TUTOR EFFECTIVENESS: CONCEPTIONS OF STUDENT TEACHERS AT ZIMBABWE OPEN UNIVERSITY IN MASVINGO

Ngara Rosemary  
Zimbabwe Open University, Zimbabwe

Ngwarai Richard  
Zimbabwe Open University, Zimbabwe


ABSTRACT

Tutoring is an age-old practice. There are some requisites for tutors to be effective. Content knowledge is an essential ingredient for effective tutoring and many other personal attributes. If a tutor is received as genuine and having a genuine desire to listen, students will be willing to open up and discuss their problems. Good mastery of subject matter by the tutor contributes to tutor effectiveness as students turn up for tutorials if they feel they benefit from tutors’ contributions. Much of the quality of tutoring depends on the attitude of the instructor and their capabilities in using technology. Research suggests that the effectiveness of distance learning is based on preparation, excellent communication skills and the instructors’ understanding. A survey was conducted at Zimbabwe Open University in Masvingo region to establish tutees’ perceptions of the effectiveness of the tutors’ teaching courses in the Bachelor of Education in Early Childhood Development Programme (BEDECD) using questionnaires. Respondents were of the opinion that most tutors had impressive subject mastery and were usually thoroughly prepared for tutorials and methodology used was viewed by most participants as suitable. However, there were sentiments that tutors hardly communicated with students outside tutorial sessions. Tutors’ marking was viewed as communicative, but feedback was not timely and tutors did not use any modern teaching media. Some of the personal attributes such as openness, humility and accessibility were viewed as wanting on the part of some tutors. The study recommended that more tutor workshops be run to emphasize and reemphasize essential ingredients of effective tutoring and that the tutors make use of technology available at the regional campus, among other things.

Key words: Early childhood development, tutor effectiveness

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The Department of Education offers more than ten courses, among which are; The Master of Education in Educational Management degree, Bachelor of Education in Educational Management, Post Graduate Diploma in Education, Bachelor of Education in Youth Studies Degree and Bachelor of Education Early Childhood Development Degree (BEDECD). The BEDECD which is both a pre-service and in-service programme was introduced for study at ZOU in September 2010 as there is a perceived need of more Early Childhood caregiv ers / teachers because like most countries in the world, Zimbabwe considers Early Childhood
education as a right of every child. The broad goal of BEDECD is to produce a practitioner who is competent in managing Early Childhood programmes for the 0 – 8 years olds. It is designed to capacity-develop students to become effective teachers of young children through distance teaching and open learning. The vision of the department of education as regards the BEDECD programme is of a student who is a creative and reflective thinker, (BEDECD Tutorial letterNo.1p.2). BEDECD is a four year programme and several courses are offered for study (See Appendix –A).

The minimum duration of the degree programme is six semesters and a maximum of sixteen semesters. BEDECD like all other ZOU programmes is implemented through open and distance learning (ODL) to youths and adult learners. The delivery strategies are mainly: Printed modules, Face to face tutorials and Internet.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Students viewed some tutors at the Zimbabwe Open University as ineffective in some respects. The study was carried out to determine students’ opinions on the effectiveness of tutors in the Bachelor of Early Childhood degree programme.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

• In which aspects were BEDECD tutors viewed as effective?
• Which forms of ineffectiveness of BEDECD tutors were perceived by students?
• Which factors contributed to tutor effectiveness or in effectiveness?
• How could tutor effectiveness be further enhanced in BEDECD?

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

It was hoped that tutors could use the study as a platform to reflect on their practices and that tutoring-linked challenges could be addressed through efforts at the national and regional campuses. Since the BEDECD programme was introduced recently, its continued implementation would benefit from the findings and recommendations of the study. It was also hoped that insights gained through the study might stimulate further study.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Tutor
A tutor is a teacher, usually instructing individual students and thus s/he is a member of staff responsible for the teaching and supervision of a certain number of students. They act as a guardian, (Collins Concise Dictionary). A tutor’s goal is to be able to guide the student in solving the problem.

Tutorial
It is a period of intensive tuition given by a tutor to an individual student or a small group of students. Tutoring in open and distance learning (ODL) is designed to:
• bring an interpersonal element to the learning process,
• foster collaborative learning and support in small groups and
• enrich print-based learning through a variety of practical and interactive exercises (O’Rouke, 2003).

Critical roles of tutors in ODL
Subject Matter Expert (SME)

A tutor should be a subject matter expertise. The most obvious requirement to be an effective teacher is the content knowledge of the subject (Moreno, 2009). Regular tutor led contact sessions are an important learner support strategy that may be an incentive for student enrolment in the programme (Daweti, 2005). A tutor should present the content in a convincing way that will inspire hope and confidence among learners.

Counsellor
As a counselor, the tutor should give students moral support. Being trustworthy, flexible and approachable are some of the necessary tutor attributes for one to effectively counsel students. Tutors should be perceived by students as caring and approachable (Armstrong, 1996).

Assessor
It is one of the roles of a tutor to collect, measure and interpret information and relate it to students’ responses or performances to the process of instruction (Curzon, 1990). Tutors assess students work to measure attainment, to determine if learning and programme goals were achieved, to decipher root of students’ problems in a course and to obtain some basis for the evaluation and improvement of teaching, learning and programme effectiveness (Curzon, 1990). Students value unambiguous expectation. Assessment should provide effective, constructive and timeous feedback, (Duminy & Sohnghe, 1986). According to Poonwassie (2001) the main areas of tutors’ sustaining responsibilities are in initiating and maintaining supportive contact with learners.

Tutor effectiveness
A tutor undertakes multiple tasks that demand a variety of abilities. Generally, a tutor should have an academic qualification that is at least one level higher than the course tutored. Essential qualities include interpersonal skills, organization and attention to detail, enthusiasm, creativity, empathy, computer skills and commitment to students and their learning. There are some things one can do to increase their effectiveness as a tutor such as; teaching using more than one learning style, keeping one’s skills and knowledge base up to date by studying one’s field of tutoring, and incorporating effective media in one’s tutoring session, when applicable (Moreno, 2009 and O’Rouke, 2003).

It goes without saying that ODL tutors need to strive to use strategies that promote deeper learning, and learning at tutorial sessions is best facilitated by non-lecture oriented techniques. When students participate in learner dialogue they learn to argue purposefully and present their ideas rationally, learners enquire and critically evaluate knowledge presented by others and experience collective advances in knowledge. Tutors in ODL should also explain the curriculum design of their courses and the expected contribution by students and importance of collaborative learning. Tutors are also expected to assist ODL students acquire suitable study skills. Issues covered under theoretical framework informed researchers about key aspects linked to the study.
METHODOLOGY

Design

The qualitative design was employed to conduct the study. The study sought to establish conceptions of BEDECD students on the effectiveness of their tutors. Babbie (1997) is of the view that surveys are appropriate where perceptions and views of subjects of a research are sought. The study was a case of BEDECD programme and Masvingo Regional campus.

Sample

All BEDECD students in the first and second intakes at the Masvingo regional campus made the population of the study. All the ten students who attended one weekend school took part in the study.

Instruments

The researchers used questionnaires which were self administered. The questionnaire had three sections, two sections with statements on some probable qualities and roles/activities of tutors and students were requested to indicate whether or not they agreed or disagreed with each of the statements, making their choices between YES and NO. In addition, the third section of the questionnaire had open ended questions which the participants had to answer.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Data were presented qualitatively using thick descriptions. Some tables and figures were used to aid researchers to present data. Data were organised according to research questions in the mind of the researchers.

Limitations

Since the study was just a case study of BEDECD tutors at Masvingo Regional campus, findings cannot be generalised to other ZOU programmes and other Zimbabwe Open University regional campuses although the picture maybe a replica of what obtains in the minds of students operating elsewhere in open and distance education at ZOU and other parts of the world. Lack of instrument triangulation, could affect the validity of the findings of the study.

DATA PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION

Students’ responses to statements in section A were as is shown in table 1a.
### Table 1a. Student views on tutor effectiveness on items 1-11

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>YES (N)</th>
<th>NO (N)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Your ECD tutors have full passion for tutoring you.</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 ECD tutors can adapt and change to meet students` needs.</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 ECD tutors thoroughly prepare for tutorials.</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 ECD tutors have a sense of purpose.</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 ECD tutors have expectations of success for all students.</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 They are reflective.</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 They are open.</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 They give adequate guidance on assignment and exam writing</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 They counsel students when necessary.</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 ECD Tutors report for tutorials in/on time.</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 They are good role models of appropriate learning behaviour.</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Fig.1a Student views on tutor effectiveness on items 1-11**
All the ten students were of the mind that ECD tutors had full passion for tutoring them, tutors thoroughly prepared for tutorials, tutors had a sense of purpose and tutors had expectations of success for all the students. In addition, all the ten students felt that tutors were reflective but only six were in agreement with the view that ECD tutors were open. All the ten participants were of the view that their tutors gave students adequate guidance on the writing of examinations and assignments and that they counselled students when necessary. Nine out of ten students expressed the view that ECD tutors were adaptable to the needs of students and that they were good role models of appropriate learning behaviour. However, only seven out of ten students expressed the view that tutors reported for tutorials on or in time while the other three felt otherwise.

Students’ responses to statements in section B were as is shown in Table 1b.

Table 1b. Student views on tutor effectiveness on items 1-9

<p>| | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>SECTION B</strong></td>
<td><strong>YES</strong></td>
<td><strong>NO</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>ECD tutors use appropriate participative methodology.</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>They are respectful of the students</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>They have impressive content knowledge.</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>They communicate effectively in tutorials</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Their marking is communicative.</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>They promote student learning through effective media use.</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>They are approachable.</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>They provide quick feedback on assignments.</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>They clarify course objectives and goals to students</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 1b. Student views on tutor effectiveness on items 1-9
In most respects, ECD tutors were perceived as effective in tutor cited aspects of teaching, and personal qualities shown in the table above. Nonetheless, opinions were quite divided on whether tutors were effective in as far as promoting student learning through media was concerned. Seven out of ten participants were of the mind that tutors did not give quick feedback on assignments.

In Section C of the questionnaire students were asked four questions and their responses were as tabulated in the tables and figures that follow.

When students were requested to state some two areas in which they thought their ECD tutors were not effective, their responses were as shown in Table 2 and Fig. 2.

Table 2. Areas in which students thought tutors were ineffective

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stated form of ineffectiveness/weakness</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not humble</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not accessible to students</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not giving quick feedback on marking</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of use of e-mail, sms, and video conferences (combined)</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig.2 Areas in which students thought tutors were ineffective
Providing delayed feedback was cited most frequently by participants, followed by lack of use e-mail, electronic messages on mobile phones and video conferences and lack of tutor humility was stated by one participant.

Students’ responses on factors that may contribute to tutor ineffectiveness were as shown in the table below.

Table 3. Factors viewed as contributing to tutor ineffectiveness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stated variable</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unavailability of modules</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-provision and non-use of modern technology to amplify course materials(combined)</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undesirable qualities of tutor</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Student opinions are further presented in Fig. 3.

Fig.3. Factors viewed as contributing to tutor ineffectiveness
Unavailability of modules was on the top list, followed by non-provision and non-use of modern technology and lastly undesirable qualities of tutor which was stated by one participant.

When the students were asked to suggest ways by which ECD tutor effectiveness could be enhanced, the following suggestions were made:

- Being time conscious
- Timeous provision of modules
- Using concrete media
- Communicating frequently with students
- E-mailing students
- Using the video conferencing facility
- Tutoring using different learning styles

**DISCUSSION**

In which aspects were BECD tutors viewed as effective?

Effective tutoring is partly determined by use of appropriate tutoring skills. According to the student views, BEDECD tutors used several effective tutoring skills. All the ten participants viewed tutors as being effective by thoroughly preparing for tutorials. Preparation is a key to any tutoring activity (Kriyacou, 1993). The general view held by students could be attributed to the probable determination and enunciation of tutorial objectives, tutorial content, and methodology and tutee involvement. Another way by which all participants viewed their tutors as effective in executing their duties was that they were reflective. Reflection is central to effective tutoring, as it is the basis upon which tutoring problems can be diagnosed and improvements can be made, (Kriyacou, 1993 and Souza, 1996). All the ten students viewed their tutors as giving adequate guidance on assignment and examination writing. These activities are central to the learning and assessment of students and contribute to their award of the degree. In addition most of the students acknowledged that tutors used appropriate participative methodology. According to Gurney (2007) participation is one of the touchstones tutors should keep for their practice. An effective tutor brings a sense of personal involvement to the classroom (Wolk, 2003) and effective interaction creates an ethos of learning that will allow tutors to feel comfortable in the learning environment. All the students viewed tutors’ marking as communicative. Tutor effectiveness in skills directly linked to actual teaching could be attributed to the teacher training which all the BEDECD tutors had. The majority of students (7/10) were in agreement with the opinion that BEDECD tutors clarified course goals and objectives to them. Maybe such a response hinges on the need for tutors to be clear about what they will be trying to accomplish. According to Hawes (1999) if one does not know where they are going any route will lead them there.

Effective tutoring also hinges on tutor attributes. All the ten participants viewed their tutors as having full passion for tutoring team. Tutor enthusiasm nurtures the tutees’ desire to learn (Holt
The passion that a tutor has for his/her subject creates a world that moves the ritual of didactic activities (Robinson as cited in Gurney, 2007) and this comes in various forms. Most students were of the mind that the tutors were effective in adapting and changing to meet students’ needs. May be this general opinion could be attributed to tutor resourcefulness where curriculum materials may not be available or where tutees have different needs. All the students were of the opinion that BEDECD tutors had sense of purpose and this relates clearly with their opinions on tutor passion. All students further acknowledged that BEDECD tutors had expectations for success in all students. Maybe this could be attributed to the fact that BEDECD students would have gone through some other levels of learning successfully, some evidence that they can be tutored effectively and so tutors reflect a positive opinion as regards what students can do. The majority of the participants (8/10) expressed the views that tutors were respectful of the students. Probably this is so, since all the BEDECD students are adults and as adults they bring stocks of knowledge and experience as they pursue the BEDECD programme. Nine out of ten students viewed BEDECD tutors as having impressive content. So most students viewed tutor effectiveness in terms of their tutoring skills and tutor attributes.

**Forms of tutor ineffectiveness perceived by students**

Five out of ten students were of the mind that tutors did not promote student learning through effective media, in spite of the fact that media use is effective even with adults. 7/10 of the students gave the opinion that tutors did not provide quick feedback on assignments. Maybe this issue could be attributed to the fact that at times, the time between the handing in of the first and second assignment is close between each other. Four of the students, were of the opinion that tutors were not open. Such an opinion could be linked to tutor personality or the rather short contact times between tutors and students. Twice, it was indicated by some tutees that tutors were not humble, and were not accessible to students. Tutors were also viewed as failing to use e-mail, Sms and video conference to enhance communication between them and their tutees. Such problems could be attributed to tutors with teaching experience but are unfamiliar with Open and Distance Learning (ODL). Nonetheless, it is important for tutors to communicate constantly with their tutees who are most of the time separated from them by time and distance (Zimeyov, 1998).

**Factors viewed as contributing to tutor ineffectiveness**

The availability of modules, non – provision and non use of modern technology to amplify course materials and some undesirable qualities of tutor were stated as variables that contribute to tutor effectiveness. Relevant resources necessary for successful implementation need to be provided (Mapolisa, Matsinde, Mawere, & Zivanayi, 2006). According to Kerby (2003) technologies are fast advancing as we are living in the computer age and there is no doubt that the development of the internet technologies provides ODL with exciting new dimensions of learning.

**CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

In many respects, students’ opinions were that ECD tutors were effective. They felt tutors had impressive content knowledge, thoroughly prepared for the tutorials and employed participative methodology. Tutor marking was considered communicative. Nonetheless, provision of feedback
on assignments was not timeous. Non use of modern teaching media was another way in which tutors were viewed as being ineffective. Tutors were also regarded as not being open, humble and easily accessible. Lack of curriculum materials such modules, non-use of modern technology and some undesirable qualities of tutors were cited as some probable causes of tutor ineffectiveness.

The researchers recommend the following;

- Running of workshops by Zimbabwe Open University at Regional campuses, which are geared towards appraising part-time tutors of their roles and responsibilities that are targeted at improving their professional competence. Workshop activities should be meaningful by simulating real life situations the tutors are likely to encounter in tutoring ODL students. The general purpose of such workshop should hinge on emphasizing and reemphasizing ingredients of effective tutoring such as good tutor qualities and promotion of tutor group skill development.

- Constant interaction between tutors and tutees, for instance through use of sms and e-mail to help overcome student isolation and to discuss student issues as they arise.

- Use of modern technology available at ZOU by tutors to enhance the quality of their tutoring as there are several technologies such as Overhead Projectors and Power point accessories which are available for use by tutors at the ZOU regional campus for the benefit of students.

- Timely provision of modules by ZOU to students so that students have some good foundation upon which they can depend as they embark their studies at the beginning of each semester.

REFERENCES


**APPENDIX –A**

Some courses on offer in the BEDECD Programme

BECD 101 Historical and Philosophical Foundations of ECD
BECD 102 Sociological Foundations of ECD
BECD 103 Theories of Child Development
BECED 105  Learning and Development through Play
BECED 106  Health, Nutrition and Safety in ECD
BECED 104  Curriculum Issues in ECD programmes
BECED 107  Mentoring In ECD
BECED 109  Communication Skills
BECED 202  Professional Studies
BECED 204  Language Arts in ECD
BECED 206  Expressive Arts in ECD
BECED 210  Planning and Development of ECD Curriculum
BECED 212  Media Science in ECD
BECED 302  Philosophical and Historical Foundations in ECD
BECED 303  Teaching Practice