

## **Examining first-year students' experience of being tutored: A South African case study**

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The inclusion of tutoring as an instructional support strategy in higher education resulted from an awareness that students lack both the metacognitive and self-regulatory practices required to complete their academic programs successfully. In addition, graduation-based funding systems have resulted in higher education institutions using tutoring as a self-serving strategy to augment learning and improve completion rates to ensure funding. Notwithstanding the theoretical and conceptual lens provided by studies reported in the current literature, there would appear to be a glaring gap in understanding of the sociocultural nuances that shape tutoring. To address this gap, the present study followed an intrinsic case study design to understand how sociocultural distinctions at a university in South Africa intersect to shape the tutoring experiences of 11 first-year students. The participants were purposefully selected, and data were collected using a focus group discussion. Data were analysed using an inductive thematic framework and, from this analysis, five themes emerged: translanguaging as a tutoring strategy, the use of technology to enhance tutoring experience, tutoring as an intersubjective process, the axiological nature of the tutorship program, reflection on the tutorship program. Based on the findings, we recommend that tutoring programs become more multilingual, structured and collaborative.

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to explore the way first-year students at a university in South Africa experienced being tutored. Specifically, we sought to understand how sociocultural subjectivities in the context of a university in South Africa shaped and gave meaning to the tutoring strategy. University learning involves negotiating, absorbing and reconciling prior and new knowledge in order to gain skills, competences and values (Isohätälä, Järvenoja, & Järvelä, 2017). This process, according to Rowe and Fitness (2018), does not happen in a predictable manner because adult learning is complex. Globally, individuals who reach university level are academically ready to complete their academic programs. However, according to De Backer, Van Keer, and Valcke (2015, p. 469), this is not always the case, as university students “often possess insufficient metacognitive regulation skills to regulate their learning adequately”. Given this situation many universities have developed formal and informal strategies to mitigate student under-preparedness. Chief among university supportive teaching and learning strategies is tutoring. Since the dawn of independence in South Africa, higher education has become more accessible to many students. However, according to Mncube (2008), students bring uneven learning experience and abilities, owing to the different education systems that formed part of the apartheid system. McKay (2016) noted from studies carried out from 2005 to 2014 that most South African universities were struggling with tutoring-related

issues. Thus, Gazula, McKenna, Copper and Paliadelis (2017) suggested that to ensure high graduation rates among such students, it is incumbent on universities to supplement students' instruction with tutoring, as a way of developing their competences as emerging academics.

The current literature indicates conclusively that tutoring has significant benefits as a supportive, collaborative, idiosyncratic tool, and as a pedagogical enabler to support the adult learner (Gazula et al., 2017; Isohätälä et al., 2017). In fact, an increasing number of empirical research studies show that tutoring at university bridges the academic and experiential gap among first-year students (Martin, 2015; Miravet, Ciges & García, 2014). Globally, studies on university tutoring have tended to focus on experiences of implementing tutoring programs (Gazula et al., 2017; Miravet et al., 2014), the evaluation of tutoring models (Narciss, 2017), the impact of tutoring on academic success (Blanch, Duran, Flores & Valdebenito, 2012; Cheng & Ku, 2009; Ng & Low, 2015) and the relationship between the tutor and tutee (Derrick, 2015). These studies have provided important theoretical underpinnings for tutoring as they highlight the pedagogical and efficacy benefits. According to the current literature, the benefits of tutoring fall into three broad groups, which we discuss below.

Firstly, researchers such as Roscoe and Chi (2007) viewed tutoring as a process of dismantling the hegemonic structures of knowledge construction in higher education. Such hegemonic practices are produced and sustained in university environments where teaching and learning is seen as a transmittable procedure rather than as a reflective and experiential process (Martin, 2015; Roscoe & Chi, 2007). Focusing on the knowledge construction process of tutors, Roscoe and Chi (2007, p. 538) highlighted that tutoring has transformative qualities, as

... tutors metacognitively reflect upon their own expertise and comprehension, and constructively build upon their prior knowledge by generating inferences, integrating ideas across topics and domains, and repairing errors. This reflective knowledge-building process is argued to result in a better understanding.

Through this process, tutors cognitively engage in a process of re-negotiating, confronting and confirming their knowledge construction frames (Roscoe & Chi, 2007). In this continuous assessment of their own comprehension, tutors embody a critical aspect of social learning where they are simultaneously constructing knowledge from idiosyncratic and collaborative experiences entrenched in context and developing a clearer understanding of their own thinking processes (Miravet et al., 2014; Öztok, 2016).

Secondly, tutoring improves the tutor's and the tutee's metacognition and self-regulated practices. According to Mellado, Valdebenito and Aravena (2017, p. 149), such studies focus on

exploring the dialogic itineraries established in peer-to-peer interaction, meta-cognitive regulation, academic self-conception, and in regard to the roles played, socio-professional competencies and academic benefits.

The focus of researchers in this strand is to explore both the tutors' and tutees' awareness and control of how their cognitive faculties are developed during learning. In addition, an inquiry into tutoring as a cognitive aspect covers the study of tutors' and tutees' self-regulated practices; that is, promoting a student's skill to reflect on their subject knowledge comprehension and predicting how they will be able to complete assigned work. According to Gazula et al. (2017), self-regulated practices are practices that students use to control and monitor their academic development and performance. Metacognitive resources embedded in tutoring are supportive for promoting students' reflection, planning and efficacy, which improves their motivation to learn. In summary, in this area of research, the inquirers examine how the process of tutoring stimulates prior knowledge and links it with new material through a selection and application of critical and reflective thinking skills. This process has merits for both the tutor and the tutee as it promotes a monitoring and assessment mechanism of and for learning (Gazula et al., 2017).

Thirdly, studies have highlighted that tutoring improves motivation and learning experiences for the tutors and tutees. Researchers such as Duffy and Azevedo (2015) argued that tutoring provides students with instructional scaffolding in tasks that would otherwise be challenging for them to complete. These scaffolding experiences, according to Ng and Low (2015), enhance the students' cognitive and efficacy abilities such as intrinsic motivation, critical thinking, communication, reflective thinking, confidence and goal setting. Likewise, Derrick (2015, p. 12) noted that tutoring "leads to gains in more than self-esteem and empathy, important as these are. Research indicates that students who tutor others also make significant academic gains". Accordingly, as the researchers in this strand show, tutoring offers two important gains for both tutor and tutee. The experience of tutoring, the understanding of how learning unfolds in context and the responsibility that accompanies tutoring enhance the professional development and identity of the tutor as both a facilitator and a leader of learning. In fact, Mellado et al. (2017, p. 149) enthused that the skills that the tutor develops in tutoring must be "considered one of the principal training needs in higher education institutions, since they require competent social conduct that fits the profile of the different areas of academic training". For the tutored student, tutoring provides an opportunity to receive a personalised, organised, well-thought-out learning experience (Cheng & Ku, 2009). Colver and Fry (2016) noted that students in a tutoring program are motivated by the self-directed nature of the approach which improves content knowledge and enhances their self-esteem. Hence, the tutoring process is synergistic with students receiving valuable academic support while helping themselves to strengthen and enlarge their knowledge through self-explanation efforts.

In South Africa, there is a general agreement among researchers and practitioners that tutoring has a positive influence on the quality of learning at university. This discourse has, however, been limited to ontological data, with the conceptualisation and implementation of tutoring being discussed as an academic project or as a branch of learner support. For example, researchers such as Sonnekus, Louw and Wilson (2006) problematised tutoring in higher education as a branch of learner support. Likewise, researchers who focus on the axiological nature of tutoring in the South African higher education spaces, such as Garí and Iputo (2015), indicated the value that tutoring has as

an enhancer of learning and subject-specific knowledge acquisition. Similar to our purpose, Layton and McKenna (2016) embedded their study in a social realist paradigm and, with first-year students as their participants, found that tutorials developed a “partnership discourse, in which tutors and academics were seen to be working together towards the common goal of student success, [which] was seen to be enabling of epistemological access”. However, what is missing from this discourse is an understanding of the epistemic distinctions that shape these partnerships within a context. That is, what sociocultural nuances are at play to enable or inhibit the creation of such partnerships and how does this epistemic process unfold?

As we have highlighted by means of the literature review above, the goals of tutoring in higher education are praiseworthy, but may be irrelevant if they are incompatible with the social realities and contextual needs of the adult learner. Higher education learning practices are diverse across different cultures, times and contexts but this quality is seldom attended to, as seen by the lure of behaviourist underpinnings in understanding a social phenomenon such as tutoring. Motivated by the sociocultural perspectives in higher education that aim to advance a rich and nuanced understanding of teaching and learning, the goals and implementation of tutoring are being scrutinised more closely because there is a lack of familiarity with tutoring as a sociocultural dimension (Colvin, 2007; Mellado et al., 2017). This shift is an agentic result of researchers who need to understand knowledge construction practices that are beyond the European and North American spaces (Bray, Mazawi & Sultana, 2013). In addition, Back (2016) mentioned that it would be ill-advised to look at tutoring as homogeneous and collective, as students' learning is idiosyncratic, particular and contextual. In their study contextualised to the Catholic University of Temuco in Chile, Mellado et al. (2017, p.155) found that beyond supporting subject-specific knowledge development, the tutoring program they implemented “corroborated the extent that the pedagogy students who participate as tutees are able to significantly increase the different dimensions of the social skills construct”. In South Africa, however, there is paucity of studies that seek to understand the sociocultural constructs that result from planned tutoring programs at universities.

The purpose of this study is thus twofold. Firstly, although a plethora of studies exist that provide important insights into effective tutoring models, the merits of tutoring as supporting instruction and the correlation between tutoring and academic achievement, there is a lacuna in the literature describing the actual implementation of tutoring and the resulting theoretical discernments gained from the process contextualised to South African universities. Secondly, the current discourse in the higher education literature pertaining to the dialectical relationship between theory and practice as radical emancipatory tool lends agency to the purpose of this study. This means that there is a need to find meaning in the theoretical perspectives of tutoring in the different contexts in which it is implemented. Such a research focus has the potential to generate creative and effective practices negotiated in recognition of contextual nuances, modalities and subjectivities. Specifically, the following question was answered in this study: What are the first-year students' experiences of being tutored at a university in South Africa?

## The research context

Against the backdrop of contextualising teaching and learning in higher education, there is a need to acknowledge the importance of sociocultural nuances in designing supportive and remedial networked learning strategies in higher education (Colvin, 2007). This university in South Africa is an excellent research site for understanding how planned tutoring activities are substantially shaped by the sociocultural tones that are embedded in contexts. The university has a rich political history, as shown by the number of political leaders among its alumni. According to VanLehn (2011), there are five types of tutoring, namely, one-on-one, peer, group, cross-age and online. In the Faculty of Education at this university in South Africa, a hybrid and unstructured tutorship program is followed.

## Theoretical orientations

In the context of this study, we followed Copaci and Rusu's (2015, p. 145) definition of tutoring as an "academic ... support and counselling system designed for students, aiming to facilitate their integration in universities by offering guidance when choosing the best social, cultural and educational options, but also to motivate and develop students' skills and improve their academic performance". This definition captures our epistemic premise which allows us to index tutoring as a pedagogical enhancer and support that finds meaning when it intersects with other social and cultural systems.

The occurrence and quality of teaching and learning activities at universities is understandably underpinned by a variety of epistemological paradigms. We acknowledge that these paradigms differ from one university to another owing to the contextual tones that shape the type of interactions that take place in social spaces. The guiding theoretical approach to this study is social constructivism. Social constructivism provides a useful framework for exploring knowledge construction embedded in the authentic, cultural and collaborative situations that are likely to be experienced (Mensah, 2015). This theory holds that knowledge acquisition is a function of social interaction embedded in the range of cultural and historical contexts (Vygotsky, 1978). Social constructivists maintain that all cognitive functions are social in orientation as individuals internalise knowledge systems through interaction, participation and support from others (Mensah, 2015). A key tenet of Vygotsky's social constructivism is the zone of proximal development (ZPD), which is the distance between an individual's actual and potential knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978). For example, contextualised to our study, a student's ZPD entails the difference between the knowledge that the student is able to internalise independently and what they require from a knowledgeable person to comprehend it. It is precisely the social and cultural frames that shape this scaffolding process of tutoring that we explored in this study.

By embracing social constructivism as our theoretical mooring, we sought to interweave tutoring with the knowledge construction processes that "occur within the context of the interaction between individuals and the cultural dynamics and forces in their environment" (Henderson & Kesson, 2004, p. 68). This epistemic trajectory is central in framing our understanding of the dynamic constructs of knowledge and meaning-making

that unfold in engaging with the social and cultural subjectivities that shape the tutoring experiences contextualised to a university in South Africa.

## **Research methodology**

To address the concerns of this study, we conducted an intrinsic qualitative case study design. According to Stake (2005), there are three types of case study, namely, intrinsic, instrumental and collective. The selection of the type of case study depends on the purpose of the study. Since our study sought a deeper understanding of the sociocultural aspects that shape knowledge acquisition in a tutoring programme at a university in South Africa, an intrinsic case study was used as the design. By embracing such as case study, we sought to understand how tutoring is shaped by sociocultural aspects embedded in the context of a university in South Africa as a holistic and specific case. To ensure rigour in our case study we applied Lincoln and Guba's (1985) measures of trustworthiness, which include credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability.

Purposive sampling was used to select participants for the study. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), purposive sampling is a non-probability-based strategy where participants are selected for their ability to provide in-depth and rich answers to the research questions. To answer our research question, we then used the following criteria to select participants: first-year students at a university in South Africa in 2017, enrolled to read a Bachelor of Education program in the Faculty of Education and registered for a mandatory or voluntary tutoring program.

We collected data using a focus group discussion, grouping together participants who had analogous circumstances and experiences in order to have them talk about the phenomenon under study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For example, in our study participants were all first-year students who had made use of the tutoring services provided by a university in South Africa. These circumstances and experiences bounded them as an analogous group from which we sought to understand the sociocultural nuances of tutoring. Also, based on the purpose of our study we required a data collection method that allowed the participants to draw their experiential knowledge from both the idiosyncratic and communal memory that focus group discussions provide. We audio recorded this discussion and documented it using transcriptions, subsequently using an inductive thematic strategy to analyse the data. We followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) method of data analysis. The first step of this process was to immerse ourselves in the data and the second to familiarise ourselves with the transcriptions. The third step involved coding, during which we highlighted different categories and subthemes. We then condensed the sub-themes into themes. These themes were interpreted in line with the available literature on tutoring to highlight novel findings and indicate knowledge gaps for future research.

Ethical procedures were respected both during and after the study to honour the rights of the participants. Accordingly, we adhered to the following ethical considerations: before data collection, we ensured that we obtained the participants' informed consent, while

during and after data collection we protected the participants from harm and maintained their confidentiality and anonymity.

## Findings

After analysing the data obtained from a focus group interview with the tutees, five main themes emerged on the experience of being tutees in a tutoring program.

### Theme 1: Translanguaging as a tutoring strategy

At South African universities English is the main medium of instruction. While this is attributable to the colonial history of the country, it disadvantages a large number of the student population who have to learn in a language that is not their first language. However, in the tutoring class, in line with Johnson, García and Seltzer (2019), the tutors and tutees navigated content knowledge construction, drawing from the multilingual resources at their disposal. Translanguaging is an instructional approach that can be used in “multilingual classrooms to bridge communication in nuanced ways and bring about a more humanising experience ... [for] learners” (Childs, 2016, p. 22). For example, as Participant C mentioned:

Our tutors allow us to speak using any language that we feel comfortable using. We feel comfortable enough to ask questions in a language we understand better. In class sometimes it is intimidating to ask a question in front of our fellow peers, who may judge you on your English proficiency.

In addition, Participant F believed that:

Some concepts are difficult to understand if you are not an English language speaker, so you would need somebody to explain in your own language which is IsiZulu in my case. Our lecturers do not create space for us to use our languages for the purposes of learning, during tutoring we are able mix languages for the purpose of understanding our course content.

On entering university, students display different levels of language command owing to their high school curriculum which offered them uneven English learning experiences and proficiency (Heugh, 2015). This study reveals that despite the lack of language proficiency and the impoverished language repertoire at their disposal resulting from their schooling background, students benefit from the tutorial sessions because the anxiety caused by using English as a second language is reduced. In the context of this study, translanguaging is used as a form of communication. This involves the use of various languages by the tutor and the tutees to engage more deeply with concepts and content, and to make connections to ideas that previously seemed difficult to comprehend in English. In support of this assertion, Participant D said:

Because of our different backgrounds, our command of English is not the same. Those who did not go to former Model C schools, language becomes a barrier to learning. However, the tutoring sessions are very accommodative because we are able to learn by not being limited to one language, so students are actually free to express themselves in any language in a safe space, smaller group where we do not judge one another.

This multilingual awareness is crucial for all tutors so that students are free to ask questions in their own language, engage with content and deepen their understanding of the module.

### **Theme 2: Using technology to enhance the tutoring experience**

The use of technology in the tutoring program provides students with the ability to share useful information among the groups, to enhance learning beyond the tutorial sessions. The findings reveal that some learning in the program is facilitated through technology in the form of social media (*WhatsApp*) and emails. This assists students to connect among themselves wherever they are, at any time of the day, whenever they need to communicate. Participant A had this to say:

For an example, I stay off-campus, when I get stuck on something at night I can always send a quick message through our tutorship *WhatsApp* group for assistance and guidance and you will be surprised that most of the students will still be up and willing to assist, including our tutor who does not get paid for assisting us beyond the tutorial sessions.

Social network tools afford students multiple opportunities to enhance learning. In support of this assertion, Participant B said:

We exchange notes which we share in the form of pictures where you just take screen shots of the relevant information from the book or notes. We exchange links to information online, voice notes, video clips and sometimes links to *YouTube* videos. So, this makes life easy and you feel that you are not alone, you have your fellow students as your support structure.

Online learning is an integral part of the tutorship program. This is according to Participant E, who said:

Technology is now part and parcel of our learning, most of us now rely entirely on it for our studies. Our tutor shares with us via emails the tutorial programs, comments on our assignments, reading materials and any other communication about our modules or studies. Even though some of us do not have personal computers we do access our emails either on our phone or at the computer labs during the day. However, any other information after hours can be shared via *WhatsApp*, text messages or through telephone calls.

The use of modern technology, in which teaching and learning are facilitated through electronic media, has extended the reach of the traditional teaching and learning space.

### **Theme 3: Tutoring as an intersubjective process**

The findings reveal that tutoring fosters a positive interdependence among students. The tutoring program creates opportunities for the students to learn from each other. Cooperative efforts result in participants mutually benefitting from one another's efforts and recognising that all group members share a common fate. Participant C supported the assertion by saying:



I think that tutorials are very helpful to us as we learn as a group; we do not only rely on our tutors but also on each other. Amongst us there are students who may know a certain section of our module better and that person takes the lead in assisting all of us to understand it and at the end we all benefit from working together.

To implement collaborative learning, team members need to rely on one another to learn. Participant G confirmed this, saying:

During tutorials we complement one another, there is nobody who understands everything that is taught by our lecturers in class, so we teach one another. Sometimes we discuss, debate and disagree on certain things but this forces us to read and find more information to help us clarify confusion or any disagreement. Our tutors are always there to assist us and where they are not sure they consult our lecturers.

During the tutorial, students interact with each other and the tutor, in contrast to their more passive role in lecture halls. This involvement allows students to feel that they play an active role in their own learning. Participant C had this to say:

In our lecture halls we don't all find space to contribute and ask questions because our classes are too big. In my class we are more than 300 so we just listen to our lecturers and when our 45 minutes is over, we run to another class for the next period. This makes learning very boring to say the least, we are not stimulated through this method of learning. However, during our tutorials we get a platform for discussing, sharing ideas, asking questions in a more relaxed environment. This motivates us do well in our studies.

#### **Theme 4: Axiological nature of the tutorship program**

The learning experiences in the tutoring program were highly regarded by the students as tutees. They believed that tutoring can help strengthen subject comprehension and build important learning skills. Participant I attested to this, saying:

I can say, Sir, personally I do not benefit in a lecture hall as much as I benefit from the tutors. With all due respect to our lecturers, there is just no time to cater for all our needs when you only have three periods per week and there is so much to do within a very short semester. I am new at the university and there are so many new things that I must learn. The tutorials amongst other things help me better understand the content, prepare for our assignments, tests and examination. Before we submit any assignment, our tutor would have a look and guide us on whether we have written it according to the requirements such as table of contents, referencing and other things.

The tutors and the tutees are generally about the same age which makes it easier to interact at that level without any barriers such as age gaps, positions of authority or power relations. Participant F had the following to say in this regard:

We easily communicate with the tutors and they are in our age group so, we do understand them more easily as compared to our lecturers. I am not saying that we do not understand our lecturers, but our tutors simplify the information for us. It is even easy to ask certain questions of the tutors which may be difficult for us with the lecturers.

Students characterised the overall tutoring experience as positive and rewarding as it builds a sense of community among them. This was supported by participant A, who said:

These is a sense of belonging to the group, the group makes you feel comfortable as if with you are part of a big family because we share almost everything including information on our courses, our frustrations and personal stuff. We even support each other in preparation for tests, we use previous question papers to make sure that we have the same understanding of how to approach questions in the tests or even in the examinations.

Students regard tutorials as supplementary to the existing teaching by lecturers, helping them to enhance their knowledge base on the modules. In support of this assertion, Participant B said:

One of us mentioned earlier on that the three lecture periods per week are not sufficient to cover the amount of work that we have to cover. For the students to fully understand the information highlighted by the lecturers during class we need tutorials conducted in a relaxed space where we can further engage with the content to understand it better.

### **Theme 5: Reflection on the tutorship program**

Students were concerned that tutorials do not have an official timetable and are not catered for in the composite timetable of the institution. As a result, students must identify suitable time slots for their sessions and look for a venue that is not occupied at a particular time. Participant F voiced his concern by saying:

Tutorials are not taken seriously by our university. How do you expect students to develop their own timetable and look for a venue for the sessions? It is very frustrating to spend about 30 minutes of the allocated hour going around looking for an unoccupied class. Sometimes you will be desperate to get assistance with certain aspects of your studies and end up not meeting on that day because you cannot meet under the tree and we don't have more social spaces where we can meet.

Students have asked for a formal timetable with protected time for tutoring. A formal timetable might help to alleviate the problem of a lack of venues for the program. Participant K supported this assertion by saying:

Sir, there is a disorder with the tutorship program as it is not properly structured. In the first place we need a formal timetable like we have for classes and there are no allocated venues for it. Why do you treat tutorials differently? Were they an afterthought? I am not asking you personally, but I am asking the institution.

Hence, there would appear to be a need for a formal, structured program with identifiable topics within the curriculum, to guide tutors in conducting tutorials. Tutorials last an hour and cover content relevant to a module. Tutees/students determine the tutorial content, based on their needs, in order to address what they call "problem areas". The topic of the tutorial is identified by the tutees, who notify the tutors of this topic a few days in advance of the tutorial, allowing them adequate time to prepare. This was confirmed by Participant H, who said:

We do not have a proper program that we follow as lecturers do not provide one for the modules they teach. As students we send in advance to the tutors our topics that we would like to be assisted on during the session. In other words, the program is driven by what we want as students, but I think it would be useful to have some guidance from our lecturers on how we should conduct these sessions.

Tutorial evaluation, which would allow the participants in the tutorship program to assess the performance of the tutor and the state of the program, is not conducted. In the group discussion, students stated that they wished to provide feedback on how the program could be improved to cater for their needs. This is according to Participant E, who said:

I think that the university should know how we feel about the program. Even though it is useful, we feel that there are several issues that need to be attended to in this program. I can say the program is led by the students and not by the university.

## Discussion

There is evidence to indicate that students often value tutorials and other small-group work over more formal, large-group teaching (Crosthwaite, Boynton & Cole, 2017). The flexibility of the tutorial format promoted an intellectually fulfilling experience. We recognise that as a result of the colonial history of the country, English is the main medium of instruction in South African universities and thus certain students are at a disadvantage when learning is conducted in English only. In this study, the findings reveal that tutored students benefited from learning using code-mixing and code-switching. There is growing research on translanguaging, with scholars increasingly advocating for the use of multiple languages to enhance teaching and learning. A study conducted by Zheng (2019) also reveals that students appropriate their linguistic and semiotic resources in response to the locally negotiated language norms and tensions.

The rapid development of information communication technology (ICT), the proliferation of smartphones and increased access to the Internet have encouraged new forms of learning in which platforms such as *WhatsApp*, *YouTube*, *Facebook*, blogs, *Twitter* and many others are used to facilitate teaching and learning. The findings reveal that some learning within the program is facilitated using technology in the form of social media (*WhatsApp*) and emails. This assists students to connect among themselves wherever they are at any time of the day whenever they need to communicate. Mlitwa and Van Belle (2011) described e-learning as the use of technological interventions for teaching, learning and assessment, enabling learners to improve problem-solving skills and empowering educators to disseminate and impart knowledge effectively. In this study, the participants characterised e-tutoring using these technological interventions as beneficial to their learning; this even though e-tutoring has not been formalised and embedded in the tutorship program of the institution.

The tutoring program also fosters positive interdependence among students. Tutorial sessions are organised in small groups which allows students to work together to maximise their own and each other's learning. Cooperative learning differs from other group learning in that it is structured to include the five essential components that make

group learning truly cooperative. These are positive interdependence, face-to-face interaction, individual accountability, interpersonal and small group skills, and group processing (Eskay, Onu, Obiyo & Obidoa, 2012).

Students believe that tutoring helps strengthen subject comprehension and build important learning skills. One of the factors that contribute to effective learning in the tutorial program is the fact that the tutors and the tutees are similar in age which makes the establishment of rapport easy, thus facilitating interaction and learning within the group. Learning in class facilitated by a lecturer is not as relaxed as the tutoring sessions because of the perceived barriers which include, among others, the age gap, position of authority and power relations. Students find the tutoring experience positive and rewarding as it builds a sense of community among them. Tutoring sessions thus become safe spaces where students feel a sense of belonging and where they feel comfortable to share and learn from of one another's experiences.

We nevertheless recognise that however valuable a tutorial course, there are constraints which must be addressed to enhance the program. Several concerns were raised about the tutorship program, including that fact that tutorials do not feature in the official timetable of the institution and no venues are allocated for the sessions. Students must fend for themselves, identifying suitable time slots for their sessions and securing venues for them. Another concern is that there is no structured program with identifiable topics in the curriculum that guides tutors in conducting tutorials. The tutors are generally left to their own devices with regard to assisting the tutees, which they do without any guidelines. This program must be developed by the lecturer responsible for the module. Students also lamented the fact that formal tutorial evaluation is not conducted, thus they are not given an opportunity to provide feedback on the performance of the tutors and the state of the program as a whole, in order to improve the program so that it is responsive to their needs as students.

## **Conclusion**

The inclusion of tutoring as an instructional support strategy in higher education resulted from an awareness that students lack both the metacognitive and self-regulatory practices required to complete their academic programs successfully. This study confirms that tutoring plays a major role in enhancing and promoting learning at the university.

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