Practice and Effect of Training on Specialized Content Knowledge to Assure the Quality of Student Tutors

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Abstract: To assure the quality of student tutors, they require generic skills (teaching, research methods, communication, etc.) and a focus on specialized knowledge regarding the content being taught. The first author's previous study on generic skills suggests that combining tutoring guidelines and an online tutor training may improve the quality of the tutors. This report of an applied study is focused on the specialized knowledge aspect. Student tutors were provided training for their generic skills, as well as specialized knowledge. The specialized knowledge provided in the study was to be used to support a course about the Civil Code and the Constitution. An external, specialized instructor conducted training for nine weeks during the weekly, 90-minute training course. Tutor training and practice were conducted alternately. Tutors who completed the training course held various study sessions for undergraduate students using textbooks and additional teaching materials that the tutor created. As a result, students who attended at least 70% of the study sessions earned a high grade in their coursework, which suggests that tutors were able to relay their specialized knowledge to the students.

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Key words: Quality assurance of tutoring, Tutor training, Specialized content knowledge, Higher education, Student tutor

INTRODUCTION

This research is a part of the first author's doctoral dissertation "Development and Evaluation of Tools for Conducting Quality Assurance Student Tutor". To assure the quality of student tutors, tutoring guidelines and methods were proposed (Watanabe, Suzuki, Toda, & Goda, 2014). An online tutor training system was further developed to allow students to practice their training, which was successful to a certain degree (Watanabe, Suzuki, Toda, & Goda, 2015).

Graduate students are typically hired as student tutors because they posses the requisite specialized knowledge. Universities and junior colleges with few graduate students, however, must inevitably hire undergraduate students. Therefore, student tutors may not possess adequate specialized knowledge.

In this study, student tutors attended a 90-minute, textbook-based, face-to-face training session (as opposed to online training) once a week. The tutor's acquisition of specialized knowledge can be measured by the grades of their tutees and will consequently assure the quality of the student tutor.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Previously in Japan, undergraduate tutors generally provided "auxiliary assistance that does not directly involve in the content of the lecture" (Tateyama, 2013). In recent years, however, an increasing number of universities have been hiring undergraduate students to provide courses aimed at acclimating first-year students to university education. At Kansai University, student tutors provide support at seminars intended to build academic skills such as presentations, debates, and written reports through "study skill seminars". The tutors (herein referred to as "Learning Assistances (LA)") are selected from students "who have completed the acclimation course and have been recommended by the faculty". Furthermore, the LA are required to complete a basic, group training course about the acclimation course and how to facilitate the lesson"(Iwasaki, Kubota, & Mizukoshi, 2008).

Sapporo Gakuin University Department of Social Information also utilizes student tutors to provide programming education. After the lecture, student tutors provided assistance to students who were self-studying based on the textbook. The student tutors were provided with teaching manuals and individually trained by the faculty (Morita, 2009). Separately, student tutors at Meio University Language Learning Center, which the first author visited for research in 2013, provide language-learning assistance. To apply for as a language-learning student tutor, students are required to have minimum grade of an A, are interviewed by the faculty, and are voted in by other student tutors. Certified by the College Reading & Learning Association (CRLA), the training program is in line with the International Tutor Training Program Certificate (ITTPC).

The aforementioned shows that student tutors are selected based on the specialized knowledge that they possess and that additional training for specialized knowledge is not provided. However, it is impossible for universities with an insufficient numbers of student tutors to expect all their tutors to possess sufficient specialized knowledge. Therefore, upon determining the need to train student tutors with specialized knowledge this study explores a method to do so.

RESERCH METHODS

The subjects of this research are 17 sophmore student tutors from an undisclosed university's Faculty of Law. Nine, 90 minute studying sessions were simulated once a week from October 2015 until January 2016. Specialized knowledge training was provided by an external, specialized instructor. The content was based on a textbook for tutors about the Constitution and Civil Code. The textbook for tutors included an outline for each session and teaching advice. Student tutors provided tutoring immediately following each study session. Practicing in advance was intended to allow student tutors to identify their own strengths and weaknesses and thus tutor with confidence. The study and tutoring sessions always ended with a discussion in order to improve the student's ability to instruct and communicate.

The instructor was to refrain from interupting as much as possible, observe the students, and primarily comment on the content and how questions were being asked.

The order of the training course was as follows;
1. The role of the tutor and tutee are divided.
2. The tutor prepares an agenda and simulates a study session with their tutee.
3. The tutee asks questions about the content provided by the tutor.
4. The tutor answers the questions.
5. All participants exchange opinions at the end of the session.

This study analyzed reports submitted by the instructor, questionnaires from ten of the student tutors, and an interview with a student tutor. Further, tutee attendance is compared to their final grade in their course on the Civil Code and Constitution. The student tutor's self-evaluation form is also numerically charted.

RESULTS

According to the reports from the specialized instructor, tutors who participated in the training course were highly committed and motivated. More specifically, many tutors demonstrated consideration towards the tutees by preparing their own handouts and short tests. In addition, simulating the study session in advance provided tutors

with the opportunity to compensate their lack of specialized knowledge and better comprehend the process of the study session. The discussions also allowed experienced tutors to provide inexperienced tutors with advice based on their own experience and tutors learned from one another.

According to the results of questionaires from the student tutors and the student tutor interview, the tutors had the following responses towards the repeated and alternating training and simulating study sessions: "each session increased my awareness towards the quality of tutoring and increased the conversations and questions I had with the tutee", "I learned how to manage time better", "I learned how to see tutoring from the tutee's perspective, which helped me explain the content better", and "I experienced my tutee grow". On the other hand, some tutors stated that, "I was unsatisfied that instructors did join in" and "we just chatted about random topics during the discussion time".

Students at the university being evaluated are graded in order of S, A, B, C, D, and E, where S and A are considered to be top-tier students. The relation between the tutee's attendance rate at the study sessions and earning top-tier marks (S or A) are as follows: 35.7% of the tutees that attended 70% or more of the sessions earned an S or A in their Constitution class, whereas only 17.3% of tutees that attended less than 70% of the sessions earned top-tier marks. In the Civil Code class, 57.1% of tutees that attended 70% or more of the sessions earned an S or A, whereas only 24.0% of tutees that attended less than 70% of the sessions earned top-tier marks (see Tables 1-4).

Table 1

Final Grades of Tutees that Attended 70% or more of the Study Sessions for Constitution.

Final Grade	Number of People	Percentage	High Achievers
S	7	16.7	35.7
A	8	19.0	
B	11	26.2	
C	8	19.0	
D	8	19.0	
E	0	0	
Total	42	100	

Table 2

Final Grades of Tutees that Attended Less than 70% of the Study Sessions for Constitution.

Final Grade	Number of People	Percentage	High Achievers
S	16	4.5	17.3
A	45	12.8	
B	100	28.4	
C	125	35.5	
D	66	18.8	
E	0	0	
Total	352	100	

Table 3

Final Grades of Tutees that Attended 70% or more of the Study Sessions for Civil Code.

Final Grade	Number of People	Percentage	High Achievers
S	1	14.3	57.1
A	3	42.9	
B	3	42.9	
C	0	0	
D	0	0	
E	0	0	
Total	7	100	

Table 4
Final Grades of Tutees that Attended Less than 70 of the Study Sessions for Civil Code.

Final Grade	Number of People	Percentage	High Achievers
S	5	2.5	24.0
A	43	21.5	
B	54	27.0	
C	65	32.5	
D	26	13.0	
E	7	3.5	
Total	200	100	

These results indicate the possibility that the study sessions are effective to some extent. The average of the self-evaluation form submitted by ten tutors that asked thirteen questions using the five-level Likert scale was 4.39 (SD = 10.93). This indicates that the tutors highly evaluated their own tutoring .

DISCUSSION

The result shows that tutees who attended at least 70% of the study sessions provided by tutors, who attended a training course for specialized knowledge, earned high grades in their coursework. This implies that the tutors were able to relay the specialized knowledge that they acquired during the training course to the tutee. In other words, these results suggest that the author's goal to assure the quality of the student tutors has been achieved.

These results, however, are limited to classes within a single faculty. In addition, we must take into account of the effectiveness of generic skill training and the motivation of the students that attended the study sessions. Our future goal is to verify and expand this method to other faculties, subjects, and students.

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