

## Paper 6: Tutorial teaching

Here in *Paper 6: Tutorial teaching* we introduce new tutors to the tutorial form.

### Introduction

*At Oxford in my youth the Senior Tutor's formula in reporting on my work to the Head of the College would never be: "Mr. Moore is being taught by Dr. X." It would be: "Mr. Moore is reading this part of his subject with Dr. X." I have come to see that two worlds lie within these expressions. (W.G. Moore)*

Good tutorial teaching is inspiring, exacting, challenging and fulfilling for tutors and students alike. In this paper we look briefly at the genesis of tutorials in Oxford, in order to show the relationship between tutorial teaching and collegiate organisation, and in order to reveal some of the concealed assumptions that underlie modern-day tutoring. We then present a model for conceptualising the dynamic relationships between the worlds of the student, the tutor, and disciplinary knowledge.

### The Oxford tutorial

At its simplest, the Oxford tutorial is an approach to university tuition in which students are tutored in the subject they are studying, for about an hour a week, on their own or with one or two partners, and by a scholar in their discipline. Writing in 1969 W.G. Moore described the typical arts tutorial thus:

*The tutorial is a weekly meeting of the student with the teacher to whom he is specially committed...[It requires] the preparation of a weekly essay, which is presented orally, listened to by the tutor and discussed immediately...A usual feature of the method is its informality. It all happens...in the tutor's...college set of rooms...with easy chairs set near the fire...<sup>ii</sup>*

Although some tutors do still require the oral presentation of an essay, there is now very considerable variation in how tutors approach structuring the tutorial hour. Oxford tutors are an extremely inventive group, and according to the demands of their discipline have over the years formulated a range of different ways of working with their students.

In those disciplines in which an Oxford education does still mean learning to think by writing, a significant proportion of tutors require the weekly essay to be handed in before or after the tutorial. Some tutors mark and return work to the student with a grade attached. Others regard a mark as redundant, and choose only to comment upon the paper, either in writing or orally. In the sciences and mathematics the tutorial hour will be focussed not upon an essay but upon structured problem solving of one sort or another. Some science tutors may no longer take their students through an entire course of tutorials, teaching instead only those topics in which they specialise. Many science tutorials are held in departments, not in college rooms.

Something of the variety in approaches to tutorial teaching may be gleaned by looking at the examples provided in Paper 5: Research informed teaching.

To think of tutorial teaching as the tutorial hour alone, however, would be to miss a great deal of how the tutorial system works and what an Oxford education means. The system of tutorial teaching embraces both an 'institutional' and an 'instructional' aspect and it is to these that we now turn.

### **The institutional aspect**

The institutional aspect has its roots in the collegiate structure of the medieval university, when scholars were admitted to colleges to study under the tutelage of college fellows.

The college fellows – 'men of character, learning and religion' as they were described in early statutes - acted as the personal guardians of the young men in their charge. As W.G. Moore has observed, "their main duty was to superintend the conduct and the expenditure of the student...tutors were expected not only to inculcate the doctrines and disciplines of the church, but to see to the dress and behaviour of their pupils".<sup>iii</sup> Teaching fellows are now rarely called upon to superintend the expenditure of their students! But the colleges' influence over the academic organisation of Oxford has endured.

Students are still admitted into colleges to read for their degrees under the supervision of a fellow in their subject, to whom the college entrusts responsibility for selecting, teaching and (occasionally) disciplining his or her students. Although students are now only rarely tutored solely by the fellows of their own college – taking tutorials with fellows of other colleges or with graduate students - it remains the responsibility of individual college fellows to organise their students' programmes of study and to monitor their progress. Some college fellows, moreover, do think of their role as extending beyond the bounds of the narrowly educational. They may encourage their students to undertake new cultural, political or sporting activities, or regard it as important to introduce them to potential employers, successful alumni, or leading scholars in the students' field.

### **The instructional aspect**

If collegiate arrangements have remained stable over several hundred years, what has changed dramatically is the conception of the tutorial itself. As the authority of the Church was weakened by rational humanism, and assumptions about the purpose of university education changed, the instructional, or didactic aspect of the tutorial relationship began to take primacy over the pastoral elements.

Where the medieval don was largely the guardian of a young man's spiritual welfare, in nineteenth century Oxford he started to become the guardian of young men's intellects. W.G. Moore credits the tutors of Oriel and Balliol with leading Oxford into its new era. Tutors who believed that "the young men had a right to call their minds as well as their souls their own, and to arrive at truth by their own efforts" invested the traditional tutorial system with a new intellectual life and energy. Contemplating the education of their

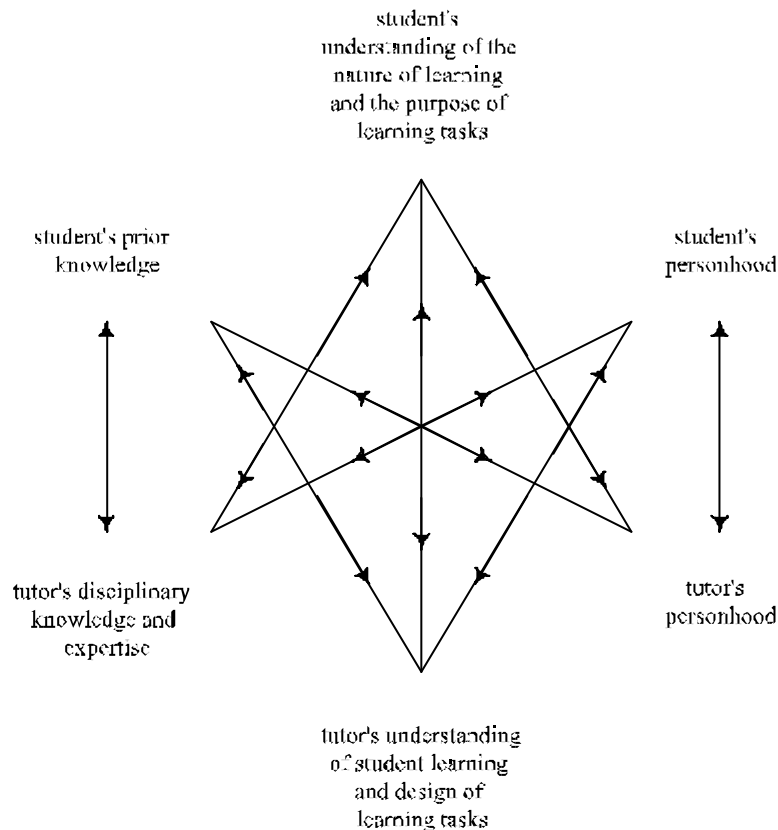
students, such men believed that the “tutor’s task was to teach them how to use their minds, not to make up their minds for them.”<sup>iv</sup>

Turning to contemporary Oxford, the weekly tutorial meeting between a student and her tutor is a small but important component in the student’s work towards mastery of her subject. Most tutors require their students to produce an essay for tutorial so the tutorial itself assumes and may structure (but emphatically does not replace) private study and instruction in lectures, laboratories or classes. The tutor is not a teacher in the sense that it is her or his role to impart information. Rather, the tutor’s role is to encourage her students creatively to engage with the knowledge they have encountered, constructing and re-constructing their own understanding. By demonstrating in this way the methods of the scholar, the best tutors enable their students to achieve their own scholarly independence.

### A model for tutorial teaching

Whilst good tutorial teaching has many elements in common with other forms of university teaching, what makes it unique is its element of personal interaction. Every tutorial is a unique series of complex transactions, deriving their particularity from students’ and tutors’ own knowledge and experience, their capacities to learn from and to inform the other, and the nature and quality of the relationship that they enjoy.

We can represent the dynamic interaction of tutorial teaching with the following model:



At the centre of the tutorial teaching process lies the critical interplay between the student's and the tutor's conceptions of learning. For current purposes I have placed conceptions of learning, rather than disciplinary knowledge, at the centre of the diagram. This is because students' conceptions of learning will affect how they approach, and therefore understand, the disciplinary knowledge that is the underlying focus of attention. Where my diagrammatic model identifies as separate components students' and tutors' prior knowledge, their approach to learning, and their person-hood, in real life of course these elements are all closely integrated in a multitude of different ways.

What makes the Oxford tutorial such an exhilarating – and demanding – forum for teaching is the personal relationship upon which it rests. In a simple sense, students' and tutors' personalities may combine in a multitude of ways to make the tutorial relationship mutually pleasurable or something quite else.

But far more than the vagaries of personality and personal preference, it is individual needs and how they are expressed that demand the tutor's attention. Chickering and Gamson's findings (see *Paper 5: Research informed teaching*) emphasised the importance to students of personal contact, of the communication of high expectations, and of respect for diversity. Perry's research (see *Paper 4: Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years*) also revealed that students who encounter real intellectual challenge often find it an unsettling experience and may, on occasion, resist it. In the interpersonal, intellectual interaction of the tutorial, the compassionate tutor will strive to maintain the integrity of the challenge whilst also acknowledging, in words or action, the difficulty the student may have in facing it. As Meyers has written in the context of critical thinking:

*'Teaching students new thinking processes involves gauging very sensitively the amount of disequilibrium that will do the most good. Too much can overload students and be dysfunctional, while too little can result in warm, wonderful classes where no learning takes place ...'*<sup>v</sup>

Skilful tutorial teaching is a constant and fascinating challenge. It is also one from which committed tutors may reap exceptional and enduring rewards.

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<sup>i</sup> W.G. Moore *The Tutorial System and its Future* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1968) p.20

<sup>ii</sup> W.G. Moore *op.cit.* p.15

<sup>iii</sup> W.G. Moore *ibid.* p.2

<sup>iv</sup> W.G. Moore *ibid.* p.9 citing G. Faber *Oxford Apostles* pp.160-161

<sup>v</sup> C. Meyers *Teaching Students to Think Critically: A Guide for Faculty in All Disciplines* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1986)