Report on the Teaching Experiences of Common Core Tutors and Teaching Assistants

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(For the project: Improvisation through the Lens of Design Thinking to Enhance the Teaching Capacities of Tutors across the Common Core)

Significance of this project

This project was conceived in response to the need to prioritise undergraduate learning experiences as part of the University of Hong Kong’s (HKU) new Teaching and Learning (T&L) strategy for 2021‒28 (Delivering to Our Students, 2021). Across the university, course design and course delivery often fall under the responsibilities of course tutors and teaching assistants (TAs). They will typically carry out their teaching duties in small group tutorials (as well as activities or fieldtrips outside the classroom) but can sometimes be tasked with the planning and delivery of lecture content as well.

The quality, nature and degree of professional development tutors walk into these roles with varies greatly. For example, tutors will vary in the number of years of experience they have working in university environments, with some having entirely academic careers and others having more experience in industry or non-scholastic workplaces. Some have no formal training in pedagogical methods, while others have attended multiple workshops covering aspects such as syllabus development, assessment design, and promoting academic integrity. Several teachers are more experienced with face-to-face student interactions, while others have demonstrated a greater capacity to adopt online or hybrid teaching methods throughout the recent COVID-19 pandemic.

HKU’s Common Core (CC) curriculum is also designed in such a way that invites and embraces a diverse group of educators to share knowledge with students. CC courses are categorized under four main themes or ‘Areas of Inquiry (AoI)’: Science, Technology and Big Data, Arts and Humanities, Global Issues, and China: Culture State and Society. Each CC course within each theme covers a broad range of perspectives and many include discussions on the interconnections between seemingly disparate areas of knowledge (Kochhar-Lindgren, 2017). Therefore, the responsibilities of the CC tutor or TA will include negotiating how to help students develop transdisciplinary and interdisciplinary thinking, better manage various epistemologies and “address the complexities of 21st century life” (Common Core, 2022). By identifying the areas in which tutors feel their own teaching may improve, a clearer strategy arises for the future provision of professional development opportunities and institutional support.

Research questions and methodology

Four essential research questions guided this study:

1) How do tutors perceive their own roles and responsibilities, and their current capacities to meet them?
2) In tutorials and other settings, what are their strategies for supporting student learning and encouraging student participation?
3) Does the transdisciplinary or interdisciplinary nature of their course content


create new challenges to be negotiated?
4) In what ways do they want to become better teachers in future and how does their experience within the Common Core (or HKU) fit into their overall career trajectories?

Participants

The call for participation in this study was sent out via e-mail to 260 current or recently employed course co-ordinators, tutors and TAs teaching in the Common Core. Participants completed the survey between March and April 2022, towards the end of the 2021-22 academic year. They include a total of 56 participants of various genders, ages, educational backgrounds, and positions within the university (see Figure 1). A majority of the respondents are relatively junior, holding Bachelor’s or Master’s degrees as their highest qualification, and brought on as new hires with less than one year of previous experience in such a role. The survey participants teach in courses that span all four AoIs of the CC Curriculum, with some of them even teaching in multiple AoIs.

Figure 1—Demographic data and background information of research participants (continued on next page).
Figure 1 (continued)—Demographic data and background information of research participants.

Quantitative data collection

Data were collected through questions collapsed under five main sections:

(a) Contact and demographic information (questions 1–8),
(b) CC Tutor/TA roles and responsibilities (questions 9–18),
(c) CC Tutor/TA skills and capabilities (questions 19–28),
(d) Professional development (questions 29–33), and
(e) Remarks and interest in participating in a follow-up interview (questions 34–35).

For (b), we asked participants to rate the importance of the listed responsibilities and roles of a Common Core Tutor/TA, on a scale of 1 (not important), 2 (slightly important), 3 (fairly important), 4 (important) and 5 (very important):

- To have a good understanding of key concepts and issues discussed in the course
- To enhance motivation and participation
- To encourage critical thinking
- To help improve students’ problem-solving thinking and skills
- To conduct tutorials in a way that enables students’ learning
- To read the materials and watch the lecture videos prepared by the course instructor
- To well perform admin duties (e.g. Setting up Moodle, attendance taking, revising course materials, etc.)
- To co-create teaching contents with the instructor
- To well respond to students’ questions and enquiries
- To bridge between the students and the course instructor

For (c), we asked participants to rate the importance of the listed skills and capabilities of a Common Core Tutor/TA, on a scale of 1 (not important), 2 (slightly important), 3 (fairly important), 4 (important) and 5 (very important):

- To speak English (or the teaching media) fluently
- To be able to communicate effectively
- To be willing to learn from students
- To be able to work in intercultural contexts
- To be energetic and creative
- To be able to engage students in an interactive way
- To be able to improvise during discussions
- To be able to help design class activities
- To be able to use educational technologies
- To be knowledgeable about the subject(s) and teaching approach(es)

For (d), we asked participants how many professional development workshops they had participated in over the past 12 months, both organized by Common Core and elsewhere. Then allowed participants to inform us of their reasons for attending Common Core workshops via multiple choice:

- Improving their performance as a Tutor/TA
- Becoming a better educator
- Supporting their career profession
- Other reasons (with textbox for further details)

In addition, we provided a multiple choice for survey respondents to inform of us the skills and capabilities they felt they were lacking currently and needed to improve to
become better Common Core Tutors/TAs:

- Communicational skills
- Subject knowledges
- Teaching approaches and pedagogies
- Interdisciplinary teachings
- Conducting small class tutorials
- Intercultural awareness
- Classroom management
- Lesson planning/curriculum development
- Class activity design
- Motivating and engaging skills
- Educational technologies
- Other capabilities (with textbook for further details)

Finally, our participants were given one open-ended question: what type of professional development activities should Common Core offer for Tutors/TAs? Several participants then left us notes with additional remarks at the end of the survey.

**Qualitative data collection**

Our investigation continued with a series of interviews with 10 educators willing to volunteer their time. These 10 interviewees are based at various faculties (Arts, Architecture, Education, Medicine, Social Sciences) and teach across all four AoIs of the Common Core. All interviews were conducted over Zoom between 20 April and 5 May 2022, with verbatim interview transcripts produced afterwards using Otter.ai.

Questions were designed to allow evaluation of their typical teaching practice, how they perceive their own capabilities and areas for improvement, their impressions of the student experience within tutorials, and how they navigate any interdisciplinarily challenges. We also seeked to understand more about how tutors/TAs believe their teaching in the Common Core curriculum fits within their overall career trajectories. A full list of the questions used in these semi-structured interview can be found in Appendix 1.
Results (Quantitative Data)

The results in Figure 2 show how respondents rated the importance of various roles, responsibilities, skills and capabilities for Common Core Tutors/TAs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Roles and Responsibilities</th>
<th>Rating</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Responding to students’ enquiries</td>
<td>4.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possessing knowledge of concepts</td>
<td>4.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conducting tutorials that enable learning</td>
<td>4.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourage critical thinking</td>
<td>4.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enhance motivation and participation</td>
<td>4.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helping improve problem-solving skills</td>
<td>4.50</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bridging between students and instructor</td>
<td>4.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading prepared materials</td>
<td>4.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performing administrative duties</td>
<td>4.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co-creating content with instructor</td>
<td>3.73</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skills and Capabilities</th>
<th>Rating</th>
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<tr>
<td>Effective communication</td>
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<tr>
<td>Improvisation</td>
<td>4.48</td>
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<td>Ability to work in intercultural contexts</td>
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<td>Willingness to learn from students</td>
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<td>Subject knowledge</td>
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<td>Interactivité</td>
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<td>Energy and creativity</td>
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<td>English fluency</td>
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<td>Activity design</td>
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<tr>
<td>Educational technologies</td>
<td>3.98</td>
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Figure 2—Results showing how survey participants rated the importance of various roles, responsibilities, skills and capabilities in their roles as Common Core Tutors/TAs.

Figure 3 shows the number of workshops tutors attended previously, as well as the reasons for attending them. Several respondents chose to highlight additional reasons like the opportunities to exchange experiences with other Common Core colleagues, support others in their pedagogical training, and learn more about other departments and faculties.
Figure 3—The numbers of Common Core and non-Common Workshops attended, and the reasons why tutors/TAs attended them.

Figure 4 shows the resulting numbers after asking tutors/TAs which skills and capabilities they feel they lack currently and need to improve to become better Common Core educators.

Several participants entered additional skills in the provided textbox. One listed flexibility as a skill needed, so their accommodating of students with different backgrounds could be more effective. Another respondent highlighted the ability to deal with unideal circumstances such as students skipping class or ‘free-riding’ on group projects. And finally, one tutor stated they have the skills listed, but would still like to continue improving upon them.
Results (Qualitative Data)

Research question 1: How do tutors perceive their own roles and responsibilities, and their current capacities to meet them?

Through the ten interviews, we first asked our tutors/TAs about their backgrounds. Most interviewees were (or are currently) engaged in postgraduate programmes recently or they were considering entering a programme soon. Three worked in industry before joining the Common Core system. All respondents were brought on staff through an already-existing relationship with a faculty or office around HKU, although only around half of them had previous teaching experience before joining the Common Core.

“Before all these professional development workshops … my personality is quite stubborn, like I’m not too willing to learn new things. But this, as a Common Core tutor, I find this very inspiring that I’m sort of encouraged to change this … to always be open-minded and learn new things” (Interviewee #2)

Half of those interviewed had previously attended workshops and education-centred events hosted by Common Core, the Centre for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning (CETL), or colleagues of the Technology-Enhanced Learning Initiative (TELI). These workshops helped tutors/TAs orient themselves around the curriculum, develop their course syllabi and assessment rubrics, learn about education theory and engagement methods, share teaching experiences with their peers, and familiarize themselves with digital tools (e.g., Mentimeter).

The roles and responsibilities highlighted were having strong organizational skills, a strong knowledge of the course content, the ability to engage students in fun and enjoyable ways, and the capability of bestowing practical skills or broadening ways of thinking during class.
“I would probably be in charge of a lot of things like setting the learning outcomes, and making sure the classes, lectures and tutorials and assignments and activities are aligned with learning outcomes. And then I should also help partly on delivering the lectures and also teaching the tutorials, engaging with students, and making sure I respond to their inquiries as soon as possible” (Interviewee #2)

The tutors/TAs see their role as being a bridge between course leaders/co-ordinators and the students, ‘translating’ knowledge for students in ways that do not utilise too much jargon. One respondent described tutorial time as an opportunity to help students digest ideas given in lectures and allow students to express and reflect on how concepts relate to their personal lives. To do so, the tutors believed that passion, confidence, preparation, patience, curiosity, adaptability, and relatability were some of the key skills and capabilities required. Frequently mentioned was also the tutors/TAs’ ability to provide a safe, comfortable space where students and teachers both should practice open-mindedness and interpersonal skills, allowing people of different backgrounds to articulate ideas free of judgment.

In their roles, tutors/TAs enjoy seeing students produce quality work that is effortful to produce, with the fruits of their labour being realized when it is apparent students have learned what was taught. Interviewees believe the skills or knowledge taught will prepare students for useful purposes in life after their studies in not just their professional careers, but in personal struggles, in finding community, and in examining one’s own identity. The respondents mentioned the benefit of hearing students’ honest opinions, thus opening themselves up to learning from students and wider sources of information too.

“So it's just the joy of sharing what I know, and getting a positive response from the students of how much the course has transformed them … I was reading an e-mail from a student just thinking profusely … the way that I taught him and the way that I interacted with him, left a huge positive dent on him that he wants to improve himself … that is more open to think critically … to be open minded to different groups that he does not see himself as the same with” (Interviewee #10)

The most mentioned component of teaching in the Common Core was the demand on tutors/TAs to organise and deliver multiple tutorial sessions every week, while also grading participation, attendance, and assessments. Related to grading was sometimes having to deal with student complaints as to the rationale behind lower grades, as well as the difficulty of maintaining consistency in grading 130 students’ assignments that are visual-based.

Well, I am a tutor. And I will think that my responsibility is actually pretty heavy. Because not only do I have to like hold tutorials for a class of mostly 120 students a course. And it's really, well, exhausting, to be honest, and it's also really time-consuming and also, at the same time need to provide support to the course coordinator or the course lecturer. So well, for myself, from my own experience, my schedule from Monday to Friday is all full, because I've got 20 sessions of tutorial classes each week, plus … two lectures on Wednesday. Yeah, it's really exhausting as a full-time Common Core tutor. (Interviewee #6)

Other undesirable aspects of teaching mentioned were not having their work in the
Common Core system being valued or supported by peers working in their respective faculties. One tutor expressed concern about how their course co-ordinator made demands not covered or compensated or under their contract. Another respondent would like to see tutorials last longer than an hour (perhaps an hour and a half) to facilitate deeper discussions and further learning.

**Research question 2:** In tutorials and other settings, what are their strategies for supporting student learning and encouraging student participation?

The tutors/TAs interviewed use different strategies and approaches for promoting student learning and engagement. Several believe it is important to **draw connections between course content and popular culture or relatable content to demonstrate the relevance and usefulness of certain knowledge.** These may be in the topics discussed in class (e.g., films and television series, queer experiences, social responsibility, relationship dynamics, etc.), or the choice of activities held as part of students’ skills acquisition (e.g., written assessments, student peer reviews, teamwork, photography, storyboards, creative filmmaking, problem-solving, critical thinking, etc.)

From the teacher point of view, useful practices mentioned include studying up on course content, practicing mindfulness and seeking inspiration through observing how other tutors perform their duties. It was important to one course co-ordinator that a skeleton structure must be laid down as part of planning tutorials, yet allows for flexibility in its implementation too dependent on the tutor/TA’s own interests and teaching style too. Another mentioned **using online videos to diversify the voices students would learn from in their course, allowing for discussion on an even greater range of perspectives.**

A lot of concern from both the teachers’ and students’ perspective surrounds grades and participation. Two tutors shared that they take time explaining how assessments could best be completed and addressing students’ concerns surrounding grades. Other ideas include using mind maps and pointed questions for each individual student so students may earn more participation points. And finally, one TA opined that gaining skills or experience did not seem important to some students who are focused on their assessment grades, so they remind students to focus also on their attendance and participation grades which may get neglected at times.

Support in the form of Teaching Development Grants (TDG), and advice given during the process of applying for Communicative-Intensive Course (CiC) badging, have both helped our interviewees use new teaching tools and pedagogies in class and deliver more effective teaching. Course coordinators, other faculty members and the Common Core Office staff have also provided advice and different approaches concerning course preparations. One respondent credits the Common Core Director for having a system continually being refined since over a decade ago, so that tutors and TAs can work under the system easily.

With that said, the challenges over the past two and a half years have had a detrimental effect on how tutors/TAs experience teaching. Several respondents lamented having a situation where student focus is hard to keep, or they would face a Zoom window occupied by blank screens as students opt not to turn on their webcams in online classes.
Because of this, many interviewees prefer face-to-face interactions in which it is easier to build rapport and create a comfortable, collaborative ambiance among tutorial groups. When courses involve digital assessments like filmmaking or working with virtual reality technology, there is an added layer of difficulty for tutors/TAs given some students may not be as tech-savvy or have fast enough Internet connections. Interviewees highlighted how technical literacy and online engagement were skills in themselves that were important for tutors/TAs to have during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Some TAs shared that they enlisted student leaders in online discussions, as they found this to be an effective strategy for keeping the students enthusiastic throughout. Such online arrangements allowed some students to perform exceptionally well:

“[One student] was really paying attention, fully engaged, and he would … encourage other students to speak … it's not pushy or challenging other people, but … it's almost like he's also playing a role of facilitating the discussion” (Interviewee #9)

**Research question 3:** Does the transdisciplinary or interdisciplinary nature of their course content create new challenges to be negotiated?

Common Core Tutors/TAs unanimously consider their experiences of trans- and interdisciplinary teaching as being positive experiences. As teaching students of different disciplines forces one to break down their discipline-specific terms and knowledge, they have the chance to learn the language of others and open up themselves to the interconnections between disparate fields. As the world is multifaceted and continually changing, tutors believe they are helping students venture into a mode of thinking that embraces foundational ideas from different fields and ‘layering’ them on top of one another to see how they may relate.

“I appreciate the room that we can sort of break these walls, and build bridges between students who understand people, as a human being, and understand the world as a whole … what we call ‘holistic’” (Interviewee #7)

“I'm quoting my nephew here. He always loves to say, "we have to learn the language of others". And not only English. English is the language of our communication … but the ways engineers talk is different from the ways architects talk. Or the ways lawyers talk are different from how the medics or doctors are talking. So learning each other’s languages—each others’ ways of words—that's, I think, the biggest benefits for me, to learn different ways of communication” (Interviewee #1)

One participant (Interviewee #1) expressed that the “creative friction” between students of law, engineering, medicine, and others more to be highly fruitful, as both teachers and students alike may consider the meanings of words or the applications of concepts differently according to their own disciplines. Another (Interviewee #4) believes that a successful day in the classroom may involve the students wanting to engage with a common subject in a way that references their own academic experience or life experience, but also broadens their mind as to what constitutes an interdisciplinary framework of thinking.

“We stress on the point that all the issues in society, they are never just relevant to one discipline of academic discipline … say, the origin of that problem, and also how humans should deal with that problem needs a multidisciplinary approach. And that's
why we try to organize the students from different cultural backgrounds and also academic background into one tutorial and let them raise their ideas for multidisciplinary thinking” (Interviewee #4)

“I think I tried to bring all of the issues that we look at—whether they’re issues of urbanism or architectural representation, and its social and political implications, or material and ecology, and what it means to kind of build in the face of climate change—I try to bring all of these questions in relation to things that they might be looking at or studying in their own classes. I think architecture at its kind of core is, is an interdisciplinary practice. We have to be curious about or knowledgeable about many different things going on in the world, for sure” (Interviewee #5)

As for what basic skills or capabilities are required for successful interdisciplinary education, those listed by the tutors/TAs include general knowledge, openness to learning from the students, a curious disposition, resilient and self-motivated, and the agile thinking needed to respond to multiple perspectives and balance the time given to all students for their thoughts, expressions, and questions. Interviewee #5 once taught a class on homeostasis to business and finance students, using the idea of economic equilibrium as a metaphor for how the body regulates itself physiologically and hormonally. Interviewees #8 and #10, who both teach on gender studies, mentioned how queer and trans members of society have been marginalized due to historical processes of colonization, thus requiring students be exposed to readings in history, medicine, and legal studies on top of gender studies.

“I just noticed that the students’ perspectives were very different if they come from different majors or different fields … I'll just give you a very broad example. So we had a lot of nursing students in one semester—nursing and medicine students—so a lot of their questions, and a lot of their discussions were very bio based … but then some other classes have more business students, for example, and their perspectives are just very different, so the direction of our tutorial discussions will be a little bit different as well. And I have to sort of understand both of them” (Interviewee #3)

Some challenges, and solutions to those challenges, were also highlighted through the interviewees. One tutor spoke about building trust with students of certain disciplines such as medicine or the sciences, who may get more stressed or frightened of sharing their opinions at the start of the semester. A tactic recommended by two of our educators was to encourage students through production, so their disciplinary differences and frameworks act less as intragroup barriers, but roads to a collective end-goal.

Finally, several interviewed tutors also spoke about an instinct and inherent passion for cross-disciplinary thinking:

“They do come from different fields … a lot of the contents are very diverse, but they all sort of have a common theme, right? … When I was a student, I had a lot of interests as well. So I even minored in many, many different fields, to try to get it all in my hands. So I don't know. I feel like I've always kind of been that kind of person anyway, so it wasn't really surprising to me when I came across these two courses. So it just kind of makes sense to me” (Interviewee #3)

“Well, first of all, [tutors] have to like this job. And they have to have the interest, you know, in the job itself … it’s like a domino effect or a ripple effect, right? So once you
like your job, you're going to do just fine” (Interviewee #8)

**Research question 4:** In what ways do they want to become better teachers in future and how does their experience within the Common Core (or HKU) fit into their overall career trajectories?

Many of the skills or capabilities the interviewed teachers would like to improve overlap with those that are required to teach tutorials and interdisciplinary content effectively. These include patience and understanding, the ability to develop detailed lesson plans, the ability to motivate students and urge them to participate in small or large groups, the knowledge of how to use digital tools and novel pedagogical activities, and the level of subject knowledge they walk into the classroom with.

The most cited barrier to improving these skills is the time required, given that many of the tutors/TAs are also engaged in their own studies or other educational and administrative duties in the university. Currently, attending workshops is seen as something one must make the time for, given that participation is not mandatory or monetarily compensated. Tutors/TAs often have busy schedules, especially once semester starts and assignments require grading typically in the number of around 120 pieces of submitted work by students per task. One course coordinator also highlighted how colleagues at their Faculty do not provide enough financial support for Common Core teaching:

> “What hinders me is really just time and resources … part of it’s just feeling, for the faculty, it's not recognized as being that meaningful, in terms of what we, in the large scheme of things, and it's not recognized as being meaningful among my colleagues. So, you know, the investment I make and teaching it is not really valued … And you know, resources in terms of being able to pay my tutors for the actual work they do … I think they spend lots of time responding to emails and, you know, being in touch with the students and, but there's still so much more they could do in terms of feedback.

But I tried to, you know, keep them from doing that, because they're just not getting paid for all of those hours. And in my department, that budget’s really been cut … with the expectation that we’re supposed to provide more feedback and all of these things that are supposed to be good for the students, where we’re expected to offer it with fewer hours for the TAs and I’m just not willing to do that. I’ve taken on more responsibility myself, in terms of grading and all these things. So I think there’s a real disconnect in terms of the discourse from the university and the reality of the faculty and department level commitment to Common Core” (Interviewee #5)

As potential remedies to these issues, the interviewees’ suggestions are threefold: a) resources and financial assistance, b) networking and exchange opportunities, and c) support for tutors’ career progression and professional development. Concerning resources, internal databases of various kinds were suggested as being potentially useful to many current and future tutors/TAs. Common Core could provide a repository or database listing the locations and responsible caretakers of various equipment useful for teaching activities and student assignments (e.g., digital cameras, drones, microphones, headphones, etc.). A central database of computer-based games may also be compiled, so teachers may contribute their created activities to a list, as well as borrow formats and concepts from other Common Core teachers.
Tutors and TAs laid emphasis on the importance of having community within the Common Core system, as they have found it was useful to meet other teachers at workshops and learn how they were not alone in experiencing some unique struggles and challenges. The challenge for some of them is how to share more meetings with others after those workshops, as community-building is more difficult without the Common Core arranging more physical gatherings and sharing experiences. Interviewee #6 informed us of their experience initiation into the Common Core system being somewhat confusing and troublesome, and the need for auditing system or workshop going over the basic roles and responsibilities, as their course coordinator assigned tasks that were not mentioned in the formal contract. They also argued for the implementation of a mentorship programme, wherein new tutors may be able to receive support, even in cases where support may be hard to find in their own faculties and departments.

“The only people I met was the course coordinator and my students and that's it. I find this a great disjunction. Well, I don't feel like part of the department and part of the university to be honest, because I do not even have my own workspace until last semester because of a lack of space. I think me being able to meet all the tutors and have such a community will definitely give me a better sense of belonging to the university, as well as getting more support from the peers” (Interviewee #6)

“Well, during our facilitation workshop, I was able to meet other TAs/tutors as well. It's good to know that we have peers. It's just that how to have a moment with them afterwards, right? Because they have their own thing to do, but I mean, why not? … Community is important, because you can always reach out to them whenever you need help. And, you know, it means it doesn't have to be part of your department. But, you know, they can always share … they have their own experiences that they can share for your growth as well (Interviewee #8)

“I actually really enjoy it because we were sitting in different tables with different TAs … I was with two other girls who have been doing TA for quite a long time. So the fact that they could share their experience with me, I felt like that was quite rich … I felt more grounded, like knowing that I now know someone who have done Common Core before and I'm not completely not knowing what I'm going to do” (Interviewee #9)

The Tutors, TAs and course coordinators interviewed consider career progression and professional development opportunities to be highly important. They propose that workshops that provide training in activity development and pedagogical theories and approaches would be welcomed, even in regular weekly timeslots that accommodate different schedules. A weekly session within the semester could work well parallel to the implementation of their teaching and make each tutor/TA feel supported when they really need support within a shared community.

A few interviewees hold very positive opinions about the opportunities for his own career development provided by the Common Core. According to them, this is because most Common Core courses are offered for at least three semesters, and such job stability is rare to find in academia, whether in Hong Kong or further abroad. The space and time then allow the chance to develop more mature ideas about their pedagogy and research interests, plan longer-term projects, and platform themselves in the strive
towards a tenure-track position. Besides this, Common Core courses may help academics have more balanced profiles, as they gain confidence and experience in teaching, work closely with intradisciplinary and interdisciplinary colleagues, and “escape” from strictly research-based duties and responsibilities within their own faculties. One respondent (Interviewee #9) highlighted how their experience of teaching has helped them practice and improve their communication skills and subject knowledge, thus preparing them well for more teaching and postgraduate studies in the future.

“…teaching a Common Core course is part of my escape from the research route as well, because I really get to interact with all these people from the Common Core … balance between the research work and teaching. Because, for me, teaching is more enjoyable. But I'm also required to do a lot of research and write a lot. And when I feel really stuck, or sort of frustrated, I will turn to what I have been doing for the Common Core course” (Interviewee #2)

“As I said, I would like to develop a teaching career in the university. So the Common Core, I think that it helps to build up my credential in saying that I have a long-lasting teaching experience in the university setting. You can say a stepping stone” (Interviewee #4)

However, some concerns were also shared, such as Interviewee #5’s experience of having taught the same class for five years after being given the task by their faculty administration. While they would like to teach courses developed themselves, they believe the current arrangements with their department are not helping their research or career. Other participants similarly believe the teaching schedule is very demanding, especially without ample mentorship or guidance, or guarantee of a longer-term contract that lasts longer than one semester or one academic year. These factors increase the urge to move on from the Common Core for some tutors/TAs, with some of them having their eyes on other opportunities in the job market or chances to pursue further postgraduate studies.

“Basically, we are all temporary staff … from who I know, we are all on temporary contracts. And to be honest, there isn't any career prospects. But at the same time the University doesn't actually provide us with any support for our further development. So, for myself, it's the question of precarity.

So the reason that I brought this up is also from my conversations with other Common Core tutors. Since we're on temporary contract, and to be honest, what if I lost my job here, and if I do not plan for further development, there is nothing else I can do, because my teaching experience here would not be actually recognized elsewhere. And also I think we are kind of like being trapped in the middle … Firstly, I think I do benefit a lot from teaching here, but at the same time, and if I cannot get my PhD done, I don't know what else I can do, but I don't have any career prospects here. So I think maybe it would be better if the Common Core Office can have maybe more professionalization of Common Core tutors, or as a career if they want to do it ... then maybe they can be given a better chance to, to do what they want to do.” (Interviewee #6)

Given that the turnover rate is high, one teacher believes this decreases the quality of teaching and wastes the efforts made to acclimatize new tutors/TAs within the Common Core system. These tutors/TAs argue that incentives could be implemented to
encourage retention and benefits for all parties: perhaps a certain number of semesters
teaching in the Common Core could provide the student feedback and administrative
support needed for promotion to higher and more permanent job positions within their
faculties.

Implications and Summary

This first phase of the project, “Improvisation through the Lens of Design Thinking to
Enhance the Teaching Capacities of Tutors across the Common Core”, involves the
evaluation of how tutors perceive their own teaching activities within the Common
Core, and the activities, benefits and shortcomings therein. Most of our respondents
were tutors and teaching assistants, so it may be supposed that the results in this report
largely reflect those in relatively junior positions within the university, holding a
Bachelor’s or Master’s degree as their highest qualification, and with one year or less
of previous experience in this role.

In their eyes, the most important roles and responsibilities they are charged with are the
ability to respond to students’ enquiries, demonstrate a thorough knowledge of concepts,
and create tutorial plans that enable knowledge transfer effectively. Our results indicate
effective communication, the ability to improvise, and the ability to work in
intercultural contexts are key skills required by our tutors and TAs. The Common Core
Office and colleagues in other offices across campus may consider providing
workshops and professional development opportunities covering these areas.

Focused interviews with ten of our tutors/TAs revealed that they see their role as being
a bridge between course co-ordinators and students, helping students digest the ideas
given in lecture through dedicated tutorials and activities. While the process of helping
students realize their potential in projects and assignments is largely rewarding, the
workload can be considerably high for Common Core classes that may host up to 120
or 130 students, and some difficulties have arisen in the last several years having to deal
with the technological requirements of online teaching. Tutors/TAs attempt to create
safe learning environments for the students, remaining flexible in their approaches,
designing engaging in-class activities, and adapting content for students with different
interests and coming from different academics backgrounds.

Career development after or surrounding the Common Core teaching experiences is top
of mind for several of our tutor/TA participants. Their primary concerns may be
resolved by offering more financial and pedagogical resources, providing more support
for their individual career progression, and arranging more opportunities for
networking among the tutor community. Future phases of this project will use design
thinking, improvisational frameworks and novel professional development programmes aimed at enhancing their quality of teaching.
References


Appendix 1—Semi-structured interview questions

1. Background Information
   1.1. Could you briefly share with me your educational and professional backgrounds?

2. Current Teaching Practices of CC Tutors
   2.1. Based on your teaching practices and experiences, what role do you think a Common Core tutor plays? What are the most important responsibilities of a Common Core tutor?
   2.2. How would you characterise your role as a Common Core tutor in relationship to your faculty and department, as well as the university as a whole?
   2.3. How do you support student’s learning as a Common Core tutor (especially in terms of enhancing motivation and participation as well as improving students’ problem-solving thinking and skills)?
   2.4. How do you work with the course instructor as a Common Core tutor?
   2.5. What do you enjoy most/do not enjoy in your teaching practices and experiences?

3. Challenges around Interdisciplinary Teachings
   3.1. How do you understand interdisciplinary teachings in Common Core courses?
   3.2. Based on your experiences, how do students perceive interdisciplinary education through Common Core?
   3.3. What do you think are the required skills and/or capabilities for successfully implementing interdisciplinary teaching and learning? Can you recall one or two episode(s) of successful interdisciplinary T&L from your own experiences?
   3.4. Have you experienced any challenges in interdisciplinary T&L? Could you share some related experiences?
   3.5. Have you done anything to respond to these challenges?
   3.6. Is there anything you find enjoyable/not so enjoyable about interdisciplinary teachings?

4. Concerns and Challenges around Small Class Tutorials
   4.1. How do you usually prepare for small class tutorials, especially in terms of the planning and implementation of learning activities for students?
   4.2. Based on your experiences, how do students receive small class tutorials, both online and face-to-face?
   4.3. Do online and face-to-face small class tutorials require different skills and/or capabilities from tutors? How do you find the differences?
   4.4. What do you think are the required skills and/or capabilities for successfully conducting small class tutorials? Can you share one or two episode(s) of successfully conducting small class tutorials?
   4.5. Have you experienced any concerns/challenges in conducting small class tutorials? Could you share some related experiences?
   4.6. Have you done anything to respond to these challenges?
   4.7. Is there anything you find enjoyable/not so enjoyable about small class tutorials?
5. Perceived Skill Gaps by CC tutors
   5.1. What skills/capabilities do you feel you lack currently and need to improve in order to become a better Common Core tutor?
   5.2. What may hinder you from improving in these areas? What may help you improve in these areas?
6. Current Professional Development of CC tutors
   6.1. What relevant trainings and professional support have you received before and during undertaking the role of a Common Core tutor?
   6.2. What do you think of the existing training and professional support for Common Core tutors? What is missing?
   6.3. Have you received any support from peer tutors or teaching assistants? Do you find there is an established community of practice among the tutors/teaching assistants? Do you think it is important to have such a community?
7. Professional Development and Career Pathways
   7.1. How did you decide to become a Common Core tutor?
   7.2. How do you expect your tutoring working experience may contribute to your career development?
   7.3. How do you think the current professional development can be further improved to support your career progression?
   7.4. What are your expectations around career pathways? How does your current role support where you want to be?
8. Ending Open Question
   8.1. Is there anything not covered in the interview but you would like to share?