

Practitioner Inquiry
submitted as part of
OpenPad application for Senior Fellow
of the Higher Education Academy

Dr. Ann Walshe

Staff Tutor and Regional Academic

The Open University in the North West
of England

August 2016

Practitioner Inquiry

How can I promote a common understanding among stakeholders of the perceptions and expectations of the purposes of group tuition in the Open University?

1. The purpose of my Practitioner Inquiry

1. As a staff tutor in the Open University (OU) I am intimately involved in the implementation of group tuition.
2. I recruit, develop and manage Associate Lecturers (ALs), who deliver the group tuition to OU students. I arrange the tutorial timetables in conjunction with the ALs, staff tutor colleagues and module teams. I visit tutorials and provide feedback. I lead and collaborate with colleagues to devise, organise and deliver staff development to the ALs, including staff development around group tuition.
3. Recent changes in the Higher Education environment have led to an increased focus on maximising student success. A central strategic objective of The Open University Mission in 2016 is “More students qualifying”. A new Group Tuition Policy (GTP) is being implemented (GTP implementation website 2016). Therefore it is more important than ever for all stakeholders including students, ALs, staff tutors and module teams to seek a common understanding of the purposes of group tuition in the OU and how it can contribute to maximising student success.
4. My Practitioner Inquiry (PI) examines how I can promote a common understanding of the purposes of group tuition. I reflect on how my own understanding developed. I present a literature review. Through an eSTEEeM project I ask “What do we mean by tuition?”. I will describe how this has contributed to my own personal development and how I plan to facilitate change through taking a lead in group tuition related activities.

2. What do we mean by group tuition?

1. Tuition in the OU takes many forms from correspondence tuition and asynchronous activities to synchronous tutorials and day schools. Group tuition is that delivered to groups rather than to individuals.
2. The Group Tuition Policy (GTP 2014) was approved by Senate in October 2014. The Group Tuition Policy document (GTP document 2014) defines group tuition as follows:

“Group tuition refers to any interactive tuition activity or event delivered by Open University staff for a group of students to facilitate their learning and/or support, normally on a module or qualification.” Paragraph 12a

My PI focuses on synchronous group tuition, that is, tutorials and day schools.

3. Group tuition is not necessarily delivered by a student’s own tutor. Many tutors collaborate by delivering shared day schools, pairing up to deliver online tutorials or offering specialist sessions to a cluster of tutor groups. Such collaboration has developed on a module by module basis through liaison between staff tutors and tutors.

3. How I developed my own understanding

1. I am a staff tutor in the Computing and Communications department of the STEM faculty. I manage and develop ALs and work on module teams. Prior to becoming a staff tutor, I was an AL for 20 years. I have also studied many OU modules to engage in continuing professional development. I have therefore experienced group tuition from the perspectives of student, AL, staff tutor and module team member.
2. Wenger (2009) defines communities of practice to be "... groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly." When I became an AL in 1990, I was initially a peripheral member of the OU community of practice (CoP) concerned with group tuition. I was expected to deliver tutorials but I had no pre-conceptions of the purposes of group tuition in the OU. I developed my tutorials in response to communications I had with my students, and over several years I settled into a pattern of delivering tuition with the purpose of explaining threshold concepts (Macdonald and Campbell 2012) and giving students practice in answering questions relevant to their assessment. I also used icebreakers such as puzzle solving to get students interacting with each other.

Over the years I have continued to learn from the CoP which is my students and my AL and staff tutor colleagues, as well as through study and scholarship. I now consider myself a core member of my CoP. "The practice of a community is dynamic and involves learning on the part of everyone." (Wenger, 2009). This section explores my learning from this CoP.

3. In 1995 I completed my PGCE in secondary mathematics with the first cohort of OU PGCE students. Through my studies and teaching practice I gained insight into different learning styles and how students come with baggage which informs and influences their thinking. Gaining my PGCE gave me confidence and a theoretical underpinning which moved me beyond the novice stage.

I learned the importance of active learning. Although (Wood, 1988) addresses how children think and learn, I have applied many of the ideas to my adult students. Wood remarks that it is well-established that 'rehearsal' aids learning. I introduced more hands-on activities in my tutorials. I remember a particularly successful activity demonstrating the difficult concept of recursion, using a set of Russian dolls and a line of students taking one and passing the rest on for counting, then passing the answer back along the line. The group enjoyed the activity and I hoped they understood recursion as a result. Not long afterwards, a former student told me he had applied to become a tutor, and in his interview, when he was asked to describe a particularly successful tutorial, he had described my activity. It had evidently had impact!

4. I began to tutor on modules where group tuition included programming day schools run by a small AL team. The purpose was to enable students to learn by doing, in an environment where they could have help as required. Brown (1994) encourages working together with others to improve teaching and learning. "Left to your own devices you would ... learn through

experience as you become more aware of what works for you in practice. But your ... teaching is not done in isolation..." Working alongside fellow ALs enabled me to develop my tuition skills by observing and copying the good practice of my peers.

5. When the OU introduced online tuition via Elluminate, I trialed blended tuition. I had to reflect in more depth about what I wanted to achieve, and whether my online tutorials could have similar objectives to my face-to-face tutorials. My staff tutor joined my first online session to help me. He advised me to include lots of interactivity, e.g. asking students to respond using green ticks, to write on the whiteboard or in the chat box, and to speak if they had a microphone.

Subsequently I attended online AL development designed to promote more advanced use of Elluminate. The facilitator demonstrated how whiteboards can be created with fixed background text and pictures, and moveable foreground objects. This led me to invent more interactive activities such as providing moveable equations. Students enjoyed moving them around; they had control and they had fun.

Through reflection I have iteratively improved the design of my tutorial activities. For example, after using moveable equations a student told me that she found it fun, but the objects were all piled on top of each other and difficult to distinguish at first. I subsequently altered the initial positions of the equations.

6. I have used breakout rooms in online tutorials both as a student and as a tutor. In a breakout room students can be less inhibited talking to each other without the tutor in the room. I once watched a recording of a tutorial where the tutor had dropped out due to technical reasons, and the students began chatting more freely. This suggested to me that students will interact more with each other if they think no one is watching. I have subsequently discussed strategies with ALs such as stepping away from the room and leaving the students with a task to promote interaction.
7. As a student my expectations of tutorials are to meet my tutor, get help relevant to the assessment and be motivated to persevere. The GTP recognises this in Paragraph 32: "The individual educational relationship between a student and their AL, which contributes to student confidence, motivation and the success of the feedback and assessment process, will continue to be built ... through meeting at learning events" Of course, my own expectations of tutorials are not necessarily the same as those of other students. OU students are extremely diverse and, therefore, expectations will be correspondingly diverse.
8. In my staff tutor role I visit some tutorials. I ask the AL in advance to provide their tutorial plan and tell me on what aspects of their tuition they would particularly like feedback, where they would like me to sit and whether they would like me to take part or simply observe. Afterwards I provide feedback and if necessary arrange some development. I disseminate good practice by making suggestions to my ALs as to what else they might try, based on what I have done myself and what I have seen others do. I also encourage dialogue because I have discovered that some of my ALs have wonderful ideas and strategies that really engage their

students. I could further develop in this area by dialogue with fellow staff tutors to share expertise.

9. Another opportunity for me to probe ALs' understanding of the purposes of tuition arises in interviews. ALs must apply for each module they wish to teach and so are interviewed regularly. Generally they are asked to prepare a tutorial plan to discuss at interview. The discussion often explores the purposes of the tutorial they have planned. Many of their purposes confirm my own expectations, such as maintaining motivation and explaining threshold concepts. Recently, an interviewee recently commented that tutorials should be a safe place to ask questions. This was a purpose that I had not previously considered and which I realised is important because we should all respect each other and foster a supportive learning community.

10. Through this experience I perceive that some purposes of group tuition are:

- An opportunity to meet the tutor and other students and avoid isolation
- A means to maintain motivation
- A resource to help understanding of the module material
- An opportunity to learn actively via practical activities and interaction with others
- A safe environment in which to learn

4. Literature review

1. Following the Browne report (Browne 2010), the UK government “introduced a new, more sustainable funding system for higher education” (Government 2015). Further reforms were proposed “for the higher education sector to be sustainably funded, provide a better student experience and take more responsibility for increasing social mobility” (HE White Paper 2011). The White Paper proposed that the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) “be given an explicit remit to protect the interest of students”.

HEFCE works with the HE sector to address the challenges of increasing student attainment and progression (HEFCE 2015). HE institutions are expected to provide evidence of how their interventions are maximising student success.

Students are now paying significantly higher fees. However, many OU students do not attend tutorials and are therefore not reaping maximum benefit from the provision they are paying for. Additionally, tutorial provision is expensive in tutor time and venue costs. We should not waste the students’ fees. We must take responsibility to provide purposeful and cost-effective tuition, not only for the students’ sake but also because we are accountable to HEFCE. If we can increase tutorial attendance by making tutorials more accessible and explaining their benefit, then we can improve the student experience and maximise student success in the most cost-effective way.

2. In response to the changes in the HE environment the OU carried out a tuition review. Workshops in my faculty (MCT Tuition Review 2012) elicited the following suggestions about group tuition:

- Attendance should be recorded.
- Face-to-face tuition should be retained alongside online tuition.
- Module teams should communicate with each other and with staff tutors to ensure consistency in the development and implementation of tuition strategies.
- Module teams should create tuition resources.
- Training should be provided to ALs in both the application and pedagogy of online tuition.
- The tutor-student relationship should be retained while concentrating resource on national forums.

The tuition review informed the new GTP and I note that it incorporates all of these suggestions. I have begun interviewing some of the key people who were involved in developing the GTP to capture the intentions and thinking behind the Policy in order to be able to evaluate its success. Having conducted my PI, I have the confidence to take a lead in my Faculty to evaluate the Policy as it is implemented.

3. Macdonald and Campbell (2012) describe an OU case study into providing professional development in the use of online synchronous tuition. They refer to the theory of “threshold concepts”, that is, the significant concepts in a course which transform the student’s understanding. They report that “developing activities within the disciplines” was seen by tutors to be “an effective way of helping them to focus on those areas of curriculum where students were most likely to need help and support through tutor facilitation”.
4. Pat Atkins (Atkins 2013) wrote a paper which “represents the results of a brief but extensive search for recent research into tuition” across the OU in 2013. There has been a great deal of research about what constitutes good practice in the context of moving from face-to-face to online tutorials. Research has also considered possible positives and concerns around the idea of clustering tutor groups and loosening the individual student-tutor link. Low tutorial attendance is a concern, and there has been some inconclusive research into whether there is a link between tutorial attendance and retention and attainment. It is concluded that there is a need for tutorials to have a clear purpose, although what that purpose is, is not explored.

Atkins reports that a 2007 project suggested that tutorials should be more integrated into course design. “A more integrated approach would place the learning objectives of tutor intervention as a central part of course design, thereby making the purpose of tutorial support clear to both students and tutors” (Atkins 2013). A B120 team teaching project reported the disadvantage “that the project's tutorial provision was seen as additional work by students”.

My PI has caused me to reflect on the purposes of tutorials. As Atkins demonstrates, there is little common understanding of the purposes. The OU-wide guidance introduced by the GTP should provide consistency and improve effectiveness of tutorial provision.

5. Robin Goodfellow of the OU IET carried out a study (Goodfellow 2014) to investigate OU students' attitudes to tutorials. Among other findings, it was found that over 80% of the students surveyed agreed that tutorials, whether face-to-face or online, helped them to understand concepts and ideas that they encountered in the module material. Benefits of face-to-face tutorials were perceived to be interaction with the tutor and with other students, also motivation to go on studying. I agree with this. As a student I have experienced the motivation that tutorials provide.
6. Input from a Student Consultation on Group Tuition (Student consultation 2014) informed the new GTP. One question elicited students’ views on what makes group tuition successful, and their responses are incorporated into the purposes listed in the GTP document.
7. Research has been carried out as to whether online tutorials should be recorded. Smith and Smith (2014) have discovered that many students engage ‘passively’ in tuition by watching

recordings. They suggest that the emphasis of an online tutorial that is being recorded may need to be shifted towards including enough suitable material for the 'passive engagers'. They state that group tuition design must recognise the passive engagers. As a student myself I like to have access to recordings because I can watch them when I am ready. Even when I have attended a session, I find it useful to watch back to remind myself of my learning. I therefore encourage my ALs to record where appropriate.

8. From the literature I have acquired knowledge of the context in which we provide group tuition. I have gained understanding of how the HE environment influences OU practice. I have also discovered what scholarship has taken place within the OU around group tuition. I am often asked "Why introduce a new group tuition policy?" At first I did not know why. Now I understand some of the drivers of the policy, such as tuition reviews and student consultations. My literature review has enabled me to provide a rationale when presenting workshops and briefings, including a workshop at the February 2016 AL MCT conference and a briefing to Learner Support in April 2016. Without my scholarship I would not have had the expertise to deliver these sessions.

5. Existing perceptions of the purposes of group tuition

1. Since the OU began, students have had tutorials. Tutorials were face-to-face and were the opportunity for students to meet and interact with each other and their tutor. On the (History of the OU) website we read:

“It became apparent very early on that the OU would need a system of tuition and counselling which would help students maintain motivation during long periods of independent study.”

The website reports that in 1974 one of the Regional Directors said that students who were unable to travel to tutorials suffered from a sense of isolation. From this I deduce that a purpose of group tuition in the early years of the OU was to motivate students and to help them to avoid feeling isolated.

2. TutorHome provides brief guidance about the purpose of tutorials:

“The purpose of tutorials varies according to faculty and module, and you should ask your line manager what specific tasks you are expected to cover. Having said that, there are three elements that frequently feature in first tutorials.

- Meeting each other
- Understanding the module materials
- Preparation for the first Tutor Marked Assignment (TMA)

The first few weeks of module study are important for students starting to get to grips with the module content. Tutorials are a good opportunity for them to get help with key points, to gain confidence and meet other students.”

<https://learn3.open.ac.uk/mod/oucontent/view.php?id=32872§ion=2> (Accessed 16th March 2016)

As a line manager I find this guidance limited. Hence, more guidance from module teams will be welcome.

3. The GTP document (GTP document 2014) Paragraph 6 says:

“The main purpose of all group tuition is, in the broadest sense, the facilitation of learning. Its ultimate aim must be to improve the learning experience of our students and their academic success, as measured by retention, attainment and progression.”

With the emergence of the University’s Students First Strategy (Students First Strategy 2016) retention, attainment and progression are key. A strategic objective is “More Students Qualifying”. To obtain a qualification, students must progress through completion of their modules. Everything they do as a student should help them achieve this. As a staff tutor visiting tutorials and developing ALs, I realise that in future I should keep this ultimate aim in mind when providing feedback to my ALs.

4. At a workshop I held with colleagues at the OU's 4th eSTEE M Annual Conference April 2015 (Workshop Notes 2015) which asked "What is tuition?", it was suggested that there are many types of tuition depending on the students and the context. Participants' expectations of tuition changed over time with experience. It was felt that students want their individual needs addressed. They want to know how to improve. They want the possibility of interaction, a choice of online or face-to-face tuition, and they want recognition of the constraints on their time imposed by their other life commitments.

A feeling of frustration among ALs in the workshop was apparent. They perceived pressure from their managers to do something different in tutorials from what students want. As a manager I look for interactivity in tutorials. ALs perceived that students often want to be provided with information and answers rather than interact. This is evidence that there is no common understanding among stakeholders about the purposes of group tuition.

5. I and Anne-Marie Gallen (Walshe and Gallen 2015) held a workshop external to the OU at the 2015 First Digital Pedagogies Conference in Doncaster. The workshop explored the question "What do students expect from tuition in a digital learning environment?"

The idea emerged that tuition could mean a variety of things to different people. It was also suggested that tutorials could encompass pastoral care, personal development and employability as well as subject-based support.

Workshop participants identified the insecurities and fears of students. They perceived a need to make the student confident and fully engaged in digital learning. There was felt to be a need to embrace key skills such as verbal communication as well as teaching digital competencies and interactive approaches. Tuition should promote understanding through discovery and active learning.

The recent introduction of student fees was seen as driving student expectations for an excessive level of support. There was much discussion around how student expectations could and should be managed.

It was interesting that, though the focus was on digital learning, perceptions identified in our workshop outside the OU are similar to those identified in our internal OU workshop.

6. Through exploring the OU website and holding the workshops I have discovered that there is no real common understanding of the purposes of group tuition in the OU. Perceptions and expectations are formed through context and experience. Previously I had not questioned my own perceptions and expectations or considered the complex issues involved. I am in a position to promote a common understanding through AL development and module team work.

I will discuss below why it is desirable to have a common understanding and describe my eSTeEM project which forms the core part of my PI.

6. Why is it desirable to have a common understanding?

1. It is desirable to have a common understanding among stakeholders including module teams, staff tutors, ALs and students in order to ensure that group tuition is effective, achieves its purposes and provides an equivalent learning experience to all students.
2. The GTP aims to “bring a new focus and clarity to the use of group tuition within the University and to offer greater quality and parity in the student learning experience.” Paragraph 2 (GTP document 2014). Principle 1 of the Policy states that “All group tuition must have a core purpose which is made clear to students and which should enhance their learning experience.”
3. With the implementation of the GTP, the tuition strategy is incorporated into the learning design of a module. Module teams shall consider the core purposes of the group tuition for their modules during the learning design process so that the group tuition strategy supports the rest of the module design. Module teams shall communicate their intentions for the group tuition to those who will deliver it, namely ALs, with input and assistance from staff tutors, in order that the group tuition fulfils its purposes within the module.
In my role I therefore need to have an appropriate understanding of the purposes of group tuition.
4. I manage ALs and timetable tutorials across several regions. Historically practice has varied across regions, due to geographical differences and student diversity. For instance, international students require online tuition while the student population density in London allows for increased face-to-face provision. Online tutorial provision is flexible while face-to-face schedules depend on venue availability. Some ALs have arranged tutorials after polling their student group for preference. Some regions have timetabled all the allocated tuition hours. Other regions have timetabled some hours and permitted the ALs to use the remaining hours as they see fit.

This was noted in the (MCT Tuition Review 2012) report: “Group tuition hours can also vary across regions. This inconsistency often arises because group tuition strategy is not clearly communicated by Module Teams. It is essential that Module Teams communicate their group tuition strategy for effective implementation by Staff Tutors and ALs.”

Of course, this would not remove inconsistencies across modules.

Managing ALs across several regions has required me to liaise with them to achieve equality of opportunity for all students. It has not always been easy to manage change in their working practices. With the new GTP, the tuition strategy is made explicit, and ALs will be clustered,

enabling equality of tutorial provision to the students in the cluster. I am currently in the process of communicating the new arrangements to my clusters in preparation for modules starting in October 2016. I have provided my ALs with the strategy and suggested how they might share the workload. But I have given them freedom to liaise with each other via a forum and come to a mutual agreement. I will run online meetings with them if they need more help in organising themselves.

5. I have previously encouraged my ALs to collaborate with mixed success.

For TU100 I encouraged ALs to offer shared tutorials to pairs of tutor groups. We also have regional day schools run by a team of ALs. The organisation does not always work well because it needs an AL to lead the planning. One AL team was ill-prepared because no-one took responsibility for the planning. Another AL team ran a well-planned day school because one of them organised it. I will in future delegate leadership more clearly in order for my ALs to take ownership of their collaborative activities. It is also important that I choose a leader carefully, as some ALs have a preference for working alone whereas others collaborate enthusiastically. I try to get to know my ALs so that I can work with their strengths.

TT284 is all online and clustering ALs on that module has been more successful. I used a colleague's model whereby ALs deliver tutorials in their specialisms. The tutors have reported increased tutorial attendance. I had two clusters of three tutors each on the 2015 presentation. They are willing to try a single cluster of six tutors on the 2016 presentation. They suggested that delivering online tutorials in pairs might be appropriate given the potential number of students attending. They are getting used to such arrangements because they have met similar arrangements on other modules and seen how well it works.

While appointing ALs for TM351 I created clusters with GTP in mind. I suggested that ALs consider collaborating in preparation for the next presentation, thus giving them time to absorb the GTP concept. As newly appointed ALs they seem willing to adopt new approaches. I am learning as I go along how to get my AL clusters working effectively to provide equality of opportunity to students and encourage participation. For instance, since each tutorial has specified purposes, ALs can be matched to the tutorials that draw on their strengths.

6. Under the new GTP students will be informed of the purposes of each tutorial. It is hoped that knowing the purposes will encourage more students to attend and benefit from tutorials. It may also avoid dissatisfaction among students with different expectations.

Honeyman (2014) highlights the importance of communicating the purposes of each tutorial:

“...in order to really improve my pedagogy I have needed to return to my teaching roots, for example sharing objectives for each session and encourage students to use these objectives in order to become more skilled learners.”

“... there are needs for different types of tutorials and some should be labeled differently because they are created to provide information, clarity and background usually to help with upcoming assignments.”

The TM351 tuition strategy has taken this into account. I contributed to discussions about the tuition strategy during module production and I wrote the strategy with a staff tutor colleague on behalf of the module team. I was able to apply my experience of implementing tutorials. I like the strategy but will be observing how the tutors and students view it in their survey feedback and forum comments. I will suggest improvements to the strategy if appropriate.

7. My eSTEEeM project 2015

1. In 2015/6 I have been joint project leader of an eSTEEeM project entitled “Perceptions, Expectations and Experience of Group Tuition: towards a shared understanding amongst stakeholders”.

<http://www.open.ac.uk/about/teaching-and-learning/esteem/projects/themes/supporting-students/perceptions-expectations-and-experience-group-tuition-towards>

The aim is to work towards a common understanding of the purposes of group tuition. As described above we have held workshops to discuss perceptions of group tuition both within the OU and externally.

Reports on both workshops have been submitted (Workshop Notes 2015, Walshe and Gallen 2015). The Doncaster workshop report was to appear in the conference proceedings due to be published in November 2015. Unfortunately the proceedings were never published due to changes in staff at Doncaster.

2. As well as conducting a literature review (see above) we have interviewed ALs and conducted a thematic analysis of the transcripts. ALs have expertise in delivering and reflecting on tuition and they also have perceptions about student and module team views.

Emerging themes of the perceived purposes of tutorials include:

- ALs facilitating learning
- Building student confidence and maintaining motivation
- Social interaction/sharing between students
- Helping students to understand threshold concepts
- Developing skills
- Collaboration/group work
- Preparation for assessment
- Challenging students intellectually
- Helping students look ahead to being a professional

The table below compares these purposes with my own list above and with the GTP core purposes (GTP document 2014 paragraph 27) which were informed by (Student consultation 2014).

My List	AL interviewees	GTP policy document
	ALs facilitating learning	Facilitating student achievement of learning outcomes, Enabling staff to gauge strengths and weaknesses of a student through a medium other than the written word in order to offer better support.
An opportunity to meet the tutor and other students and avoid isolation	Social interaction	Connecting students to at least one curriculum-focused OU learning community, building identity as an OU student and a sense of belonging
A means to maintain motivation	maintaining motivation	Strengthening students' interest in the subject and ongoing research in the area to build knowledge and motivation to persist with their studies and achieve their goals
A resource to help understanding of the module material	Helping students to understand threshold concepts	Identifying any challenges with and supporting student understanding of difficult and/or threshold concepts
An opportunity to learn actively via practical activities and interaction with others	Collaboration/group work sharing between students	Fostering dialogue about learning in the context of the academic content of the module and/or qualification
A safe environment in which to learn	Building student confidence	Building confidence through academic engagement with peers, and helping students recognise others' strengths and weaknesses as well as their own
	Developing skills	Enabling the development of students' professional, cognitive and key study skills, employability and PDP (personal development planning) skills, including group working, communications and other social and collaborative learning skills, as appropriate to the module and/or qualification, Helping students to structure their learning through understanding the different roles of learning resources and opportunities
	Preparation for assessment	Helping students to prepare for and succeed in assessment
	Challenging students intellectually	Deepening students' learning and sense-making through greater engagement with learning resources
	Helping students look ahead to being a professional	Contextualizing students' learning within professional and other wider subject settings

The commonalities are striking. My own list is limited to my personal experience. It is encouraging that the AL interviewees list covers the GTP list that was informed by students. From this I can confidently state that ALs understand their students, and we should draw on the extensive expertise of our ALs by consulting them when designing tuition strategies.

3. These findings have implications for my practice in that I need to forge stronger links between ALs and module teams. I must ensure that ALs are fully informed of module developments or initiatives. On TM351 I arranged an online tutor briefing to be given by the module team following the first TMA in preparation for the second TMA and the EMA. I am flagging any tutor issues which require module team response. On modules where I am not a module team member, I have learned to contact the team if issues arise.
4. Ideally there should be an AL on each module team. When the new AL contract is introduced, there should be more opportunity for this to happen. This will be a good consequence of the new AL contract.
5. Another implication for my practice is that I am now more aware of my ALs' expertise and the contribution they can make. I will value their views and adapt accordingly. For instance, on the new module TM351, ALs report that innovative use of iPython Notebooks is causing marking to take longer than it should. With the team I will work on resolving this for the next presentation, using ideas proposed by the ALs.
6. We delivered a talk on our findings and a winning poster at the April 2016 5th eSTEEem conference. Our poster (Fig.1) was voted best poster by delegates resulting in extra publicity for our project on OU Life and on the eSTEEem website. Already a colleague is quoting our poster in a document he is writing for the OU Scholarship website.

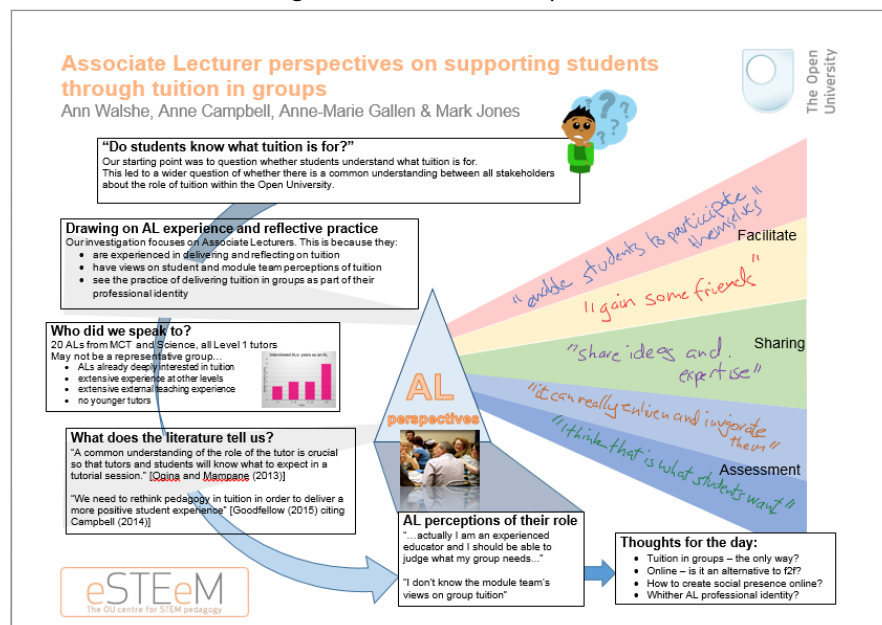


Fig. 1 Poster for 5th eSTEEem conference April 2016

7. We also gave a talk at the 2016 HEA STEM conference and are preparing a paper for publication thus disseminating and influencing beyond the OU.

8. Conclusion: How can I promote a common understanding?

1. As a staff tutor and module team member, I am in a position to apply the understanding I have developed through my PI to influence perceptions and expectations of the purposes of group tuition in the OU.

I am cultivating my community of practice by engaging in discussions and sharing information as follows:

2. I have used my understanding of the purposes of group tuition to influence the TM351 module tuition strategy. For instance, I know that students value an introductory tutorial where they can get to know their tutor, so I suggested the first tutorial should be for tutor group only. I understand that assignment preparation is not necessarily delivered by the student's own tutor, so I suggested that the assignment preparation tutorials can be for the cluster.
3. I have delivered development sessions to ALs in Manchester and Gateshead on group tuition and the new GTP. Feedback from those sessions informed me of issues that concern ALs.

ALs perceived group tuition to mean team teaching. They were concerned that the tutor-student relationship would be broken and it would be impossible to tailor a tutorial to students' needs without knowledge of their strengths and weaknesses. ALs also questioned why the GTP was being introduced when they perceive that existing arrangements work better.

Through my scholarship I have gained the knowledge I need to be able to address their concerns.

I recently shared these questions and concerns with a colleague who was planning to run a local AL development session on group tuition. Following that session, we discussed how best to deliver the group tuition presentation and workshop for the February 2016 MCT AL conference. There were around 250 AL attendees, providing a perfect opportunity to disseminate my understanding.

Our workshop addressed What GTP is Not. For instance, it's not necessarily team-teaching, it's not about removing face-to-face tuition; it's not about throwing away good practice. I also talked about the history of looking at tuition in MCT and in the OU, in particular the findings from (MCT Tuition Review 2012). Workshop participants were then encouraged to explore the implications of GTP from their perspective. There were mixed responses and there was

particular concern about the booking system. At the time there was no available detail. Participants would have preferred to find out exactly how GTP will be implemented on their own modules.

I was granted funding for an AL to write up and categorise the workshop notes. I produced a document which I hope will feed into future staff development events. Concerns, questions and positives for each category are presented along with a response. For instance, under the AL contracts category, ALs are concerned that cluster managers will be remote and out of touch. My response is that the cluster manager will be their tuition task manager, that is, the staff tutor they know, and will not be remote. I intend to invite staff tutor colleagues to contribute to the response in order to capture their expertise and maximise the usefulness of the document as a staff development resource.

4. Over the coming months I will be involved in workshops with colleagues to work out the details of implementing the GTP on each module. I will be able to feed in my understanding. I expect to subsequently run AL development sessions and liaise with them to develop a shared practice.
5. My eSTEEeM project will result in publications and other dissemination opportunities such as seminars or further workshops. These should extend beyond my faculty and the OU to educators more generally.
6. I aim to take my eSTEEeM project further. Having focused initially on AL perceptions, the next step will be to bid for a project to focus on students' perceptions.
7. I also plan to evaluate the effectiveness of the GTP implementation in my faculty. I have already begun to interview key people and develop my project plan. This will require me to engage in further scholarship around evaluation techniques as well as to investigate how my project can have impact in the faculty. My PI has given me the confidence to do this.

References

- Atkins, Pat (2013) 'Existing Research into Tuition in the OU – October 2013 updated version of July 2013 paper' Available at <https://intranet9.open.ac.uk/collaboration/ScholarshipExchange/Wiki/Document.aspx?DocumentID=921> (Accessed January 2016)
- Brown, Laurinda (1994) 'Working together', in Selinger, M. Teaching Mathematics, London, Routledge, Chapter 19.
- Browne (2010) 'Securing a sustainable future for higher education: an independent review of higher education funding and student finance [Browne report]' Available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-browne-report-higher-education-funding-and-student-finance> (Accessed February 2016)
- eSTeEM project (2015) 'Perceptions, Expectations and Experience of Group Tuition: towards a shared understanding amongst stakeholders' Project leaders: Anne-Marie Gallen and Ann Walshe <http://www.open.ac.uk/about/teaching-and-learning/esteem/projects/themes/supporting-students/perceptions-expectations-and-experience-group-tuition-towards> (Accessed September 2015)
- Goodfellow, Robin (2014) 'Students' attitudes to Face-to-face and Online (Elluminate) Tutorials: 2012J Tutorials Survey – report on findings', Available on the OU Scholarship platform at <https://intranet9.open.ac.uk/collaboration/Scholarship-Exchange/documents/Results\%20of\%20Tutorials\%20Survey\%202013.docx> (Accessed 28 September 2015)
- Government (2015) '2010 to 2015 government policy: access to higher education', Published 12 December 2012, Updated 8 May 2015. Available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/2010-to-2015-government-policy-access-to-higher-education> (Accessed February 2016)
- GTP (2014) Group Tuition Policy. Available at <http://intranet6.open.ac.uk/learning-teaching-office/learning-and-teaching-centre/projects-and-programmes/group-tuition-policy> (Accessed February 2016)
- GTP document (2014) Group Tuition Policy document. Available at https://learn3.open.ac.uk/pluginfile.php/93636/mod_resource/content/2/S-2014-04-09-Group-Tuition-Policy\%5B1\%5D.pdf (Accessed February 2016)
- GTP implementation website (2016) Group Tuition Policy implementation website. Available at <https://learn3.open.ac.uk/course/view.php?id=300503> (Accessed February 2016)
- HE White Paper (2011) 'Higher education White Paper - students at the heart of the system'. Available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/higher-education-white-paper-students-at-the-heart-of-the-system> (Accessed February 2016)

HEFCE (2015) "Delivering opportunities for students and maximising their success: Evidence for policy and practice 2015-2020", Published July 2015, Available at <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/media/HEFCE,2014/Content/Pubs/2015/201514/HEFCE2015-14.pdf> (Accessed February 2016)

History of the OU. Available at <http://www.open.ac.uk/researchprojects/historyofou/story/national-and-regional-presence> (Accessed February 2016)

Honeyman, Mandy (2014) 'Developing pedagogy to promote effective student interactivity in synchronous web-based learning environments', A Practitioner Inquiry prepared for FHEA application, Available on the OU Scholarship Platform at https://intranet9.open.ac.uk/collaboration/Scholarship-Exchange/documents/Developing_Pedagogy_in_Synchronous_Environments.pdf (Accessed 28 September 2015)

Macdonald, J. and Campbell, A., 2012. Demonstrating online teaching in the disciplines. A systematic approach to activity design for online synchronous tuition. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 43(6), pp.883-891.

MCT Tuition Review (2012) 'Final MCT Tuition Review Report (March 2012)', Available at <http://learn.open.ac.uk/course/view.php?id=7697&m=3> (Accessed 27 January 2015)

Smith, Donna and Smith, Katy (2014) 'The Case for 'Passive' Learning – The 'Silent' Community of Online Learners', Available on the OU Scholarship Platform at https://intranet9.open.ac.uk/collaboration/Scholarship-Exchange/documents/Passive_learning_published.pdf (Accessed 28 September 2015)

Student consultation (2014) <http://learn1.open.ac.uk/mod/forumng/view.php?id=9134> (accessed May 2016)

Students First Strategy (2016) Students First Strategy project site <https://intranet7.open.ac.uk/collaboration/emerging-strategy-2016/SitePages/Home.aspx> (accessed June 2016)

Walshe, Ann and Gallen, Anne-Marie (2015) 'Digital pedagogies conference report' (Private communication 2015)

Wenger, Etienne (2009) 'Communities of practice a brief introduction', Available at <http://neillthew.typepad.com/files/communities-of-practice.pdf> (Accessed 28 September 2015)

Wood, David (1988) 'How Children Think and Learn', Oxford, Blackwell.

Workshop Notes (2015) <http://www.open.ac.uk/about/teaching-and-learning/esteem/sites/www.open.ac.uk/about.teaching-and-learning.esteem/files/files/ecms/web-content/2015-04-16-Gallen-and-Walshe-conference-workshop-notes.pdf> (Accessed January 2016)