

Personal Tutoring: Notes from a small conference

Dr Ruth Payne

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Dr Ruth Payne

Leeds University Language Centre Director

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The purpose of this short report is not to wave any flag for personal tutoring, nor to press people to undertake even more work in this area. It is simply to highlight things I learnt at the recent conference and to reassure everyone that at Leeds, we are very much **on top of our game**.

The Keynote speaker was Liz Thomas, who outlined the history of personal tutoring from its inception as tutors in *loco parentis* - because students didn't reach adulthood until they were 21 – to the league-table-driven provision we have today. More importantly, though, Liz Thomas is author of HEA's What Works?

(<https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/individuals/student-success/retention/what-works>), looking at student retention and success; she is now working on Phase 2

(<http://www.lizthomasassociates.co.uk/phase2.html>).

The key issues for students are not surprising:

1. **Personal touch and personal knowledge – *he knew my name***
2. **Sense of belonging**
3. **Tutoring managed as part of mainstream activities – not as an add-on**
4. **Tutoring/support is delivered to all, so it's best to embed tutoring in main teaching**
5. **Peer relationships**

6. **Students' identities as learners in HE**
7. **Relevance to students' interests and to future individual goals**
8. **Meaningful relationship between staff and students – approachable staff**
9. **Most effective advice is given via academic skills teaching, by academic staff**

Of course, the **timing of the delivery of advice** is always critical, and students continue to benefit when information is not just passed on all at once. The focus during induction should be on **friendships** with other students and on **relationships** with staff, with guidance to all necessary information coming later on through those social links, but not as a means of forging them. This feels like a real **endorsement for peer mentoring** and support from other students as well as from staff. It also suggests clearly that **induction is more than 'Induction Week'**. Most importantly, perhaps, it highlights the need for **early contact with personal tutees**.

Our personal tutoring through Leeds for Life is already based on a **curriculum model** that includes advice and guidance in overall programme provision. This differs from pastoral models that separate support from academic work, or professional services models of tutoring that offer access to a range of support agencies. What we do as personal tutors in Leeds is **establish the relationship** the students find so important, then **guide students towards other services** where necessary. Key to this is that academic guidance remains part of the academic experience overall, not an add-on component, and students have been seen to value this as a **key connection to academic staff**. However, we cannot overlook the fact that there are still ways to improve our work as personal tutors, and this can be achieved through transparent discussions about what we are trying to provide, as well as through provision of a range of **accessible resources to support colleagues** new to personal tutoring, or simply new to Leeds.

What's happening elsewhere?

One of the sessions referred to tutoring as 'Cinderella' – the poor relation to academic skills and subject teaching. This institution set up a Learning Hub to address retention problems and student engagement, employing recent graduates as interns to set up events and manage social media. Again, the message was that **social integration is a clear route to academic investment and success**. I wondered if a learning hub would separate academic skills from subject learning and remove a crucial point of contact for personal tutors and other academic staff, but we do need to **take every opportunity to signpost Skills@library**, perhaps going so far as to set up a schedule of prompts for 1st years as they reach key assessment stages, reminding them of available support.

Another session discussed coaching skills and how we can learn from other models, such as charities and businesses, using coaching skills to establish the relationship at the very start; this discussion referred to the **importance of silence in personal tutorials**, to allow students to gather their thoughts and then explain what is most important to them as individuals. Another session discussed the 'patchwork tutoring' made up of peer mentoring, personal tutors, senior tutors (more a programme support role) and the clear links between them.

Some institutions recommended setting a piece of assessed work in core modules to form the basis of the first tutorial meeting. Having asked the tutee how they approached the assignment, discussions then naturally lead to key issues such as time management and writing style. This then provides an opportunity to **set specific targets for each tutee**, with an end of year performance review reflecting on the extent to which the targets have been met.

The very **important topic of CPD** as personal tutors was discussed in the final session I attended, including **training on listening and advising**, and the provision of an interactive pdf as an online **resource for personal tutors**. The issue with this will always be keeping

resources up-to-date and fresh, but it's definitely worth doing. One very important point from this session was the provision of clear indicators of **what the personal tutoring relationship is *not*** – and that sets very useful boundaries for those tutors who have concerns about how far tutoring should be taking us in terms of giving advice to our students.

Some take-home points:

- **Leeds for Life provides an exceptional model of Personal Tutoring**
- **The next step in LCS must be to embed Personal Tutoring fully within our programme**
- **We must make full use of our new peer mentoring scheme**
- **Keep signposting Skills@library**
- **We need to monitor attendance at personal tutorials**
- **There is a key link between personal tutoring and induction**
- **Relevance is equally important to students and staff - why are we doing this? – and that will mean tailoring tutoring to different subject areas and student cohorts**
- **There's a real need to shake off any vestiges of the 'poor relation'**

* United Kingdom Advising and Tutoring group