

The University Teaching Opportunities Programme (UTOP): An Opportunity for Educators and Students to Learn from One Another

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Jonathan takes us through his experiences of being a mentor for UTOP, particularly how it enabled him to collaborate with his UTOP student mentees to design a learning activity in which students could think critically about AI-generated output.

In addition, Jonathan's UTOP mentee Eliza also shares her undergraduate TA experience, which you can read about [here](#).



UTOP participants in discussion (Photo credits: UTOP team)

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As the module coordinator and lecturer for GET1050/GEI1001 “Computational Reasoning,” I have been employing undergraduate students as teaching assistants (TAs) since the programme’s inception four years ago. When the University first introduced the University Teaching Opportunities Programme (UTOP) in 2022, I eagerly signed up, recognising that UTOP could address a challenge that I could not overcome single-handedly.

There were problems with inducting fresh undergraduate TAs on a paid contract. Given their lack of experience and maturity compared to graduate TAs, new undergraduate TAs placed a lot more pressure on themselves to perform and succeed. They believed that being compensated meant they had no room for failure. This performance mindset hindered their ability to be receptive to learning, as feedback for improvement was typically perceived as a sign of failure, further exacerbating their stress. Moreover, it was challenging to motivate new TAs to reflect on their teaching practices for their personal growth and development, as there were no incentives in place for them to do so. With their undergraduate workload taking precedence, reflecting on their teaching practices often fell to the bottom of their priorities and was frequently neglected.

UTOP has proven to be highly effective in reshaping the mindsets of new undergraduate TAs. As a four-unit course, it established the understanding that their primary goal was to *learn* rather than to focus solely on performance. Being a pass/fail module, it provided them the opportunity to make mistakes and learn from them without fear of failure. After running UTOP for three semesters, I observed that students who were initially apprehensive about teaching became more willing to give it a try. TAs also became more receptive to feedback as UTOP provided a framework for regular feedback sessions. More importantly, UTOP encouraged TAs to reflect on their teaching practice, helping them define the kind of teacher they aspired to be, the teaching values they wished to uphold, and ways to enhance their own practice. Overall, the emphasis shifted from performance-oriented to formative, allowing TAs to conduct tutorials with reduced self-imposed pressure. Consequently, they were able to enjoy a more reflective and enriching teaching and learning experience.

Furthermore, the flexibility of UTOP allowed me to experiment with ways to give students opportunities to learn about other aspects of teaching beyond the classroom. In the past, I had involved my undergraduate TAs in minor roles, where they provided valuable insights and feedback on students’ potential misunderstandings of assignment instructions or suggested ways to make certain scenarios in various learning activities more engaging.

These little successes compelled me to explore how I could engage students more deeply in teacher-student partnerships, a pedagogical approach that aims to foster learning with students through a collaborative and mutually beneficial process. As Cook-Sather et al. (2014) explains, it involves all participants making equal contributions, albeit in different ways, to various aspects of curriculum and pedagogical development, implementation, investigation, or analysis (pp. 6-7).

Consequently, in Semester 2 of AY2022/23, I supervised two students under UTOP to help me design a new tutorial activity where we could teach students to think critically about AI-generated output.

As I taught them the nuts and bolts of constructive alignment and how to design a tutorial activity, I was learning so much from them about their student perspectives. In one discussion, it became clear that students were having very different experiences of ChatGPT compared to mine (and my colleagues). One of them shared how her peers were using it, and how they came up with prompts to produce outputs far better than mine. In another discussion, I learnt how students were approaching readings, websites, and even the Canvas learning management system, very differently from what I had expected.

As educators, we often overlook these aspects because we typically assume that students perceive our instructions and resources in ways very similar to us, and thus design activities and assessments based on this assumption. However, through UTOP, I had the opportunity to engage with these students on a regular basis, and it provided a platform for these differences to become apparent. This experience has therefore allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of my students.

In retrospect, UTOP is not solely an opportunity for students to learn from us; it also serves as a platform for us educators to learn from our students as we collaborate with them in designing new learning activities. It presents a chance for both teachers and students to grow together.

Reference

Cook-Sather, A., Bovill, C., & Felten, P. (2014). *Engaging Students as Partners in Learning & Teaching: A Guide for Faculty*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.



Jonathan Y. H. SIM is a Lecturer with the Department of Philosophy at NUS. He is very passionate about teaching and he continues to research fun and innovative ways to engage students to learn effectively. He has a special interest in crossing beyond disciplinary boundaries in the search for fascinating new insights to age-old problems.

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