

“What we do in the shadows”¹: Evaluating the one-to-one Tertiary Learning Advice Consultation.

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Abstract

This paper reports on the initial phase of an action research project undertaken at a tertiary learning centre to evaluate the one-to-one tertiary learning advice consultation (TLAC). Although we conduct a yearly online student survey, collect student feedback anonymously and discuss student issues regularly at staff meetings and in staff development and planning sessions, we felt it was timely to investigate and evaluate our practice more systematically and robustly. We focused on the TLACs because these are a core part of learning advising work that is highly valued by students and some academic teaching staff but are “arguably an expensive luxury” (Wilson, Li & Collins, 2011, p. A139). Following an Australian study by Berry, Collins, Copeman, Harper, Li and Prentice (2012), we collected data from peer observations, staff self-reflection forms and student questionnaires. Our initial findings indicate that through using a triangulated approach, we were able to observe that all TLACs followed a similar three-stage process: establishing focus, discussing and wrapping up. Furthermore, learning advisors (LAs) consistently encouraged independent learning, affirmed students’ efforts, built rapport, and checked students’ understanding in TLACs. Our paper reports on the project to date and outlines our plans for the next phase.

Introduction

Working with individual students is a core part of the tertiary learning advisor’s (LAs) work in many learning centres. However, the one-to-one tertiary learning advice consultation (TLAC) is often “not particularly well understood by university administrators, teachers, and students” (Roberts & Reid, 2014, p. A70). Furthermore, it is sometimes viewed as an “expensive luxury” (Wilson, Li & Collins, 2011, p. A139), and one ongoing concern is that “we have little beyond student thanks to demonstrate the effectiveness of our work” (Carter, 2010, p. 79). While, as practitioners, we are confident of the value of the TLAC both to individual students and the wider academic community (see Chanock, 2007), the need for this value to be communicated is ongoing.

In recent years, some research has been conducted on investigating the value and impact of the TLAC beyond the level of student satisfaction (see for example, Manalo, Marshall & Fraser, 2009; Stevenson & Kokkinn, 2009; Berry et al., 2012). This latter study was the starting point for our research. Berry et al. used Stevenson and Kokkinn’s (2009) theoretical framework to design a process to better evaluate one-to-one teaching in their

¹ Title borrowed from Clement, J. & Waititi, T. (2014). *What we do in the shadows* [Motion picture] New Zealand: Shadows production.

academic skills centre at the University of Canberra. They developed what they called a “360-Degree Approach” intended to incorporate the perceptions of students, learning advisors and their colleagues. They found that structured self-reflection and peer observation provided “significant learning about one-to-one teaching practice” (Berry et al., 2012, p. A16), but that the feedback from the student questionnaires “remained limited”.

In 2014, the staff at Victoria University of Wellington’s student learning centre, Student Learning Te Taiako², began a research project to explore an approach that would allow us to evaluate our practice more systematically and robustly. We decided to base our study on the work of Berry et al. (2012) and use three instruments (staff self-reflection, a student questionnaire, and peer observation) to collect data. Our study focused on peer observation and used staff self-reflection and the student questionnaire as secondary tools to assist the evaluation.

Peer Observation

Peer observation goes by many different names including *peer evaluation*, *peer appraisal*, *peer review*, and *peer feedback*. The staff in the Academic Skills Centre at the University of Canberra came to call the process *peer exchange* (Berry et al., 2012, p. A20) in recognition of the focus on “professional development” and “shared understanding”. As these various names suggest, there is much flexibility about what peer observation is, how it should be done and what purposes and outcomes are intended.

In our centre, we had engaged in a peer observation process (POP) in 2009 as a way to shed light on the TLAC, which is often done with the student in a private space and in isolation from other colleagues (metaphorically ‘in the shadows’). The POP followed Gosling’s (2002) peer review model (as cited in Bennet & Barp, 2008, p. 562) because the key principles of *engagement*, *self and mutual reflection*, *equality*, *mutuality*, *participant ownership of agenda*, *constructive feedback*, and [being] *non-judgemental* are in line with Student Learning’s philosophy (Student Learning Support Service, 2010). The purpose of the original POP was to encourage professional development through self-reflection and sharing practice. We also saw potential for POP to inform training for new staff members. We used this prior experience of peer observation as a basis for the 2014 study.

The 2014 study

Although the 2014 study was built on our previous POP experience, it differed in that rather than focusing on professional development, it focused on using peer observation as a way to evaluate TLACs. As is common across learning centres (Roberts & Reid, 2014, p. A72), our mission is to “develop independent and active learners at all levels of tertiary study” (Student Learning Support Service, 2010, p. 1). One objective of the 2014 study therefore was to evaluate if all the LAs in our centre consistently work towards that aim.

Our context

² Previously Student Learning Support Service (SLSS).

There are thirteen LAs at Student Learning Te Taiako – a mixture of full-time and part-time positions. We are a stand-alone unit and, as such, we are not affiliated to any faculty, the library or the University’s Centre for (staff) Academic Development (CAD) as other learning centres may be³. We offer, amongst a range of other programmes, one-to-one TLACs, drop-in ‘express’ sessions in the library, and generic study skills and academic writing, reading and speaking workshops. As noted, the focus of this study is the TLAC. TLACs occupy approximately 46% of our work (2014 statistics). Typically students self-refer and will be given a 50 minute appointment in relation to some aspect of their academic study. Sometimes students are referred from another service, such as Disability Services or Counselling. Less frequently, students are ‘sent’ to us, usually because of plagiarism issues.

Design and planning

Our research is best described as action research (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988) in that it was undertaken for our purposes, it was collaborative and we wished to evaluate our work and make changes to our practices if needed. We began by updating the 2009 peer observation form so that it reflected our 2014 research objective (appendix 1). We also adapted the staff self-evaluation form that had been used at the University of Canberra’s Academic Skills Centre and in our learning centre (see Academic Skills Programme, 2003; Berry et al., 2012; Student Learning Support Service, 2010). This revision involved adding some questions and fine-tuning the language. Moreover, while the Canberra staff self-evaluation form differed from the student evaluation form, our two forms were designed to match with each other (see next paragraph). We then introduced the research project as a general concept to Student Learning staff in January 2014. Next we sought feedback on the draft staff self-reflection questionnaire from learning advisors including the Pasifica and Māori learning advisors and a senior colleague who had previously worked at Student Learning. We then asked LAs to fill out the questionnaires after their one-to-one consultations on a trial basis. The self-reflection process was also the subject of one of our presentations at the 2014 ATLAANZ Regional Hui at Whitirea where we obtained further feedback.

The student questionnaire was designed to match the staff self-reflection form. In the final version, the LA self-reflection form (appendix 2) and the student questionnaire (appendix 3) had 20 items each. The items on both forms were the same but worded differently to reflect the target participant. For example, the item ‘I listened to what the student wanted to achieve in the session’ on the LA form was worded as ‘The learning advisor listened to what I wanted from the session’ on the student form. This matching feature is different to Berry et al.’s study in which the self-reflection form and the student questionnaire had very different questions. We hoped that by matching the items, we would be able to better compare the evaluation by LAs and the students.

Collecting the data

³ See Carter & Bartlett-Trafford (2008, p. 45) and Laurs (2010, p. 23) for discussions about the different ways in which tertiary learning centres may be aligned with other services

Ethics approval was given for the collection of data via the three instruments discussed. The office co-ordinator set up the appointments, made sure everyone had the right paper work, ensured that the students had read and understood the information sheets and consent forms, and collated all the forms at the end of the TLAC. These forms were then placed into a labelled envelope and filed securely. Only the primary researchers had access to the data.

Originally we were going to confine our data collection period to the four weeks at the start of the second trimester. However, for reasons such as student cancellations and staff availability, we did not get enough triangulated TLACs to provide quality data. Hence the data collection period was extended to the end of the period for which ethics approval had been granted. By then we had 14 sets of data. 11 out of 13 LAs had participated in the peer observation, either as observers, or observees or both.

Data Analysis

Both quantitative and qualitative analyses were conducted on the data.

Quantitative data were based on the ratings given on the observation form, the student questionnaire, and the LA self-reflection form. Two steps were taken in the first phase of data analysis. The first step was merging the rating scale. As the LA self-reflection form used a 5-point rating scale, while the observation form and student questionnaire had a 3-point rating scale, we decided to convert the 5-point scale to a 3-point scale. We combined 1 'very successful' with 2 'successful' on the LA self-reflection form and named them 'successful'. Similarly, 4 'unsuccessful' was combined with 5 'very unsuccessful' and became simply 'unsuccessful'. After the merging, all three forms had 3-point rating scales.

As a second step, rated items on the self-reflection form and student questionnaire were collated in the statistics software, SPSS. The 20 items on the LA self-reflection form and the student questionnaire were matched against the eight items on the observation form. For example, item 2 on the observer form ('discuss both the strengths and weaknesses of the student's work') were matched with items 7 ('we discussed the strengths of the student's work') and 8 ('we discussed areas of development') of the self-reflection form and the student questionnaire. The 20 items on the self-reflection form and the student questionnaire were thus combined into eight composite groups that matched the eight items on the observation form. The score of each composite group was calculated based on the mean scores of the component items within the group. The grouping of rated items allowed us to compare the ratings of each individual appointment given by the three groups of participants, i.e. the student, the observer, and the learning advisor. The comparison made it possible to observe any consistency or possible mismatches in the evaluation; hence, the data was truly triangulated. In this sense, our study went one step further than Berry et al.'s as they had not been able to obtain ethics approval in time to include the data from the student questionnaires (Berry et al., 2012, p. A24).

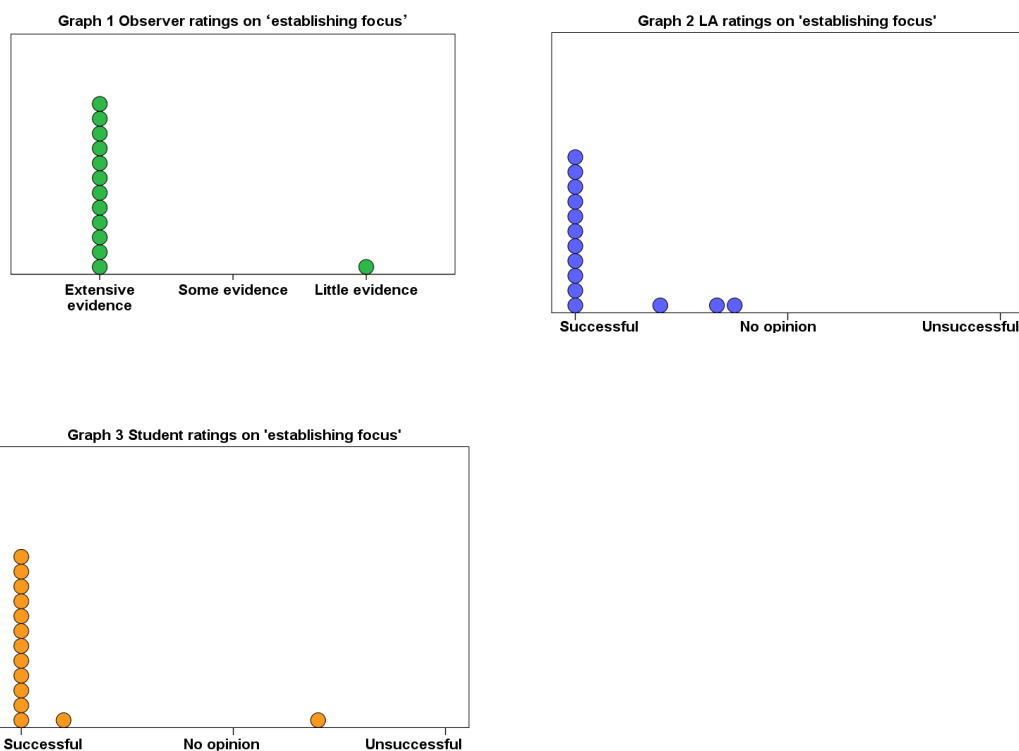
Qualitative data were drawn from additional comments on the peer observation form, the LA self-reflection form, and the student questionnaire. These were entered in NVivo and thematic analysis was conducted. As the comments from the students and LAs were limited (probably because the questionnaires needed to be filled out quickly as people moved to other commitments) we decided to focus on analysing the comments from the

observers. Analysis of the qualitative data was aimed at identifying any pattern or features of individual consultations. A total of 20 themes were identified initially. These were then reviewed and grouped into four main themes: the 1-to-1 process, consultation topics, key features, and the demeanour and attitude of the LAs. Due to space limitations, we focus on the 1-to-1 process and key features of TLACs in this paper.

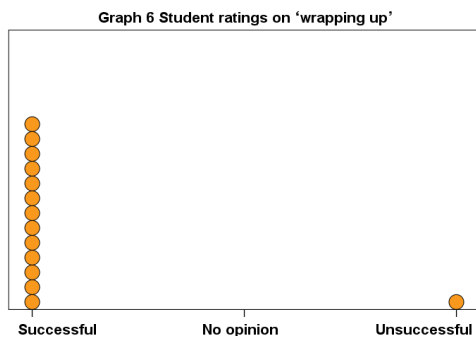
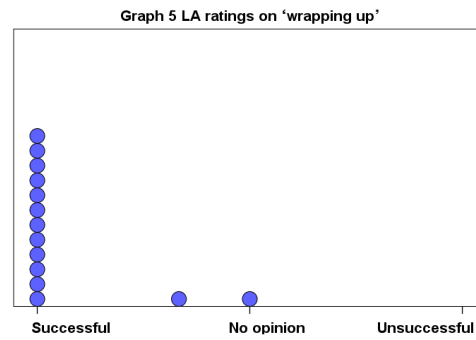
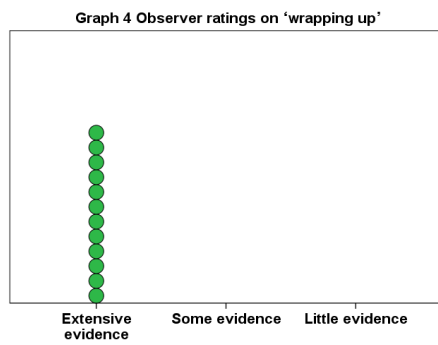
For the second phase of the data analysis, the qualitative and quantitative data were compared. We were able to find support from the quantitative data for the themes generated from the qualitative data set.

Findings

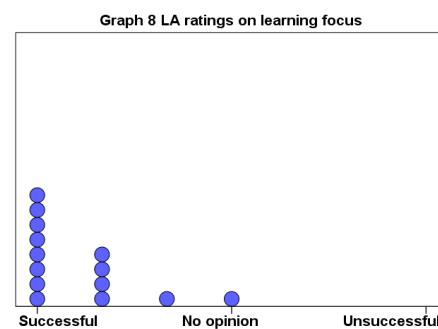
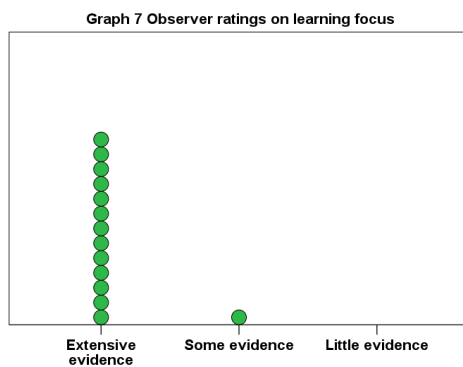
Our analysis shows that all the observed TLACs followed a similar three-stage process: establishing focus, discussing, and wrapping up. Graphs 1 to 3 below show that almost all the learning advisors discussed with the students what the session should focus on. Any variations on the graphs were due to familiarity with the student or the nature of the appointments, which affected how much time the LA spent on establishing the focus for the session and hence the rating of the relevant items on the questionnaires. Comments by the observers reveal that most LAs tended to ask students to identify their needs through open questions. Some advisors started the consultation by relating back to a previous appointment.

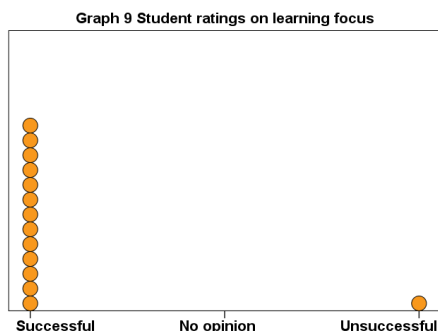


The wrapping-up stage can also be consistently observed across all appointments (see graphs 4-6). The observers' comments show that most LAs finished the appointments by summarising the key points discussed and suggesting an action plan.

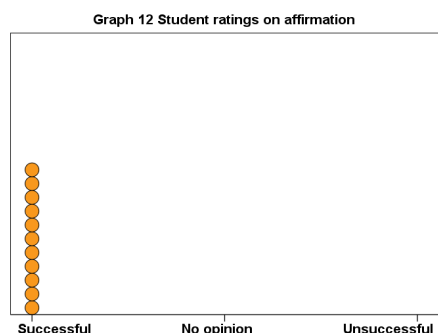
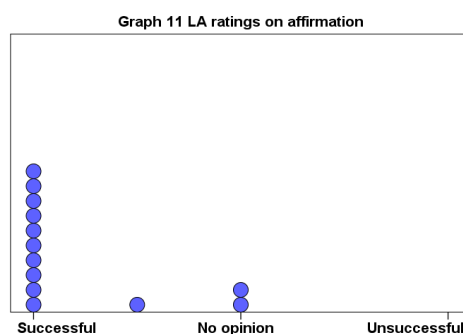
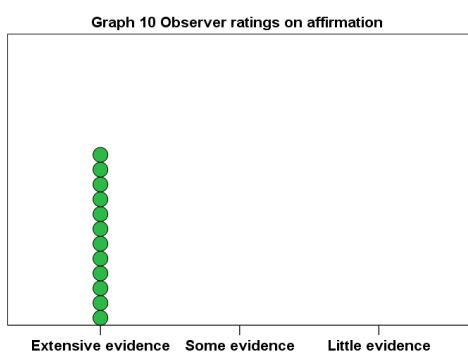


Analysis of the discussing stage revealed that, although some LAs were critical of how well they encouraged independent learning during the consultation (graph 8), encouraging independent learning featured strongly in all observed sessions. Observers' comments show that LAs did so by getting students to answer their own questions or correcting their own errors, by prompting students with questions, or by asking them to make their own plans. The success of encouraging independent learning, however, seems to require the cooperation of the student, or student readiness. One observer commented, "the student was very passive so the LA had to direct the session and the flow of conversation was quite one-sided but the LA tried as much as possible to encourage the student's involvement."

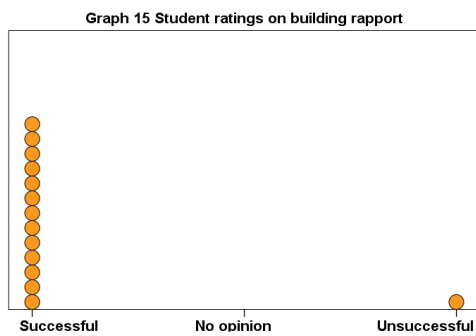
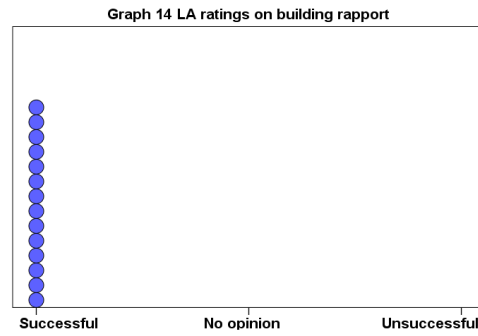
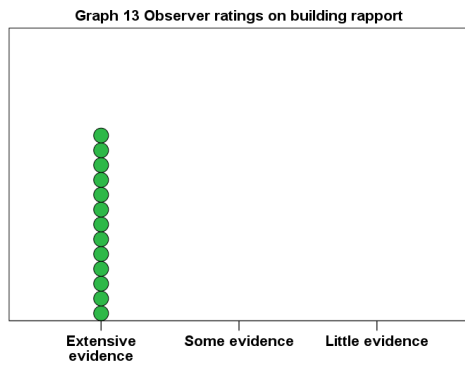




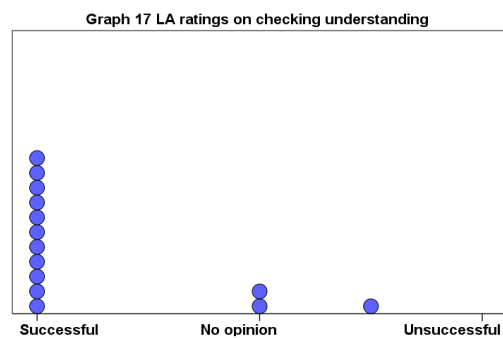
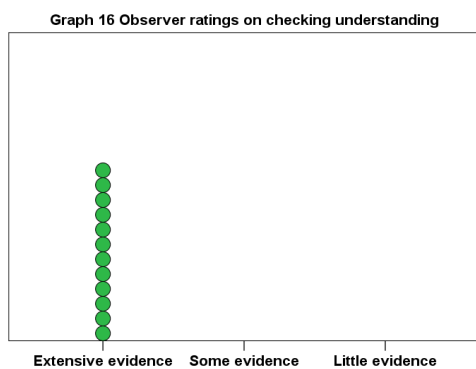
Besides the clear three-stage process in the TLACs, three key features also emerged in data analysis. These features seem to occur throughout a TLAC. The first is that most LAs often praised or affirmed students' strengths or efforts. Graphs 10 and 11 show this feature was consistently reported by the observers, the students and the LAs themselves. Some observers specifically commented that the LA praised good habits, was very encouraging and reminded students of their strengths, or affirmed what the student had done.

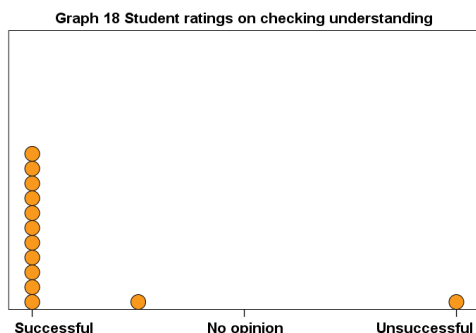


Relationship building between LAs and students is another feature that came through strongly in the data. Some LAs seemed to have done this through friendly greetings, relating to the student personally, or asking about progress or students' feelings. One observer commented that one LA spent half the time establishing the relationship as the student was new to our centre.



A third feature observed is that most LAs regularly checked students' understanding of what was being discussed (graphs 16-18). The observers' comments show that this was done by questioning, summarising what the student said, and using students' verbal and non-verbal cues. Of the three features mentioned, checking understanding is the least uniform in the ratings by observers, LAs and students. One observer commented that the LA did not check the student's understanding because the student was good at indicating understanding himself/herself. Another observer commented on the effectiveness and said using yes-no questions may be less efficient in eliciting understanding. Nevertheless, the overall ratings from the observers, LAs and students are consistently high.





Reflections

Project in general

Our experience of the research project was similar to that of Berry et al. who stated that “as is common in action-learning projects – staff were learning to implement this model on the run” (2012, p. A25). We, too, were gaining insights about how best to conduct the study as it proceeded. Nevertheless, our study shows that peer observation, triangulated with student feedback and LA self-reflection, can be used to evaluate consistency and quality of TLACs within our centre. Data analysis shows that the observed TLACs followed the process as outlined by Student Learning Support Service (2010, p.8). Some of the key qualities of TLACs specified in our centre’s staff guide (Student Learning Support Service, 2010, p.8), for example, ‘clear parameters’, ‘independent active learners’, ‘relationship building’, and ‘empowerment’, were also observed in the study.

Peer observation process

After the data collection period, we conducted two focus group sessions to elicit staff feedback on the project in general and also on the POP. Staff responded to open ended questions and both sessions were audio recorded. Overall, staff found the peer observation sessions “thought provoking” and “very collaborative”. Peer observation offered LAs a chance to “reflect” on their practice, to be more “aware” of what they were doing in the session and as a reminder to avoid “pilot mode”. Some staff who are “used to sharing an office” and those LAs who had participated in the 2009 POP found the transition from an everyday scenario to a more structured observed scenario uneventful.

One experienced LA who shares an office noted that peer observation introduced a “new level” of self-consciousness “because there was pen and paper involved”. She also felt that there was “an element of critique” and “rating” in spite of knowing that this was not actually the case. This was similar to Berry et al.’s (2012) findings that “staff reported being continually aware they were being observed” (p. A26).

While peer observation was generally a positive and worthwhile experience that affirmed our practice, provided an opportunity for reflection and led to opportunities for people to try other strategies, there are some ways in which it could be improved. For example, in the next cycle of the research, we would provide staff with explicit information on what to

give feedback on and how to give it. As one learning advisor who set up the original POP observed, “Our current jobs give us an edge in this area – it’s what we do all the time – but still, there is a difference between providing positive/supportive critical feedback to students and providing it to colleagues” (Roberts, M. personal communication, November, 2008). This comment echoes suggestions from researchers such as Blackmore (2005) and Bell and Mladenovic (2008) that it is important for people to be trained how to carry out peer observation.

Another area for improvement is the debriefing session. Some LA-observer dyads did not schedule in time for debriefing which is seen as being an integral part of a peer observation cycle (see for example, Hammersley-Fletcher & Orsmond 2005; Peel, 2005). Although the importance of this had been explained in an email to staff, we feel that email might not have been a timely or effective way to communicate. LAs might not have read the email and even if they had, the intense day-to-day core work with their students was likely to be a priority.

Finally, some LAs said that, with hindsight, they would have liked more advice on managing physical space before they started. For example, there was some concern about where the LA, the student and the observer should sit, and how to negotiate small spaces.

Conclusion and next step

The feedback from the two focus groups and from informal conversations among staff showed that the project, although time consuming, was very worthwhile and all LAs were willing to be part of another research cycle. As the year progressed, we noted that we were asking more frequently what *impact* our work has and how we can better communicate its value to the wider university community. The question of evaluating the impact of both academic language and learning advising was also the subject of an AALL (Association for Academic Language and Learning) symposium in Adelaide, Australia in December 2014⁴. However, evaluating the impact of learning advising, particularly TLACs, is complex. Writing about learning advising in the Australian context, Webb and McLean (2002) commented, “While there are assumptions that our work impacts positively on retention and success of students, many of the variables influencing the learning outcomes are beyond our control” (p. 3). Nevertheless, we will look at our project more in light of this question. We have redefined our future study objective, then, as: to evaluate the one-to-one learning consultation and investigate how it can lead to a change in student behaviour

Acknowledgments

We thank our colleagues at Student Learning Te Taiako, with special mention to Dennis Dawson for his advice on the quantitative analyses of the data and Marie Paterson for

⁴ See AALL symposium: Evaluating the impact of academic language and learning practice https://www.conferenceonline.com/conference_invitation.cfm?id=20417&key=643D9C2E-1310-45B3-8904-7FF24D8FC8AE.

facilitating the observation sessions. We also thank the students who agreed to take part in the peer observation sessions and took the time to fill out the questionnaires. Thanks to Dr Mary Roberts (now at the University of Macau) who, along with Dr Xiaodan Gao, set up the first Peer Observation Process and undertook the background research used for this study. Finally thanks to our Aotearoa New Zealand and Australian learning advising colleagues whose work has been an inspiration for this project.

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Appendix 1

Project title: An evaluation of the one-to-one Tertiary Learning Advice Consultation.

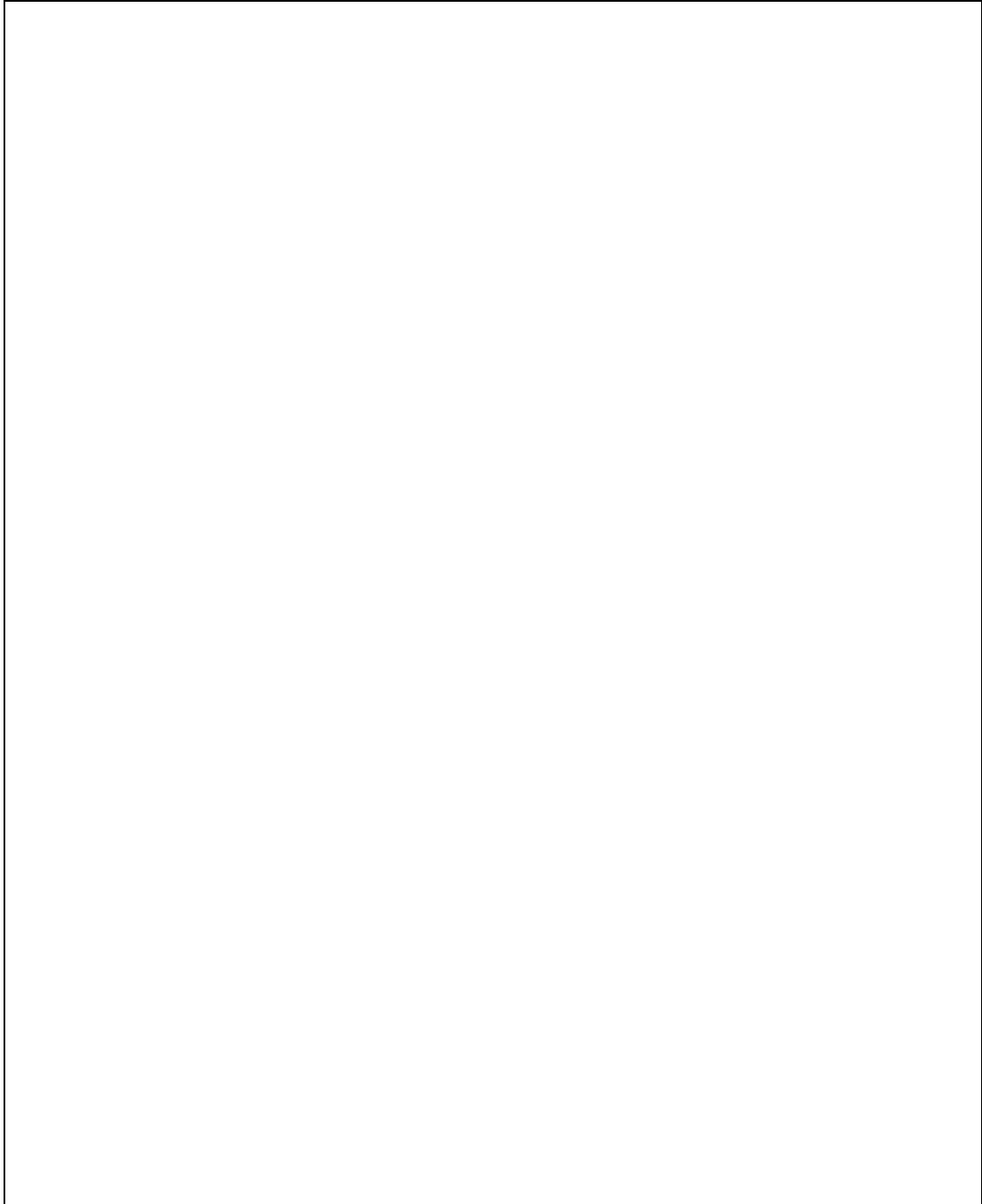
Peer Observation of SLSS Individual Consultation

Key: n/a not applicable 1= extensive evidence; 3=some evidence, 5=little evidence

	a			
ascertains the student's needs and discusses focus for the session				
discusses both the strengths and weaknesses of the student's work				
has a good rapport with the student				
encourages active participation and independent learning				
	a			
makes student aware of general and specific learning outcomes				

	seeks feedback on student understanding and acts accordingly				
	focuses on learning rather than editing/correcting fixing				
	summarises main points, gives student plan of action and ends on positive note				

Do you have any further comments on this session?



Adapted from: Academic Skills Programme. (2003). *Information for new staff in Academic Skills Program*. Canberra, ACT, Australia: University of Canberra, and from: Student learning Support Service. (2009) *Peer Observation Sheet*. Wellington, New Zealand: Victoria University.

Appendix 2

Project title: An evaluation of the one-to-one Tertiary Learning Advice Consultation.

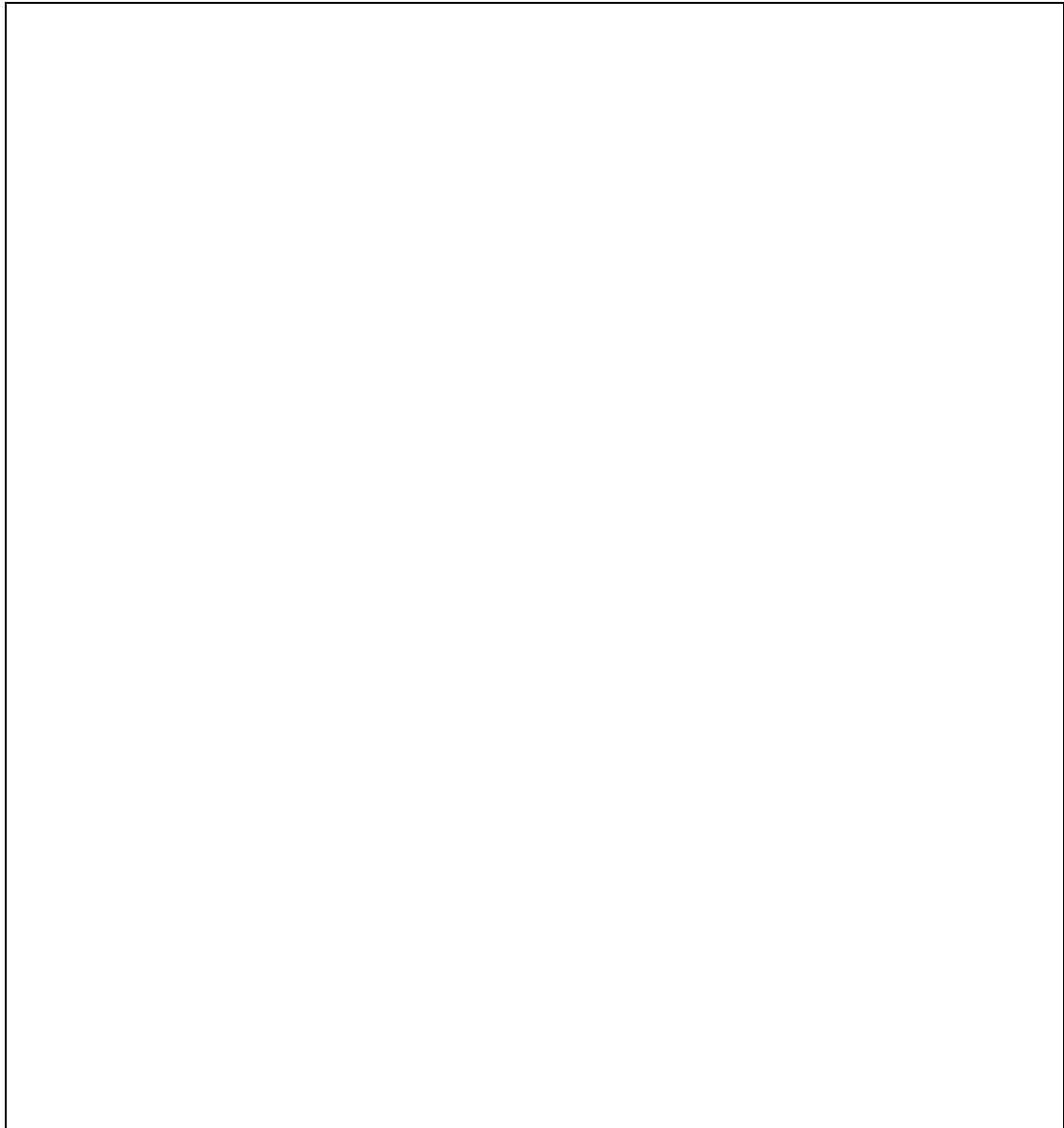
Staff Self-reflection form for individual consultations

Key: 1= very successful; 2=successful; 3= no opinion, 4=unsuccessful, 5=very unsuccessful

		A					
	listened to what the student wanted to achieve in the session.						
	made sure the student understood our role as learning advisors.						
	we negotiated the focus for the session.						
	we examined the specific requirements of the assignment.						
	we positioned the specific learning objectives of the session within the wider context of the student's study.						
	established a good rapport with the student.						
	we discussed the strengths of the student's work.						
	we discussed areas of development.						
	encouraged the student to participate actively.						
1	modified my approach if it did not seem to be effective.						
1	general as well as specific aspects of the work were covered in the session.						
2	the session focused mainly on what I consider to be learning rather than on fixing problems and /or proofreading						
3	made reasonable attempts to ensure the student was learning throughout the session.						
4	we discussed strategies for developing the student's academic learning.						
5	we discussed strategies for improving the student's skills the long term.						
5	checked to see if the student felt satisfied with the progress of the session.						
7	felt we used the time available wisely.						
8	at the end of the session, we summarised the outcomes.						
9	felt the student left the session with a clear and manageable plan of action.						
10	we ended the session on a positive note.						

PTO

Please add any further comments on this 1-to-1 consultation



Student Learning Support Service, (2014) Victoria University of Wellington. Adapted from: Academic Skills Programme. (2003). *Information for new staff in Academic Skills Program*. Canberra, ACT, Australia: University of Canberra

Appendix 3

Student Evaluation of SLSS Individual Consultation

This questionnaire is designed to help students and SLSS staff reflect constructively on consultations so that together we can maximise their effectiveness as learning opportunities. Your responses are anonymous.

Key: n/a = not applicable 1= successful 3=no opinion 5= unsuccessful

		a			
	The learning advisor listened to what I wanted from the session.				
	I understood the role of SLSS and what kind of help advisors can provide.				
	We talked about the focus for the session.				
	We examined the specific requirements for my assignment.				
	The learning advisor helped me to see how specific learning objectives for the session related to the wider context of my study.				
	The learning advisor was friendly and easy to talk to.				
	We discussed the strengths of my work.				
	We discussed areas that I need to work on.				
	The learning advisor encouraged me to participate actively in the session.				
0	The learning advisor changed her/his approach when I seemed to be lost or stuck.				
1	We covered general as well as specific aspects of my work.				
2	The session focused mainly on what I consider to be learning rather than on fixing problems and or proofreading.				
3	The learning advisor checked to see if I was learning throughout the session.				
4	The learning advisor helped me think of some strategies for developing my academic learning.				
5	We discussed some strategies I could use for improving my skills in the long term.				
6	The learning advisor checked to see if I was satisfied with the progress of the session.				
7	I felt we used the time available wisely.				
8	At the end of the session the learning advisor summarised the main points of the session.				
9	I left the session with a clear and manageable plan of action.				
0	We ended on a positive note.				

PTO

Please add any further comments on this session.



Adapted from: Academic Skills Programme. (2003). *Information for new staff in Academic Skills Program*. Canberra, ACT, Australia: University of Canberra