Peer tutoring at university: a citizenship experience

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The first year of higher education (particularly at a university) is a real challenge for most of the students attending university for the first time. They are faced with multiple changes ranging from adaptation to a new way of life - a more impersonal one where spacio-temporal guidelines have to be developed, where the access to autonomy may be experienced in a more or less successful way - to the learning of pedagogic modalities different from those applied in secondary education; a larger number of students; a more distant relationship with teachers; abstract and more extended curriculum content; less explicit evaluation criteria, etc.

In these circumstances and in spite of some democratisation in the access to higher education, the rates of failure and drop-out in the first year may reach in some faculties 60% - an unacceptable human and social charge. It is true that generally the first year(s) of university studies privilege a linear system of knowledge transmission: presentation, reception and re-presentation of the subject content: the students are, in the proper sense of the word, listeners to a privileged relation established between teacher (or researcher) and knowledge. The university teaches, and temporarily excludes the student from the intellectual proceedings leading to apprenticeship. This exclusion, and the partition of the subject matter, contribute to the development of a sort of intellectual infirmity, to the impossibility of 'thinking around', to the absence of intellectual enterprise composed of a multiplicity of cognitive conflicts and sources of learning in the largest sense of the expression (Dupont & Ossandon, 1994).

This pessimistic situation contrasts with the findings of studies of success factors in higher education. These include an emphasis on the primary role of the student as social actor as well as learner, where the student is the central element in her/his own training (Frenay, Noël, Parmentier & Romainville, 1998). The main task of the university should be to stimulate this kind of student engagement and to support students' active participation within the institution.

It is in the context of struggle against failure and dropping out that the University of Mons-Hainaut's Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences has developed, in addition to other supporting programmes, a tutoring experiment with peers, the main objective of which is to enhance the integration of young students into the university environment by offering them affective, cognitive and social support from their more experienced peers.

Tutoring among peers: principle and organisation

Tutoring is a sponsorship system where experienced students (called tutors or monitors) are in charge of a group of first-year students (generally called students or tutored). A group of first-year students are taken in charge by a student-tutor. The tutor is able a relationship with the younger students different from those which might be formed with an assistant or a teacher. Meetings between tutors and students take place at least once a week at mutually agreed times.

In the course of these meetings different activities are organised: some are compulsory, others are free and left to the tutors' and students' choice. There are two types of compulsory activities:

- each pupil has to explain to the other students of the group some parts of what s/he learned and mastered;
- each pupil must propose to her/his peers a personal socio-cultural theme to stimulate debate.

Both tasks allow the first grade students to 'practise knowledge'; this means to master the subject matter properly and to structure it for others. It also provides a good preparation for oral examinations, by making students aware of their verbal abilities and capacity to react properly to others' questions, and by allowing an evaluation of their degree of self-confidence. The progressive realisation of a common evaluation matrix of statements confront students and tutors with the search for pertinent criteria which will be used in the training context.

In addition to these compulsory activities, tutorial sessions include free exchanges which promote communication techniques, the construction of mutual support networks, the sharing of study material (notes, exchange of books and documents) and moral support from peers in what might otherwise be painful circumstances.

In this way, the tutoring experience encourages, in a context of friendship, a more dynamic relationship with the subject-matter, the culture and one self's knowledge.

Moreover, the practice of tutoring is for the tutor a real 'professional' experience: tutors have to manage a group situation, to evaluate the quality of the students' performances, to respond to the specific needs of each member of the group, to negotiate with teachers, to listen, to reassure - in short, this engagement is particularly rewarding and prepares the tutor-student for a psychological or pedagogic profession.

The tutorial experience is supervised regularly: there are discussion sessions with all the first-year students, individualised feed-backs to tutors and individual discussions based on diaries relating the activities at each weekly session. The object of the diary is that it reflects the tutor's life experience. It allows the supervisor(s) to have a better understanding of the group's experiences and becomes as such a dialectic instrument. The tutoring experience is officially acknowledged in the university's curriculum and is validated as a 30-hour course in the first candidature. It is also an option in the curriculum for tutors.

Tutoring: a research-action approach

The tutorial experience is neither an unchangeable nor a fixed procedure: on the contrary, it is constantly remodelled during the academic year according to each group's evolution and its development is enriched by information emerging from those most concerned: the students themselves. This information is collected through different and complementary instruments: collective interviews with both the students and their tutors, questionnaires presented at different points of the year, the diaries of the tutors.

In 1999-2000 a more systematic research was undertaken. The participants were:

	Students' questionnaires		
Participation in the experiment	I	II	III
163 students	132	111	84
	Tutors' questionnaires		
26 tutors		20	

163 students and 26 tutors participated in the research. 132 students responded to the first questionnaire, distributed at the beginning of the year; 111 to the second questionnaire after the January examination session, and 84 students completed the third questionnaire just before the June examinations. The following reflections arise from the analysis of the data.

Tutoring among peers: an experiment in citizenship

Although the main objective of the tutorial experiment does not explicitly privilege education for citizenship, in practice it is an application of the principles of citizenship.

Place and belonging

One of the aims of the tutorial experiment is the integration of newcomers into the university community. To achieve this, small groups are formed under the leadership of a more advanced student. In the groups, the new students find their place and progressively build up a feeling of belonging to a community: firstly that of the tutorial group, then among all the students of the first year, the faculty of students and finally the whole university. Of course, the feeling of belonging does not develop immediately; it rests on common experiences and is established through interpersonal privileged relations. In this context, each student becomes a recognised member of a wider group.

The young first-year students perceive the importance of this social integration. We asked them at the beginning of the academic year what they were expecting from a tutorial system:

Table 1

Pupils' expectations	*T = 146*	% of subjects
From a social point of view		
- the establishment of new relations with other students	24	22
- support for integration into the university system	16	14,3
- support in learning to speak better in public	15	13,7
- mutual help in a group	15	13,7
	(T = 70)	**(47.9)**
From a cognitive point of view		
- getting better information, explanations about lectures, examinations and expectations of the teachers	31	28.4
- advice and support in view of success	15	13.7
- a better method of work	5	4.6
	(T = 51)	**(34.9)**
From an emotional point of view		
- moral support, encouragement, self confidence	25	22.9
	(T = 25)	**(17.2)**

Their initial expectations relate to social integration into their new context through the establishment of new relations among peers (22%), the access to the social norms of the university system (14.3%), the practice of verbal competence (13.7%) and the development of an intra-group spirit of solidarity (13.7%).

Cognitive expectations are also well represented: they relate particularly to the need for information about lectures and examinations (28.4%). There is more need for information about 'working rules' than for the learning itself (13.7%) or working methods (4.6%).

At the emotional level, students expect moral support from their tutors.

In the second round of interviews in February (after the first examination), the same students considered tutoring a particularly beneficial contribution socially, placing priority on:

- the establishment of new relations among students   40.7%
- a fair understanding within the group   37.2%
- the exchange of ideas, emotions and activities   25.1%
- the possibility of speaking in public   5.8%.

At the end of the academic year (May), the students considered that the five most important benefits they had gained from tutoring were:

1. information about the examinations and the requirements of the teachers   98.8%
2. the establishment of new friendship links   65.1%
3. the development of a spirit of mutual support within the group   53.5%
4. moral support   52.3%
5. the provision of a place where students can listen, talk and discuss freely 46.5%

70.8% of the first-year students considered their integration into the University as good or very good at the end of the academic year and 64.4% thought that the tutorial experience had favourably influenced their integration. These figures are encouraging, as they take into consideration not only the opinion of students whose group worked well, but also those of youngsters who participated in more fluctuating groups where the climate had been less happy.

There is another dimension of citizenship experienced within the tutorial groups which relates to the management of one's rights and duties.

Rights and duties

The activities of each tutorial group develop progressively in self-management according to ethical rules that are expressed as 'the four Rs' by Casanova (1999): respect for others; references as guidelines;   responsibilities (individual and collective); and recognition. Drawing inspiration from institutional pedagogy, bureaucratic, authoritarian and therefore alienating structures have been replaced by 'new structures, viewing an autonomous human being, free and responsible, apt to take in charge his own life, but also able to co-operate with others and to fight for a new society ' (Pourtois and Desmet, 1999, p. 290). Each member of the group has both rights and duties, even when there is no hierarchical link between the protagonists. The tutors have a responsibility towards the younger students but have no power over them: it is by managing the group effectively, providing support, and enabling the potential of each of the first-year students that tutors fulfil that responsibility.

Supervision sessions back up this proceeding

One tutor spoke of the beneficial effect of letting tutors act freely 'As a tutor, this experience has offered me a lot and was very enriching. Being free in handling our work (organisation of sessions, time-table, content of the sessions ...) was very productive. We felt we should do our best since we had responsibility for our group. This feeling of being responsible is very rewarding. I think of my future professional career and I am convinced that from such an experience positive benefits will remain: managing a group, having responsibilities, establishing relations of confidence and respect ...What more can we ask in terms of practice? I feel I learned and acquired a lot ' (note-book of a tutor, 1999-2000)

On the other hand, the students engage in the experiment by contract: after an information session, first-year students can choose either to participate in this collective experience or to perform an individual task related to methods of work and their development at different points of the academic year. The contract explicitly mentions that the tutorial experiment requires the active and regular participation of the student, but the student knows that free expression is acceptable and that this activity is a supplementary resource

for integration and aimed at increasing her/his chances to succeed. Tutors and students are thus co-responsible for the development of their group.

Students and tutors were asked separately for their opinions about the working of their group; the majority of both are positive and in similar proportions:

Table 2

Your group works	Pupils	Tutors
	N = 86	**N = 20**
- well	54	16
- rather well	27	3
- rather badly	2	0
- badly	2	1
- no answer	1	0

The functioning of the group is regularly discussed during the supervision sessions.

Towards a democratic socialisation

Tutorial activity among peers can be considered as a socialisation experiment since the establishment of a privileged relation with a more experienced student introduces the newcomers into their 'student's job' with its specific life-style, codes, norms, etc. (Sirota, 1993). As indicated by Dubar (1998), socialisation is a procedure of identity construction, not the simple transmission of knowledge and practices contributing to social reproduction. It is therefore important that each person constructs their own 'project' (professional as well as personal) across a diversity of heterogeneous influences and social relations. New university students are confronted with the need for a new identity construction and the necessity of working out a student identity which is their own: this may require a series of connection and disconnection with representations and even with new values. In this task, the peer group is not only a support, that is, an environment which offers security, but also a reflecting mirror where opinions can be matched and developed.

The claim that the tutorial experiment performs this identity-building function is supported by the fact that some students who withdrew from the course after the January examinations nevertheless continued to participate in tutorial activities in order not to be isolated and to define precisely their training projects.

About inter-subjective relations

At the tutorial sessions students experiment with new forms of relations where everyone can express their thoughts freely, and where divergent opinions from which conflicts might arise can emerge. Far from indicating a malfunctioning of the group, such occurrences witness its dynamism and vivacity, but it is important to prepare, train and to support tutors in their capacity as regulator of interactions within the group. Paturet (1998) stressed the importance of these exchange gatherings where it is essential to maintain the dialogue in spite of differences.

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At the end of the experiment, the tutors reported that the management of peer group activity provided the most important benefit for themselves (16 tutors of the 20) and eight said that it led to a better knowledge of themselves.

These inter-subjective exchanges contribute to the emancipation of all the actors; the confrontation of opinions enlarges each participant's representations, develops the ability to support and contest views and stimulates a critical mind.

Institutional recognition

Many of the researchers who examined the tutorial experiments remarked on the ambivalence of the teaching staff with regard to this supporting activity (Finkeliztein, 1994; Gartner, Kohler and Riesman, 1973). Many people adhere to values in principle, but resist innovative proposals which seems to them likely to reduce their power, and this may have been what happened at our university. Nevertheless, faced with a high level of student failure and the limited participation of students in more conventional remedial measures, there was a growing interest in the experiment, and at present, tutoring among students is acknowledged and officially included in the academic programme as a 30 hours' course. Some teachers have even taken advantage of the existence of tutorial groups to use the same groupings in the organisation of subgroups for practical work; this saves a lot of time because the students already know each other.

For the students, tutoring is an instance where important messages about students' life can be disseminated directly: the student body as a whole can inform newcomers in the tutorial sessions about the activities of student associations, about the possibilities of their active participation in academic life, and how to become representatives in the internal decision-making agencies at the university. Such information is usually presented in an interactive form of questions and answers. The tutorial groups are therefore considered as favourable entities for the development of political consciousness in the largest sense: understanding of the academic organisation, of the student's place in the system, of rights and duties, of the students' representation system etc. This more global integration into the system constitutes another factor of success for students in search of understanding.

Conclusions: tutoring as a new politic in education

Tutoring is a real challenge in education. It is not only a methodological and pedagogical strategy for a better learning and understanding in academic disciplines but also, and perhaps most importantly the application of a democratic concept of education. The relations people have with knowledge determine their relations to power. In the context of tutoring, the teachers and the students have to share a new relation with both knowledge and power. They have to consider each other not only as the agents but also as the actors and the authors of the knowledge they share. In this way, any authoritarian relationship based on the possession of knowledge is disappearing because no one can be reduced as a passive agent of the knowledge.

The experiment of tutoring is leading to a new political system of relationships among the different actors in education, recognising the power of each individual in a democratic approach of the knowledge.

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