

TUTOR CHALLENGES: STUDENT ASSISTANTS ON THEIR ROLE IN CBL

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ABSTRACT

University departments have been employing student assistants (SAs) to help with teaching tasks. In challenge-based learning (CBL) courses, this has been no exception. However, teaching tasks in CBL courses are different from traditional courses, leading to other expectations, tasks, and responsibilities. At our department, we aim to increase the didactic skills of our SAs in group-based CBL courses through the introduction of a Student Assistant Community. This paper reports on first efforts in setting up that community, and specifically on the insights gained regarding how SAs view their own role within CBL courses, and which challenges they encounter in guiding student groups. These insights provide valuable input on how to successfully employ SAs in CBL activities.

Keywords: student assistants, supervision, professional development, challenge-based learning

1 INTRODUCTION

Student assistants (SAs) are employed students with teaching and research tasks. Traditionally SAs help with teaching by answering basic questions and performing simple organizational tasks during practicals, and by grading. However, over the past few years SAs have also taken up the tutoring- or coaching role in courses that apply challenge-based learning (CBL) principles in group work. In such courses, the role and influence of the SAs is more prominent than in more traditional courses. The SAs monitor progress of student groups, give advice to students, help with content-wise questions, detect misbehavior of students, report to the responsible teacher, and advise the teacher regarding the final grade. Furthermore, the direct interaction between the responsible teacher and the student groups is diminished compared to traditional courses.

Employing SAs in CBL has many advantages: they generally have flexible working hours, can easily empathize with the problems students face, are often up-to-date on recent technologies, and can give practical advice. SAs benefit themselves through obtaining financial rewards, greater understanding of course content and an improvement of didactics, communication, and leadership skills.

However, the practice of having SAs as tutors also raises questions: Should students carry responsibility for grading? Can we guarantee similar supervision for all groups, given the diversity of SAs? How to find and train SAs with sufficient experience, given their brief employment?

This paper reports on the view of SAs themselves on those questions, obtained from recordings and summaries of leaderless focus-group discussions (Morgan, 1996). More precisely, it reports on how SAs see their own role in CBL and which challenges they face during the execution of that role.

2 METHODS

To attempt structuring the finding and training of suitable SAs and retaining their expertise, our department is creating a Student Assistants Community (SAC). The goal of SAC is to provide a platform for peer discussion, to enable development in didactics skills, and to improve retention of SAs. The initiators of SAC observed that some SAs involved in CBL were eager to improve their own didactic skills, and to share their didactic insights.

To encourage this, and to ensure relevance of the SAC, we decided that all shared content and resources within the SAC should be primarily created by the SAs themselves. During its conception, a group of four experienced SAs (all co-authors of this paper) were asked to create an on-boarding guide for new SAs in CBL courses. During the first discussions regarding useful content for this guide, the SAs deduced that their own views on their role as SA differs substantially.

Instead of building the requested guide, they suggested to investigate these different views more thoroughly. After all, these insights into the different viewpoints of SAs are probably more valuable for the development of the community, and coincide more with the philosophy of CBL and the SAC, than a “how to”-guide. Consequently, they started recording a podcast about their experiences as an SA in CBL courses, which includes discussions of issues encountered while supervising groups, and reflection on how they handled these situations. The podcast now serves as a resource for other SAs to learn from these experiences, and as inspiration for new discussions and reflections.

The second initiative of SAC was the organization of weekly peer discussions for subgroups of in total 25 SAs involved in a first-year CBL course of the bachelor computer science. In the course, students follow the SCRUM methodology (Schwaber, 1997) while cooperating to build a small robot. Through SCRUM, students practice reflection, communication, planning and presenting skills. Our SAs in this course serve as a first point-of-contact for the student groups. They mainly observe group dynamics, and give feedback on project management. The SAs also have an important role in advising the teacher in the final assessment of the course. Our SAs are provided with a training on supervising this SCRUM process, but they still must learn much of the didactics behind the course on-the-job. The peer discussions are intended to support this on-the-job learning.

For these discussions, we used a technique similar to “intervision” (Bellersen & Kohlmann, 2016), in which peers reflect on cases and experiences brought in by group members. The discussion was usually started by two of the co-authors, who brought in topics that were expected to be relevant in the current week of the course. SAs were encouraged to share situations and questions within the intervision group. Additionally, exercises were prepared by the SAs running the sessions, focusing on guiding groupwork and training SAs on what kind of questions to ask students to assess their progress. Other topics such as lacking communication or free-riders, were frequently discussed.

3 RESULTS

The content of the podcast, as well as the summary written by the leading SAs of our intervention sessions, can be considered as a (in the case of the podcast leaderless-) focus group discussion, from which we can gain many insights regarding the view of our SAs on their role in CBL teaching, and the challenges they face.

First and foremost, our SAs in CBL view themselves as the “eyes-and-ears of the professor”. SAs highlight that, in contrast with the teaching of “traditional” courses, the monitoring of behavior and registration of malfunctioning is seldomly taking place through execution of simple “checklists”. The CBL nature of the course requires a flexibility in execution that makes it more difficult to capture what constitutes misbehavior and malfunctioning. The department manages this to some extent by requiring the groups to follow a SCRUM-like process, which helps to make a group progress more explicit, but still a higher than usual level of didactic insight is required from the SAs when deciding what to report back to the teacher.

Secondly, SAs consider themselves to be “coaches in professional skills education”. The SAs are present at group meetings and give feedback about progress, communication, presentation, and planning skills, as well as asking the group to reflect on their own functioning. Our SAs indicate that, while they feel they do not always have the right credentials to give this feedback, they also have a frame of reference similar to that of the students they are coaching. This sometimes makes it easier for the student groups to accept the given feedback. In their coach-role, the SAs indicate to frequently question themselves whether they are responsible for motivating students.

Thirdly, SAs report they “feel responsible for the final assessment”. While SAs do not determine the final grade, in practice the SAs can have a large influence as they inform the responsible teacher on important topics like the quality of group processes. The SAs also feel that this responsibility can be justified, but it does require good insight of the SAs in the learning goals, similar to the observations made regarding being the “eyes-and-ears of the professor”.

Finally, SAs report that they experience difficulty in finding the right balance between “being an ally to the group” in their role as coach, and “being the person co-determining the final grade”. The SAs also report that clear communication regarding their elevated role in grading helps in obtaining the status needed to carry out their role as coaches, as the student groups take the SAs advice more seriously.

4 CONCLUSIONS

When studying the needs for SAs, “empowerment” came to our minds first to enable SAs to fulfill the role as they see it for themselves. SAs need to build their own confidence in didactics, which can be achieved partly by providing dedicated workshops on relevant subjects, and partly by regular reflection either in intervisions, or together with the responsible teacher. SAs also need to be “seen to be empowered”, by for example having the responsible teacher clearly explaining to the students of the course what the role of the SAs is. For this, it helps when the roles and tasks of the SAs are clearly described and the course organization is clearly structured. Regarding the final assessment, SAs agree that they should not be made to feel they have the end responsibility for the grade, but having a clear influence on the final grade is possible and perhaps even desirable.

In summary, by asking SAs to tutor groups of students in large CBL courses, teachers are putting additional didactic responsibility on their shoulders. We can recognize that this is the case, because the SAs start asking themselves the philosophical didactic questions posed in the introduction, which all teachers will recognize. The authors feel that, despite this increased responsibility compared to “traditional” courses, it is still justified to ask SAs to take on this role, provided that they receive sufficient support and supervision while they learn the skills needed on the job.

We additionally recommend paying proper attention to the “professional skill level” of prospective SAs. Where traditionally SAs are selected based on their grade for the course, it may be more important for CBL courses to select SAs based on other criteria, such as communication, leadership, and didactic skills.

5 REFERENCES

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