What makes a good tutorial and a good tutor: a student's perspective

[This paper has been contributed by the Oxford University Student Union (OUSU).]

Tutorials are often referred to as the 'jewel in Oxford's crown'. For many students tutorials are the focus of their academic week and the most enjoyable part of their undergraduate studies.

The format and style of tutorials tend to vary slightly subject by subject and so there can never be a definitive answer to 'what makes a good tutorial'. However, OUSU's Teaching Review, involving around 400 students found that key themes did emerge.

What are tutorials for?

Tutorials are typically seen as a chance to debate and develop arguments beyond the point which the student has reached independently. This might be slightly different for MPLS or Medical Sciences tutorials; however these students still valued debate and discussion over just going over problem sheets.

However it might be worth asking students, particularly second and third years, at the beginning of your first tutorial with them what they see as the role of the tutorial and what they hope to gain from it. Some students may have a different idea of what they want to get out of a tutorial and they will really appreciate the chance to give input; it should make the experience much more valuable and satisfying all round. Oxford is undergoing a cultural shift towards obtaining and responding to qualitative student feedback on teaching, culminating in OUSU's comprehensive Teaching Review this year. Creating a dialogue with students about what they want from their teaching as well as what you expect from them will really help get the most out of what can be an inspirational part of the Oxford learning experience for students and tutors alike.

What happens in them?

Formats of tutorials frequently vary from subject to subject and tutor to tutor but, at its most basic, the tutorial is based around using the submitted piece of work as a springboard for discussion and development of ideas, as well as being an opportunity to give feedback on that piece of work. One point was emphasized by nearly all students consulted this year: don't get students to read out essays from start to finish to start the tutorial! Almost every student sees this as a waste of time and of next to no benefit. Asking students to summarise their arguments is a much better way of beginning.

How do I give feedback?

- It's often seen as better if the work is submitted (and marked) in advance of the tutorial so that feedback can be given while the work is still fresh in everyone's minds.
- Allow time to go over work and for oral feedback to be given.
- Comments such as 'try to tighten up your arguments' actually mean very little to most students; giving specific areas for improvement, and a strategy for getting there, is more valuable and normally really appreciated.
- Whether or not you give students a mark or grade at the bottom of their work, giving an indication of how they are progressing (maybe against the previous week's work or a set of marking criteria) is really appreciated by students. During the consultation exercise many students voiced frustration at not knowing 'where

they are' and it also helps avoid unpleasant 'reality-checks' after collections and exams.

What's my role as a tutor?

A tutor's role is to guide and encourage the learning of their students; challenging them on their ideas and supporting them when they need help.

- A tutor should have a point which they want them to reach by the end of the tutorial so while discussion is good it should be guided and directed – check the syllabus as well as past exam papers on OXAM (www.oxam.ox.ac.uk) to see the key areas in each topic students should know.
- Focus on guiding the discussion, building understanding and drawing links to other concepts and topics in that paper.
- Constantly get students to justify the statements they are making, this will help them to get a clearer understanding of their position and the topic; both are crucial to success in exams.
- Particularly in essay based subjects, avoid asking students factual questions or passing on factual information. It is the responsibility of students to know the basics and the provision of information is what lectures are for.
- Do make sure though that all students have a basic understanding of the topic otherwise more advanced questions will be useless. If you feel that a student has not grasped the basic material or might not have done sufficient reading, don't be worried about raising it with them. It may be that the student is struggling to cope or keep up, or that they don't realize the level to which they should be working, and will appreciate the opportunity to talk it through with you rather than finding out through collections or poor reports.
- Tutorial partners should engage with each other and with each other's arguments to gain a deeper understanding of the topic and their position. Tute partner dynamics are really important to students so be aware of them.
- Bear in mind that students aren't just assessed on content but also on application of knowledge and technique. Students often feel anxious and frustrated about skills such as structuring an essay or responding to exam questions effectively, rather than the content itself. Addressing these early in their studies, not just in exam revision sessions, will be really appreciated.

With a bit of planning it is rare that a tutorial won't be good. Our key recommendation would be to look for, and use, student feedback: they want tutorials to be as rewarding and inspiring as you do. Relax, don't panic and remember that if someone had found a definitive answer to what makes a good tutorial or a good tutor we would have told you. Good luck!

If you have any questions about these areas or any other aspect of student academic experience, or would like more information or a copy of the OUSU Teaching Review, please contact OUSU's Vice-President (Access & Academic Affairs) at academic@ousu.org, or the student Academic Affairs Officer at academicaffairs@ousu.org