Karen Elgar is a Ph.D. candidate and sessional staff member in the School of Psychology, who delivers lectures in VET courses and tutorials in higher education. Karen discusses her role as a tutor.

What is the value of tutorials - how do/should they contribute to students’ learning?

Tutorials are an important aspect of student learning because they allow for a more hands-on approach to the material. In tutorials we place a large emphasis on the students using and demonstrating their knowledge, rather than just having a theoretical appreciation of the concepts gained through reading, writing or listening to a topic. Students need to be able to apply material rather than just recite it.

Tutorials also facilitate the individual’s interpersonal skills as there is a lot of interaction between the student and tutor, as well as between classmates. In the courses I have taught I have noticed that this allows students to feel more comfortable with the material and more engaged overall. Research suggests that feeling connected and forming peer relationships in University is an integral part of succeeding in higher education. I believe that tutorials facilitate a large part of this.

How do you plan and prepare for a tutorial?

The first (and most obvious) step in planning for a tutorial is feeling comfortable enough with all of the material so that you can easily explain it to others. I learnt very early on that there is a big difference between internally understanding the material and having the ability to verbally explain it to others who may phrase or grasp information differently to me.

Preparing examples of concepts and alternate ways to frame ideas is essential in this stage. It is also necessary to be fully aware of all of the material that is available to students: this can encompass lecture notes, lecture slides, set readings, online modules, handouts etc. I find Lectopia another useful source as it provides tutors with a record of the lecture material if we cannot attend ourselves.

The second step is understanding the rationale behind every activity that you plan to conduct. In some classes, the tutorial material is prepared by someone else and sometimes you need to sit down with it to make sure you can make it work with the class. You cannot expect students to see the value of completing activities if you yourself do not see how it taps into the learning objectives for that topic.

The third step is communicating with other staff in the subject. It is essential that all teaching staff have the same understanding of what is to be conducted and what is expected of students. Talking this through with peers helps you to feel more comfortable in knowing how to conduct the tutorial. I like to do this an hour or so before the tutorial begins in order to develop the right frame of mind for entering the classroom.

Do you have a favourite, tried-and-tested model for structuring a tutorial?

I prefer not to have a set model for structuring a tutorial as I believe that the best classrooms are dynamic and open to being influenced by the needs of the students. I always have a set class plan before each class in which there is a clear structure and timeframe for each activity, but I am more than willing to adjust this if students are gaining a lot from one particular activity or if I realise more attention needs to be paid to another topic. Not all learning is orderly and structured and I think that a learning environment should reflect this.
Do you have any strategies for encouraging students to contribute to a discussion?

There are a number of different ways to tackle this and I think the most important thing is to identify what is preventing a student from engaging of their own accord. For quieter and more introverted students, a good method is to use lots of pair or small group work to allow them to develop a comfort zone in conversing with other students. Some students may have language difficulties which may cause them to avoid contributing due to fear of embarrassment, so I will ask them to contribute ideas that they have written down or already discussed with me, so that they know what they are saying is correctly phrased and a good response to the question. Establishing an environment in which students feel comfortable to ask questions and voice their opinions is also necessary for engaging the group as a whole.

What approaches, planned or unplanned, have worked really well for you in tutorials you have taken?

The best approach I have found is to strike a balance with students between being approachable and being assertive. My own experience as a student has shown me that tutors who genuinely empathise with what it is like to be a student and are helpful with assisting students to balance the demands of student life are invaluable.

On the other hand, it is important not to enable students in helplessness if they are continually avoiding completing necessary work or following set guidelines. I have found that being very open and direct about my expectations, as well as being available to help students whenever they need it, is the best approach to running the tutorial to the benefit of students.

How do your tutorials fit into your assessment strategy?

Tutorials are invaluable in assessing how a student might be progressing with a particular project or assignment. Many students feel uneasy about venturing questions or difficulties during a lecture, whereas the small group work and one-on-one time during the tutorial really puts them at ease in being open about their experience with the work. I like to break all assessments down into small steps, so a basic tutorial structure would be to introduce the work that needs to be done during the week in each tutorial and then follow up that work in the following week to discuss and troubleshoot the progress they have made. I find not allocating too much time to actually completing the work in class works best, as this does not encourage students to be self-sufficient in gaining information themselves or allow them to learn to manage their time effectively.

In most courses I have taught we have also allocated marks towards participation, so in a sense each of these tutorials has a graded aspect. I think this is an important means of assessing students, as real world opportunities are based on more than good writing skills and encompass things like time management and a person's ability to relate to others. Encouraging students to actively participate and allocating marks towards this effort can also bolster other assessment marks, as students gain confidence and knowledge through this process.

How do you evaluate and reflect on your tutorial activities?

There is a large focus on feedback in my class, so students are regularly invited to contribute their thoughts anonymously on what works best and what they would like to change or introduce in the tutorials. I also like to keep a brief summary of my perceptions on the success of each activity in my class plans and notes, so that I can refine any activity that did not work well in further classes. Regular discussion with other staff members is also important, as we compare experiences and draw on one another’s ideas and tips.