Continuing the tradition of our ‘Talking’ series, this issue reports a conversation with four tutors – all working in the Faculty of Arts. I came to meet these women following their participation in the Faculty of Arts Tutors’ Development Program (TDP—http://www.arts.usyd.edu.au/tdp) – a collaboration between the Institute for Teaching and Learning (ITL) and the Faculty. The program is designed to help new (and experienced) tutors feel prepared for their first tutorial; to focus on teaching for student learning; and to engage in strategies for evaluating and reflecting on their teaching in order to improve it. Each of these women went on to complete an extension module with me focused on the Peer Observation of Teaching (PoT).

In April, over coffee and biscuits, we sat around a table and chatted about their experiences as tutors, their learning about teaching, the departmental and disciplinary contexts they work in, and the challenges facing them as they work to become better, more effective tutors while completing their PhDs. I am grateful to each of them for their valuable insights, their generosity and for giving up their time.

Introducing the tutors

Thushara Dibley is currently teaching in the unit Social Activism in South East Asia and is in her first year of a PhD in the Department of Indonesian Studies. She is researching how local non-government organisations in Aceh and East Timor engage in the peace building process.

Helen Fewster and Barbara Baumann both research and tutor in the Department of Anthropology. Helen is completing a PhD focused on research in Papua New Guinea and this is her second semester of tutoring. Barbara is working on a thesis about the relationship between the Australian state and Aboriginal organisations, and has been tutoring for only a year.

Jacinta van den Berg is a third year doctoral student in the Department of English. Her research is focused on representations of maternity and the Australian writer Brian Castro. Although she has declined the opportunity to tutor this semester, she has in the past taught on unit such as Fiction, Film & Power, and Narratives of Romance & Adventure.
TAI: I wonder if I might start off by asking each of you to talk a little about some of the things you learned as a result of participating in the Tutors' Development Program (TDP) - the experience of actually learning about teaching.

JACINTA: I guess I didn't feel like a confident or experienced tutor until I actually had the feedback from the Peer Observation of Teaching (PoT) module. And because I was being observed by someone who I'd gone through the initial training with, to be able to get that feedback from her which was 'yes, you've succeeded', made me feel like I could think of myself as a teacher. I felt confident that I could pick up other work outside the university as well. And I enjoy teaching and actually feel like I have some skills there. So I do think of myself as a teacher now. Because the whole career thing after the PhD is shaky, I am seriously thinking about going into teaching rather than research.

THUSHARA: Compared to last semester, I feel much more confident as a teacher. I would attribute a lot of that to having gone through the process of teaching - having had such a big load last semester. But I've also picked a lot up from the TDP and like Jacinta, it was getting some feedback from another tutor, someone who I had observed and thought was quite good, saying that I'd done a good job as well. That made me feel: "Ok, I can do this". I've also had the opportunity to do a few lectures this semester for various subjects. That's been terrifying but at the same time, really good because it's pushed me to teach in a way that I haven't taught before and I've had good feedback so that's been great – really affirming.

HELEN: My experience of tutoring last semester was my first experience of tutoring at university. I was a high school teacher many years ago and I think tutoring at university level is somewhat different. I have found it very rewarding because it also helps you clarify your ideas and thoughts – which you don't necessarily do when you are working on your PhD. You actually have to explain the concepts to your students so you need to think more deeply about the issues involved. I found that the TDP course did help. One of the problems is getting students to talk which can be quite hard to overcome. I tutored four classes last semester in the same unit – one was incredible. The students just talked and talked and ideas just bounced from one student to another which was fantastic. One of the other tutorials wasn't nearly as dynamic and it was very difficult to get any responses from the students. Sometimes, I would end up talking most of the time which then ends up coming out in the evaluations: as "you talk too much".

TAI: Yes, I think we all know that feeling. The dreaded silent classroom and the need to fill it!

HELEN: Nonetheless, I think that tutoring is a very rewarding and invaluable experience for any PhD student and it really should almost be a part of doing your PhD because if you are thinking of going and doing anything later in academia or teaching certainly, you need that experience beforehand. To go in there without that experience having got your PhD would be a lot less valuable. So I think it's a very worthwhile experience.

TAI: Yes, you raise a good question about what should constitute a PhD - whether teaching and research might be experienced in a more integrated way so that both count as part of the doctoral experience. There are some ideas floating around amongst researchers and scholars of doctoral education about a doctoral curriculum so that there are some structures to the PhD. For instance, teaching could be part of it, getting some experience of research grant writing, making a contribution to the journal editing – all those kinds of things are integrated so that the doctoral graduate would have a more complete experience of academic life – and not just a thesis. It's a very controversial idea though!

HELEN: Yes, it's hard because whilst you're tutoring and I found the experience of being in my peer’s classroom extremely helpful.
I paid close attention to her questioning style which was extremely effective.
Observing this enabled me to give her positive feedback and crucially, to acknowledge the effectiveness of her teaching style – which is very different from my own. Jacinta
marking, you’re virtually not doing your PhD. Tutoring takes up a huge amount of your time and it’s not to be ventured into lightly because if you want to complete your PhD on time, you have to be careful that you don’t do too much tutoring.

BARBARA: Last semester was the first time I tutored and it was a very good experience. I still have a few insecurities with the English language so I was very nervous standing in front of a class - but this semester, I’m getting more confident. It takes a lot of time to prepare the tutorials and it also distracts me to a certain extent from my research. Last semester I had 5 tutes and I have 5 tutes again this semester. Although I initially intended to take on fewer tutorials, I’m happy for the opportunity because I am definitely aiming to work as a lecturer in the near future. Apart from that, management of my time input into tutoring is becoming more effective. I thought the TDP was very useful in preparing me for the teaching situation. Actually, there should be more emphasis on training to be a lecturer. Just because you’re a good scholar doesn’t necessarily mean you’re a good teacher and you are able to bring your knowledge across to students. I think there has to be some compulsory sessions for people who actually are starting to become tutors and have no teaching experience. I was a little surprised when I started tutoring last semester because there was no “official” induction process. If I hadn’t completed the TDP, I’m pretty sure some of my insecurities – especially with self-confidence – would have continued. I think it should be a compulsory module for the “newcomers”.

TAI: It’s interesting that question – whether teacher/tutor training should be compulsory – whether academics should be required to do it. Let me ask you now about preparation, marking and feedback – widely acknowledged as the activities which take up the most time. How’re you finding those things?

BARBARA: In my case, because I’m not as competent with the language, I put quite a lot of time into preparing my tutorials – I tend to be very organized in general (there is of course always the danger of “over-preparing”). Apart from the time factor, I really enjoy the preparation process and I try to use various sources to give students an “introduction” into the topic and put the unit readings into a wider context. According to the feedback sheets I hand out mid semester, students find this really useful and it helps to make “dry theory” more interesting and accessible.

JACINTA: I always felt that I would spend more time on the preparation if I hadn’t had those initial TDP classes because they just made so much of a difference.

BARBARA: The teaching is actually very enjoyable – just the marking has been a draining experience for me. I guess everybody is feeling similar – the essay feedback takes most of the time and in marking weeks, I have actually no opportunity to get other work done.

JACINTA: It takes so much time to put together feedback.

TAI: And yet we know from the literature that the quality of feedback, and the dynamics around feedback, is what students cite as being one of the most important ways of gauging how they’re learning. There’s some research from the UK which suggests that what we need to do as teachers is find some way of getting students to engage with the feedback we provide them as part of their experience of learning – particularly if that’s where we spend most of our efforts as teachers.

HELEN: Some lecturers feel that students don’t take a lot of notice of the feedback. However, I remember as a student being really keen to get my feedback. Students also wrote to me telling me that they were looking forward to reading my comments. So, it may be that some students give it a cursory glance but not every student. Maybe one problem is connected with the return of the assignments in that the major assignment is often returned at the end of the tutorial period so students

From my experience teaching this semester, I’ve found that it is really helpful to have a space to reflect on my own teaching, and to learn about the experiences of others. As I progress in my research, I am going to become busier and busier and unless I develop some structures in my professional life that allow me to continue to give time to reflecting on my teaching, it’s likely I’ll start to get sloppy. For this reason, I think it would be really great to develop a partnership or team with other tutors.

Thushara
are unable to consult with their marker about the feedback. It would probably be a more worthwhile experience for students if they were able to discuss the comments with their tutor.

**TAI:** Then there are other questions about how tutors are involved in the construction of assessment – or even, whether they can be. Since tutors are responsible for most of the marking and feedback, helping them understand the rationale for assessment tasks seems to be really important – especially if they're the first point of call for students.

**THUSHARA:** I've had a different experience because the subject I've been teaching is a new one and it only started last semester. The person who's teaching it is my supervisor so I spend a lot of time with her. She was a teacher before she became an academic so she's very supportive of anything that will improve the experience for the students. So I was always saying “how do you want me to do this exactly?” and “I don't really know this and that” and she was really kind and helped me out. So with assessments and things, she's always open to the feedback that I can give her. If we're talking about suggestions for how departments can better support tutors, I think it's about getting tutors more involved throughout the process and maybe getting lecturers to spend time with the tutors. For example, having a feedback session at the end of semester would be really helpful – not only for the tutors but also for the people running the course and for the students.

**HELEN:** I was so impressed with that article in *Synergy* – in Geopolitics – the organised approach to tutoring they took. All the tutors on this course got together with the lecturer before the semester started and I think each one took a lecture in the course. They were all involved with the planning of the course and they all wrote feedback after each tutorial. Their approach was exciting and innovative; so well planned and thought out. It would be great if something like that could be replicated in our department.

**JACINTA:** That would be fantastic in English as well - that would make the greatest single difference.

**HELEN:** It would be so fantastic to actually be part of the process, to have your ideas consulted and to be part of an ongoing discussion. Even if you had to write up a reflection about each tutorial, it would be worth it to be part of a more coherent process rather than one that's ad hoc.

**THUSHARA:** But it could be organised amongst the tutors themselves couldn't it? I don't know what the culture is like in other departments but I know that there are a whole group of research assistants and tutors in the Indonesian department and I'm sure that if all of us sat down together, I’m sure it would have an impact.

**HELEN:** I believe that the lecturers tried to be helpful and supportive and I really appreciated the help that was given with the marking. Barbara and I also tried to support each other. We would meet each week and pool our ideas but when we were seen doing it, sometimes we received mixed messages – such as don’t get too involved or stress out– it will be fine.

**TAI:** I don't think the experience you've just described is uncommon in this university – part of it is about academic workload and part of it is about having a more organised and strategic approach to teaching and learning so that it's valued as a professional, intellectual and evidence-based activity. In a lot of places – those values are often contested.

**THUSHARA:** Just seeing how my supervisor works – I don’t know a lot about how other academics operate - there is a lot on their plates. It seems the problem is not so much that they don't have an interest in teaching but that there is no structural incentive to prioritise teaching – at least not in the same way that something like promotions depend on how many publications you're producing, not how many hours you put...
I’m interested in how the process of tutor development can be incorporated into the overall system of tutoring. How can the tutoring process be a more active and integral component of the unit of study? Helen

into your teaching. That I think might change things.

TAI: Some of that is changing. The promotions guidelines are focusing people’s attention on teaching and learning in some new ways – for eg, emphasising teaching and learning leadership or the scholarship of teaching – but there is still more work to do. I wonder if we can change tack again. Could you each describe how you’re going managing a teaching load with making progress on your PhD?

THUSHARA: I’m only doing one tute a week and it seems manageable. It is challenging. I can’t imagine how I could do very much more. But it’s sort of a funny little battle that goes on in my mind – on the one hand I think “well, if I want to become an academic this is the sort of juggling that I’ll be doing for the rest of my life”. On the other hand, “well, do I really want to accept that this is how it is”. What are the consequences not only for my teaching and my research but for my personal life as well – particularly, if you’re trying to do well at your teaching and your research and then also have a weekend. So it’s not just those two but then how that fits into the context of me being a whole human being and continuing to be a good friend and a good family member and a good partner and all those sorts of things. I feel it’s manageable now but I can see that the pressure will become greater as my PhD goes on and also if it becomes my profession and it’s my livelihood.

JACINTA: Where I am now – I’m not tutoring because I couldn’t get any meaningful work done on my thesis. I actually didn’t really realise how much work I wasn’t getting done until I’d finished that year of teaching. I’m effectively treating that year as basically a break even though I was still on the scholarship. I’m wondering whether the scholarship could be re-arranged so you could have a break that was factored into what else is going on for you that year. So, you could have a break from the scholarship if you were tutoring. To me, it just didn’t work at all to be tutoring at the same time. I mean, I managed to get conference papers done because I could have those small goals but in terms of the sort of deep thought that you need for a PhD, it’s just a non event.

THUSHARA: I was just thinking listening to you that that might be something that the TDP might consider looking at - having a session particularly for people doing research and teaching because a lot of people would be talking about how to keep that balance.

TAI: I’ll pass on the feedback to the folks in the Faculty. That issue of balancing research and teaching comes up all the time and I don’t really have an answer for it. It’s a structural issue about how academic work is organised so that they’re not pulling in opposite and contradictory directions. And notice, we haven’t even mentioned ‘service’ – the poor and neglected cousin of the three dimensions of academic work. Again, some of these are strategic issues but it’s worth putting on the agenda the challenge of how universities support the professional development of their doctoral students. The evidence from the Student Research Experience Questionnaire (SREQ) is that it’s uneven and patchy across the university. What sort of strategies do you think might help that?

HELEN: I think that increasing the importance of having meetings between lecturers and tutors would probably be a good start.

JACINTA: Just knowing that people cared enough to start doing something about it would be meaningful.

THUSHARA: Really small things I reckon, like just a meeting at the beginning of the semester and a meeting at the end of semester.

BARBARA: We have markers’ meetings but we should probably have them earlier in the semester to ensure some kind of consistency and we should agree on one set of marking
criteria. I have the feeling that every lecturer organizes these matters differently. I would appreciate if this could be clarified in the very first tutors meeting with the lecturer. I would also be happy to take on more responsibility in the planning and organization process.

JACINTA: Maybe too, if there was an effort to match your areas of expertise to your teaching that would be just, so fantastic. Don’t get me wrong, I enjoy teaching things that are out of my area – the courses I taught were really interesting and I enjoyed teaching but I can only imagine that teaching in my own area would only make the experience so much better, for everyone involved. This is a dream life than I’m living, being able to teach in my own area.

THUSHARA: I think getting organised and having concrete things to suggest to academics about helping to improve teaching, in my experience, is really helpful because I know they’re really busy. So being really clear from our perspective about what we want is a good starting point. And manageable for them too.

TAI: What about the idea of writing about your tutoring for publication or, applying for an award? Are they incentives for you at the moment? I ask because there’s a move towards what’s called the scholarship of teaching, and making sure that excellent teachers are recognised and rewarded. Have any of you thought about that sort of thing?

JACINTA: No time.

HELEN: It’s a huge task and I’m not sure what the incentive would be. I started writing something about my experience of giving interactive tutorials but I had to go off and do some fieldwork and came back quite sick and then teaching started – it’s still on my computer.

JACINTA: I think I would feel fraudulent applying for an award when I’ve lacked that sort of feedback from everyone except my direct peer. Without any feedback from the course coordinator and that sort of thing, I’d feel like, I don’t know: I think I was great but hey!

TAI: So there’s an issue about getting feedback from the academics responsible for the unit. Are there other things you’d like to raise more generally?

JACINTA: Can I, just as one little thing, I would really appreciate some clearer boundaries about what work is and isn’t appropriate for someone to be doing as a tutor. I worry that there’s a whole lot of work that tutors do that is unpaid after the contract comes to an end – like hunting down marks, or assignments that students hadn’t handed in and that sort of thing. Often, there are no guidelines to help tutors understand their rights and responsibilities – when they can say ‘no’.

THUSHARA: I want to add something to setting limitations. One thing which worked well for me was, just at the beginning of this year I was putting together a time table of how much time I was going to spend teaching and how much time I was going to do research. I showed it to my supervisor just to get some feedback and because she’s lecturing for the course that I’m tutoring, she just directly gave me feedback saying “look, I don’t want you spending that much time on your teaching and you’ve had enough experience now I feel like you should be right with just spending three hours on preparing”. It was good just to know what the expectation was and also it kind of pushed me to not to get so caught up in the details. Having done a semester of teaching now, it was just a good little boundary setting exercise that was helpful.

JACINTA: So incredibly organised, I’m impressed.

Notes
3Further information about the Student Research Experience Questionnaire at http://www.itl.usyd.edu.au/sreq/