The following is an extract from the Archaeology and Anthropology – Guides to Good Practice, or “Yellow Book”

HOW TUTORIALS WORK

A tutorial is interactive. A significant proportion of the input always comes from the student. Part of this input by the student is a considered, thoughtful reaction to the reading and thinking that has been set for this tutorial. Part of the tutor's input, in turn, will take the form of questions and comments in response to this reaction. The student does not become passive at that point, though: on-the-spot rejoinders to these questions and comments from the tutor are vital too. So, a proportion of what the tutor says is response to the particular choices and reactions of the student - to what they have said about the overall assignment, to what they come up with in discussion and, of course, sometimes to answering straight questions on issues that have puzzled the student. Some of the tutor’s input must be devoted to correcting error. But much more importantly, it is the tutor's (quite demanding) task to ensure that new ideas useful to the student are inserted intelligibly into this exchange of views. The best practice of all is gently suggesting the considerations on the basis of which students may, of their own accord, formulate a new idea without being told it explicitly. The technique is particularly well-suited to teaching good practice in argumentation, methodological sophistication, intellectual self-reliance and confidence, and an understanding of rival views of the big picture. But another great strength of the tutorial is that it is normal for the tutor to introduce illustrations and discussions that are specific to the particular student or students present at each meeting - deriving, as it might be, from field-experience that they have had, or connecting with related topics which they found earlier to be particularly interesting, or at which they were particularly able. In this way a good tutorial greatly extends the range of examples derived from reading and lectures, and encourages the individual formation of the student's personal response to the subject.

A sequence of tutorials serves to provide a set of typical clusters of problems and discussions within a subject area. It shows by analogy the ways in which the subject is done, and the kind of problems that its practitioners face. It guides and calibrates an ambitious programme of reading on the part of the student - reading which, with the parallel guidance of lectures, forms the foundation of an understanding of the subject. But it is obvious that tutorials can in no way hope to 'cover' a subject, nor are they intended to. A set of hour-long sessions of a scholar with 1-3 students would be a very inefficient way of imparting information. Instead the emphasis is on promoting comprehension at the second-order or meta-knowledge level - understanding what understanding this subject might be like, through participating in debate about its nature and practice, with representative examples.

The consequence of this is that unlike lectures, tutorials do not add up to a survey, however conceived, of any body of material. They are about 'problems in' rather than 'bits of' the subject. The appropriate selection of problems for tutorials is very variable. In any one term, students taught for the same paper by different tutors - or even by the same tutor - on this system, may cover very different sets of tutorial topics, and that does not matter at all. The tutorials provide insights and approaches which can be deployed, by lateral reasoning, to improve examination answers to problems in many different areas of the subject. But they also have a less perceptible effect, in that when properly conceived and imaginatively delivered in dialogue with an intelligent and reasonably diligent student, they completely transform that student's overall conception of the discipline.
And finally, students should observe that the rigours of this style of education equip you with a very considerable level of transferable skill which is of interest to future employers! Note also that your 'reaction' to the assignment that we talk about here may take lots of different forms - written down or not, handed in advance or not. Tutors will usually respond well to your getting away, at least to some extent, from the routine stereotyped essay format and its style! Above all, don't forget that the vast majority of the information that you need to acquire will come first from reading, and second from lectures! While tutors need to remember not to hold forth too much, always to be constructive, never aggressive, and to set thinking as an important part of what is set. They get their reward: it is the fact that, on this system, no two tutorials even on the same subject in the same week are ever the same that keeps tutors sane. Really successful tutorials where both parties are stimulated and where the tutor has new ideas alongside the student are not rare, and are one of the serious rewards of academic life.