare our tutors for a future either in universities or in the wider workforce.

Acknowledgements

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