

Engaging sociologists: An A-Level tutoring and mentoring outreach project with 2nd year undergraduate students

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Background

This article is a collaborative piece of work co-written by two university academic staff (AM and RW), an FE college lecturer (PS), and two undergraduate students (GF and DH) who recently participated in the tutor/mentor scheme. The university academics are both experienced higher education lecturers and active researchers, AM previously taught in school, and RW used to teach in further education. Both AM and RW have worked extensively in widening participation and outreach activities within the university and beyond. We report here on a scheme designed to both help local Sociology A-Level students, and also to offer our undergraduate students a chance to 'give something back' (Brine and Waller, 2004) to the wider academic community whilst gaining useful skills and first-hand experience of teaching. We have presented details of this scheme at the national British Sociological Association's Annual Conference twice, to the regional BSA's South West Regional Sociology Teacher's forum, and at Widening Participation events at our university. We are also hoping to present this at the university's Learning and Teaching annual conference in the summer, to encourage colleagues from other disciplinary areas to consider undertaking such a scheme. The main purpose of publishing this article is to promote further collaboration between university Sociology departments and staff teaching the subject at A-Level in schools and colleges.

The UWE Sociology tutor/mentor project

As part of UWE's aim of strengthening its collaborative partnership work with educational institutions and its wider civic mission to reach out to the local community, a scheme has been developed whereby selected second year undergraduates engage in outreach activity to help A-Level Sociology students in nearby schools and colleges. The scheme is now in its fifth year of operation and has now been expanded to include undergraduate

students of Criminology as well as Sociology. The numbers of participants has varied over the years, and in 2016/17 there are nine undergraduates working at a total of six local institutions. The origins of the scheme lay in the academics' commitment to addressing the material, cultural and psychological processes through which students from disadvantaged areas and groups are excluded from applying to university (e.g. Archer *et al.*, 2007; Harrison, forthcoming; UCAS, 2015).

The resulting scheme combines two main elements: tutoring and mentoring. Tutoring by knowledgeable undergraduates provides A-level students with a valuable resource that would otherwise be less accessible in a 'shadow education system' (Bray, 2011) governed by money, and the aim is to boost performance at A-level thereby increasing access to Higher Education (HE). Mentoring by confident and capable undergraduates provides A-level students, many of whom come from families without direct experience of HE, with first-hand 'hot knowledge' (Ball and Vincent, 1998) about what university is actually like (what Bourdieu (1986) would call a form of 'cultural capital'). It also offers a role model to whom the A-Level students can relate, and who can offer reassurance that university really can be open to all. While the scheme has generally targeted schools and colleges located within areas of Bristol where there has been a longstanding low level of participation in HE, it has not stipulated which specific groups of students can participate, since an overly prescriptive approach was thought to be potentially stigmatising for participants. The scheme is funded from the university's widening participation budget which meets costs including resources such as textbooks and travel expenses, and the provision of payment for the undergraduate students, who can also use their involvement in the scheme as the basis for further sociological reflection in a level two module at UWE titled 'Developing Self and Society'.

Undergraduate students are recruited onto the scheme at the beginning of their second year. Selection is based upon a strong first year academic performance, an application form, references, and an interview with the two academic staff. During the autumn term (October to December) the selected students participate in a weekly series of 'subject knowledge enhancement' sessions with one of the academic staff tailored to mastering the sociological knowledge required for the relevant A-Level unit. In the past this has included family and households, education and research methods, and crime and deviance. These sessions involve the relevant lecturer (either AM or RW), but are usually

led by the students themselves in order to provide some classroom practice. As well as demonstrating their core subject knowledge, they are encouraged to discuss how they might teach the session in an A-Level setting. When these sessions have been led by an academic, school teachers and college lecturers have sometimes also been invited to participate, offering them the possibility for academic subject development. Although the undergraduate students have usually recently studied A-level Sociology, an additional session led by a current college lecturer (PS) provides curriculum updates and advice on 'how to teach' in the school or college environment. In the scheme's earlier years, social science graduates on the university's PGCE PCET award (a teacher training course for people aiming to work in sixth form or further education colleges) also helped mentor the scheme's undergraduate participants. This was how PS herself first became involved in the project, as a PGCE student prior to obtaining a permanent teaching post locally. PCET students also offered further advice and guidance on how to teach at A-Level. The undergraduate participant's mentoring training has largely been delivered through the university's 'student ambassador' scheme, but with an additional focus on issues of safeguarding in schools and colleges. All participants receive clearance from the Disclosure and Barring Service before going out on placement.

After this 'preparatory' first phase, students are ready to deliver the tutoring and mentoring during the spring term (January to April). These sessions are usually weekly or bi-weekly, span between six and twelve weeks and, depending on the specific student and location, last for anywhere between 30 minutes and two hours. The specific activities are negotiated directly between the A-Level teacher and the UWE student, thereby offering participants some experience of working like a professional. The majority of students have preferred working one-to-one with students inside and/or outside of the classroom, but a minority (mainly those most interested in teaching as a career) have engaged in both small group and whole class teaching, with the latter activity generally being under the supervision of the class's regular teacher. The main focus has been on reinforcing and extending subject knowledge, but additional focuses have included remedial work, revision guidance and examination technique. The mentoring element has largely been delivered through informal conversations in which the A-Level students have probed for information and insights into the 'real undergraduate student experience'. A small number of students have also participated in 'taster' events at which they gain first-hand experience of what studying Sociology at university will be like. During the 'delivery'

phase, the Tutor/Mentors are supported by the university academics through regular emails and face-to-face meetings, and sometimes through establishing their own informal peer support systems too. And, as previously suggested, additional support has previously also included meetings with postgraduate students on the university's PGCE PCET programme.

As part of the formal evaluation of the scheme, we ask all participants to share their views on its benefits, and on how it could be improved. The A-Level tutors have reported how it is good for their own practice to have an enthusiastic and well-qualified 'assistant' to help even if it was for a relatively limited duration. Some had previously mentioned how they felt it 'kept them on their toes', and helped them to reflect on their own classroom practice (Loughran, 2002; Moon, 1999), especially during the discussions with the mentor. However, the major benefits reported were, as we had hoped, for our undergraduate students and the A-Level school and college students they worked with. Whilst we could approach our own undergraduate Tutor/Mentors directly in this process and have used the evaluation from two of them (GF and DH) in particular here, some of the reported benefits for the A-Level students comes via their teachers rather than the school or college students themselves, which reflects the difficulties of obtaining first-hand data from them.

Findings

For ease of understanding, the findings are divided into two key areas. The first is from the placement hosting teachers and lecturers, who give their own views of the scheme, as well as those of their A-Level students (analysed by PS). This section, which takes the opinions from a number of participating hosts in school and colleges, is further sub-divided along thematic lines. The second area is the views of the undergraduate participants (GF and DH).

School and college teaching staff

Increased of understanding of – and engagement with – the subject

In terms of their students' academic understanding, teachers reported that 'learners achieved better grades in formative assessments after taking part in the scheme as

they were more confident with theories and authors'. Teachers frequently reported an 'increased engagement with the subject of sociology' leading to more enjoyment of the lessons and better subject knowledge. The increased engagement was partly attributed to the mentors' depth of sociological understanding. One teacher remarked the mentor 'had a strong level of knowledge of A-Level Sociology and exam practice' and added that they were 'very well trained and comfortable in the college environment.'

Improved exam technique

The exam technique of learners in the scheme vastly improved according to their teachers. The time to develop essential exam skills in a one-to-one setting was invaluable to teacher and learners. One teacher felt the scheme offered 'improved skills of evaluation', adding that 'this is traditionally an area where learners need assistance'. Another highlighted that 'structured evaluation points' were 'a focus of many sessions.' Teachers noted the value of other study skills and exam preparation advice, including organising revision notes, coaching on revision techniques, and how to structure essays.

Individualised support

Teachers reported that the support offered in one-to-one or small group settings was particularly beneficial. Because of class size and time pressure, this style of learning is difficult for teachers to offer, and one commented that the apparent increase in parents willing to pay for additional tutoring to ensure achievement is often led by learners' concerns about concentration and understanding in larger classes. Other benefits included improved writing skills for learners for whom English is an additional language, another issue that one respondent particularly felt learners and teachers are facing with growing frequency.

Increased enthusiasm for Sociology

Teachers noticed individual benefits to learners such as improved academic engagement or enthusiasm for the subject. Learners benefitted from hearing concepts explained by someone other than their teacher. Teachers expressed that the small group had considerable benefits for anxious learners, who perhaps more than ever make up a significant proportion of the class. For learners who usually

avoided speaking up, asking questions or 'taking risks' in the classroom, the small group sessions allowed them to offer their input in a more comfortable and less threatening environment. Teachers also saw benefits to the host institutions; one noted that the scheme helped to improve student retention levels generally, citing the reason that learners 'viewed the study of Sociology as 'more than a lesson' and therefore connected with it more due to the efforts and enthusiasm of the mentors'.

Increased knowledge of higher education

Whilst on placement the Mentors answered questions, offering advice and inspiration to the A-Level students. Some teachers noted that meeting the mentor had allowed learners a valuable opportunity to discuss options with someone currently at university taking a Sociology or Criminology degree. One reported that 'learners gained an increased awareness of higher education and the career possibilities offered by a Sociology degree', and that 'the mentor talked to the students about her day-to-day life as an undergraduate, and the career plans of herself and her peers'. This had the impact of enhancing aspirations for the A-Level participants, and for some (including Gemma mentioned below) made going to university seem like a realistic possibility.

The undergraduate student perspective

In this section two undergraduate students share their thoughts on the benefits of their participation in the scheme. Both Daisy and Gemma are Sociology undergraduates. Rather than A-Levels, Daisy did a vocational BTEC Health and Social Care award before her degree, but decided to focus on Sociology at university. Gemma is from Bristol and was a participant in the scheme as an A-Level student at a nearby college, an experience which encouraged her to decide to study Sociology at university as she explains below.

Daisy

My participation in the Sociology tutor/mentor scheme has been one of the highlights of my second year at university. The best element of it was working with the young people, who I found to be interesting, intelligent, and just as passionate about Sociology as I am. The scheme offered me a number of benefits, including the

opportunity to obtain practical teaching experience in a classroom environment which would be invaluable should I ever consider a career in teaching.

Through planning and delivering these sessions I found that my own knowledge of key concepts and theorists was refreshed as the focus on the unit on 'Families and Households' coincided with one of the main themes of my Level 2 undergraduate core module on 'Social Transformations'. Most importantly of all, I found the students' curiosity and enthusiasm infectious, and finished the scheme with a renewed enjoyment of my field of study, alongside an interest in working with young people as a career path.

Throughout the scheme the students also experienced a range of benefits, of which I would say the most important is individual level support and improved subject knowledge. My students also seemed to enjoy talking to me about my own university experiences, and particularly appreciated the opportunity to hear a first-hand account of university life, and the increased knowledge of higher education that it provided. Many students were interested in how degrees were classified or graded, although discussions around how to balance study commitments and the student social life was also a main preoccupation!

Gemma

When I was at college in Bristol taking my A-Levels, the Sociology tutor-mentor scheme helped improve my grades and encouraged me to take not just the AS, but also the full A-Level qualification. It also encouraged me to consider doing a degree, and specifically a degree in Sociology. In addition the scheme allowed me to ask questions about the university application process and university life in general. As an undergraduate, working on the scheme increased my confidence both with regards to my academic ability and within a working environment. The role was very fulfilling too as it allowed me to give something back to my local community (Gemma worked at her local FE college with a number of students who had been to her old school). I think that overall my experience of being part of the scheme as a sixth former and then as a university student contributed to my personal and academic development to the point at which I am currently heading towards a 'good honours' degree in Sociology. I am also taking part in a placement in the post-16 education and training field which is helping develop my career plans after university.

Conclusions

Overall the scheme seems to benefit everyone who participates in it. The undergraduates gain enhanced subject knowledge and experience of working in a school or college environment. The A-Level teachers get assistance in their classroom, encouragement to reflect upon their own practice and the opportunity to enhance their subject knowledge. The A-Level students receive support for their studies and the rare chance to discuss university life with someone close in age to themselves to whom they can perhaps relate better than they can to their teacher. Even the university benefits from enhanced partnerships with local schools and colleges and the opportunity to develop the skills, experiences and employment outcomes of its undergraduates.

If you are reading this as a school or college teacher, why not get in touch with your local university Sociology department and see whether they would be interested in offering a similar scheme? Richard and Andy would be happy to offer some advice on how to do so.

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