

Towards a Pedagogy of the Oxford Tutorial

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The Endangered Tutorial

Recent publications have sounded the alarm that the classic Oxford tutorial may be an endangered species. The traditional form of tutorials, one or two students and tutor with focus on essays read aloud for critical questioning and discussion, has reigned since the 1880s. “The ‘Oxford Tutorial’ is part of a learning system that involves a period, usually a week, of intensive study, the preparation of some work, whether an essay or completion of a problem sheet, followed by the tutorial itself. Students usually have three tutorials a fortnight...” (Ashwin, 2005, p. 632). But during the past 20 years or so, under economic, political, social, and academic pressures, support for the traditional tutorial has waned. Opinions about and evidence for this trend have been expressed most critically in “The Oxford Tutorial”, a collection of essays by dons from several Oxford colleges (Palfreyman, 2001).

The attacks on the tutorial have come from all sides. Financial pressure is being applied by government limits on the tuition fees colleges may ask, rendering them unable to set a rate based on value. This forces colleges to increase the ratio of students to tutor. “We recognize the financial pressures pushing the University and its colleges away from the one:two model of the tutorial towards ‘small group teaching’...” (Palfreyman, 2001, p.8). From another direction students may be changing in their tastes for pedagogic methods, based possibly on differences in cognitive expectations (Shale, 2001), variations in their conceptions of tutorials (Ashwin, 2005), or anxieties over confronting tutors (Ryan, 2001). Moreover, students today prefer, increasingly, to learn in groups and there has been a steady build-up of evidence of the advantages of discussions with a number of diverse participants, advantages that are impossible in one:two meetings in any case. Perhaps most critically for the fate of the tutorial, dons themselves more and more need to be research producers as well as to fulfill their roles as premier teachers.

Thus, a congeries of forces is pushing the traditional tutorial toward small group seminars.

Yet defenders of the traditional tutorial are now speaking out and joining partisans from earlier generations in advocating the rich and distinctive contributions of the tutorial method of education. In this research we join the movement to support the tutorial: if the tutorial is to languish then at least let us identify its essential positive characteristics and preserve it for a time or place where conditions are more favorable; if the tutorial is to evolve, then we should better understand those of its fundamentals that should be retained and those that may need improvement and innovation.

In spite of economic pressures and perceived inefficiencies, the tutorial method has rightly been hailed as the “Jewel in the Crown” of education at Oxford and Cambridge Universities. But apart from general respect for Oxbridge education, our admiration for the tutorial rests on belief only, in “its glories,” as Dawkins (2001) puts it, not hard evidence. Other than historical analyses and practitioner accounts that have identified general principles, objectives, and mechanics, there is neither a formal pedagogic theory of the tutorial, nor, consequently, any explanations as to why it has endured so long, and in the eyes of the dons in this study, why it is still successful. As the tutorial method is threatened with possible extinction, or at the least with alteration beyond recognition, claims for the “Jewel” are in urgent need of empirical investigation. But, without a model of its pedagogy, it would be fruitless to study the tutorial.

Our method in this study is to provide a rich ethnographic description of the tutorial as a teaching and learning environment. We will draw, principally, on the essays of “The Oxford Tutorial” as the documents of indigenous practitioners. These are interesting accounts in that they are communications from tutors to students concerning the tutorials they will take. Based on personal experiences in a variety of disciplines, the essays reveal the kinds of goals and pressures that impinge on the traditional tutorial and some, indeed, point to advantages in modifying the tutorial to suit contemporary students. In some of the most reflective essays one may easily sense a deep anxiety over the potential loss of the traditional tutorial.

Are they representative of all Oxford dons? Not necessarily, for these essays are written by advocates of tutorials, who constitute in any case a very small proportion of all

tutors. For the most part, the stories they tell, whether of their own tutorials (Dawkins, Lane Fox), or how they conduct tutorials now (E. Smith, Probert, Mash, Mirfield, Pearson) are intended to let their own students know what to expect and how students could best take advantage of their tutorials. Other essayists use an historical approach for analyzing contextual factors that have contributed to a changing tutorial environment (Ryan, Palfreyman) and the point of view of students is also covered (Clark, A. Smith). The essays are innovative, for rarely do teachers try to communicate their pedagogic credos to students in advance of instruction. While a small sample, they constitute an important preliminary body of knowledge of living or functional pedagogy about tutorials. But because the essays were intended to reflect the variety of approaches in different disciplines, there was no attempt to systematize the pedagogy. Indeed, tutorial variety was emphasized more than shared characteristics. By interpreting the dons' stories, their arguments on behalf of tutorials, and approaches to teaching, we will model a composite pedagogy of tutorials. However, the model, formulated by a researcher with no direct experience of the Oxford tutorial and hence somewhat idealized, will only be provisional until it is verified, revised, or falsified by the practitioners it purports to represent. The method of this study is not only to discover basic principles of pedagogy, but also for the model to be subjected, in turn, to the criticism and commentary of those primary author/researchers.

What is the Real Oxford Tutorial?

When Richard Dawkins asked himself the question, Shall we retain or abolish tutorial-driven education, he must have realized that he really didn't know what a tutorial was other than those in his own experience.

“It is on its educational merits alone that I am prepared to argue the case that our Oxford education should continue to be ‘tutorial-driven.’ Or, if it is not to be, and we decide to abolish the tutorial system, then let us at least know what it is we are abolishing. If we replace the Oxford tutorial, let us do so in spite of its glories and because we think we have found something better, not because we never properly understood what a real tutorial was in the first place” (Dawkins, p. 52).

While Dawkins describes his personal experiences of tutorial-driven education, he admits that tutorials, generally, are not a coherent entity. He means, of course, to question

what is a tutorial *really*, that is, beyond the mechanics of a tutor and one or two students working on their essays and the readings on which they are based. It is surprising that a veteran of so many tutorials should confess that they are not well understood. We think that the principal reason for this is the endless variety of tutorials that reflect individual tutor approaches and subject matter (in fact, Dawkins' own tutors varied considerably).

One of the principal dangers to tutorials is the great difficulty in defining precisely how they are structured. As W. G. Moore observed some decades ago: "Endless variations are possible, and are, indeed, produced by circumstances. ... [W]hat happens in tutorial depends so much on the two or three personalities taking part in the exercise that the keynote is variety; almost anything may happen" (cited in Palfreyman, 2001, p. 6). The practices described in "The Oxford Tutorial" suggest there is a wide range of individual approaches to conducting tutorials. For example, Emma Smith (2001) states: "This variety is intrinsic to the Oxford tutorial system, and is thus both its greatest strength and, potentially, its great weakness" (p. 73). Each tutorial activity is unique, because it involves the coming together of particular individuals in a particular setting with particular artifacts (i.e., syllabus readings, student essays), all of which have their own histories which, in turn, affect the way in which the activity is actually played out. Other barriers to a general model of tutorial practice are differences in the teaching of different disciplines. The traditional tutorial was based on teaching "Greats," a form that was best suited to the humanities (Ryan, 2001). Teaching science and engineering presents other problems, such as greater prominence afforded to methodological issues (Probert, 2001). Alan Ryan puts it this way: "It is less plausible to say this [open-ended argument] of the bulk of what an undergraduate gets taught in chemistry, physics, and cognate disciplines. The effect is that open-ended argument as distinct from problem-solving is less salient than it once was" (p. 81). Emma Smith (2001) concludes that tutorials are private events and are bound to vary greatly in quality depending on the tutor's experience and variations in the student's ability or desire to participate. "No two tutorials should be the same, and no tutor should try and make them so," she says (p. 72).

This apparent variability of tutoring implies that there might be little chance of finding general properties, no less a pedagogy common to large numbers of tutors. The very variability seems to have inhibited any direct empirical research that might have

contributed to the understanding of the tutorial. Yet, like Dawkins, we must try because if the tutorial faces extinction this may be the last chance, while there are still dons writing such essays, to understand tutorial education and why it has been successful for so long.

Where to start? There is one principle on which all the dons agree: the primary goal of tutorial education is to help students to think for themselves.

The Primary Goal of the Tutorial: Teach Students to Think for Themselves

Clark (1955) identified the goals of tutorial education as teaching students to think for themselves and to have confidence in their own conclusions and opinions. He added that tutorials develop students' facilities to express themselves in writing, or other means of presentation. Other pedagogical objectives are found in Moore (1968), who stated that the purpose of tutorials is not to instruct or convey information so much as to induce students to consider ways to evaluate evidence and make connections among diverse pieces of evidence. It is a skeptical method using initial inquiry, criticism, theory analysis and comparison. The induction method functions primarily, we shall argue, by placing students in the position of teachers of subject matter. David Palfreyman (2001) has cited both the Franks Commission and the North Report (landmark government reviews on the running of the university) as advocating the goal of teaching students to think for themselves and, said another way, to develop skills in self-directed learning. As Ryan states: "Students learn by asking themselves what they really think by being asked over and over again by those who are teaching what they really think about the subject at hand" (p. 86). Under prompting by their tutors to engage repeatedly in self-questioning, students may learn to evaluate evidence independently, to question their beliefs, and reformulate their theories. This process is intended to bolster students' confidence in their conclusions and opinions.

In the sections that follow, we shall study the various principles and techniques of tutorials in terms of how they purport to meet this primary goal. We propose that there are several interrelated pedagogic practices in tutorials that teach students to think for themselves. Each section concludes with questions that could further the investigation.

Tutorial-Driven vs. Examination-Driven Instruction?

From the evidence of his essay, Richard Dawkins is clear about what tutorial-driven education is opposed to, and that is education that is lecture-driven or

examination-driven. While he asserts the tutorial's independence of other sources of authority over a student's education, he reports that, unfortunately, students "increasingly demand that their tutorials should prepare them for particular examinations" (p. 46). Looking back on his undergraduate tutorials assigned by his own tutor, Niko Tinbergen, he reports that he read one D. Phil. dissertation a week and wrote a kind of examiner's report. "For that one week," he says about one of his assignments, "I slept, ate and dreamed starfish hydraulics" (p. 51). Perhaps, we can generalize from Dawkins' experience, recognizing that it concerns science, that the student essay in tutorial-driven education will be about a relatively specialized subject matter treated from a research perspective. Thus, the subject matter in Dawkins' tutorial with Tinbergen was more highly specialized than material covered in a lecture or on an examination. But is this generally so?

In contrast, Dawkins referred also to Arthur Cain, his tutor in zoology. Cain provided him books on history and philosophy in an assignment to see how they were connected to zoology. Dawkins was encouraged to learn by arguing connections between these very general areas of knowledge. With respect to subject matter, the assignment sounds broader than material covered in lectures and examinations. From Dawkins' brief reports on his own tutorials, therefore, we very tentatively conclude that in traditional tutorial-driven education the questions asked of subject matter might be outside the scope of lecture and examinations.

Emma Smith differs with Dawkins on the purpose of the tutorial. Reflecting on her tutorials in English, she included the following of several goals:

"To monitor students' working habits and learning in between the tutorials – to check up on what they've read, how they found it, any difficulties or problems encountered, lectures or classes they've been to....[T]o draw together different kinds of teaching and learning, from faculty classes or lectures and from individual research, in order to situate the tutorial within this broader learning context" (p. 74).

In contrast to Dawkins, who would not have a direct connection between the tutorials and other sources of instruction such as lectures and classes, nor especially with the examinations, Emma Smith seems to place the tutorials at the co-ordinative center of student's learning with respect to all forms of education available to undergraduates. And

a goodly share of the purpose of the tutorial serves in the preparation of the student for the examinations. While somewhat conflicted, she asserts the essential linkage between tutorials and examinations:

“To develop students’ awareness of their ultimate assessment, by exam or whatever. This is a balancing act: I don’t want to suggest that the sole purpose of tutorials is to prepare people for exams, but nor do I want there to be a great rift between the work covered in the tutorials and final exams” (p. 74).

Tapper and Palfreyman (2000) observe that it is common for there to be a call for better connections between the different forms of education. “If, as is often insisted, there should be a better integration of the contrasting teaching methods, usually of lectures and tutorials, is it not likely that the tutorials will be integrated into the lectures series?” (p. 115). As the lectures have in fact become more connected to the Examination (Ryan, personal communication), we may count this as additional support for Smith’s model of the tutorial as a locus of integration. Penny Probert agrees. In her essay she supports a very close connection between the lectures and the tutorial essays:

“You will be set work for each tutorial, normally questions based closely on the lectures. If you do not do these, the tutorial will be a waste of time for everyone. The preparation you make is your chance to take the material you’ve been lectured on and make it your own” (p. 65).

Mash (2001) also supports connecting the tutorial with the lectures:

“In a *good* tutorial, after students have attended lectures, read thoroughly, and written their essays based on chewing over the material, there are two functions: a ‘topping-up’ exercise on the basics...and the tutor’s response to the essays. The latter consisting of assessments concerning the need for greater depth, relation to other topics, and where the research might go next” (p. 89).

Clark (2001) interviewed 40 undergraduates at Oxford to study the students’ evaluations of the tutorials. While, happily, it appears that students continue to support tutorials, they also had criticisms of the tutorial-driven model.

“[S]ome students also made the more specific criticism that, whilst tutorials are an important forum for debate and discussion, they are poor preparation for the examinations (whether Mods, Prelims, or Schools) themselves. In students’ evaluations,

tutorials do nothing to expand their knowledge of their subject and yet it is this subject knowledge that forms the basis of their examinations. One interviewee opined: ‘tutorials have taught me to argue...about anything, but not how to pass the exam’” (p. 109).

It is not clear that tutorial-driven vs. examination-driven tutorials differ in their pedagogy, *per se*, although, clearly, the content would vary. The issue, perhaps, is whether focus on the examination overly limits the range of questions addressed in the essays and prevents the emergence of questions and areas of interest that tutors and students might find intriguing. It would be important to determine what proportion of a large sample of dons would prefer either of these approaches, or whether, in fact, most tutorials include a mixture of examination-relevant and other material.

The Ideal of Tutor-Student Equality:

Tutor and Pupil Work Together in Tutorials to Help Students to Think for Themselves.

Another pedagogic principle to be considered is whether students thinking for themselves is accomplished in a tutorial relationship that, at least, has the *ideal of tutor-student equality*. “My own tutor never taught otherwise than as his equal” (Mirfield, p. 38). What is it about the tutorial in which equality is achieved to a high degree that contributes to students thinking for themselves? Emma Smith describes the tutorial as a “shared enterprise”. She stresses the idea that tutor and pupil “work together” in good tutorial teaching.

“The work tutor and student/s are together engaged in during the tutorial is both a general and shared enterprise – to develop different understandings of the texts in question – and a specific one – to extend individual student’s work according to their particular strengths and areas for development” (p. 72)

Perhaps, because she is a tutor of English, Smith understands best that what tutor and student are working on together is a discussed, and possibly shared interpretation of readings, leading to an improvement of the student’s ability to read independently and, perhaps, contributing to improvements in the student’s work, *i.e.*, essay writing. Shale supports this view, but puts it in terms of diminishing the tutor’s role as a traditional teacher. Elaborating on Moore’s rejection of the idea that tutors teach pupils and rather that students are “reading this part of her subject with Dr. X,” Shale explains that in the latter method “Dr. X is engaged in a working partnership in which her own [student’s]

endeavour lies at the heart of her learning and are really of far greater significance than the efforts of her tutors” (p. 98). But Ryan dissents against this supposed equality: “...the old assurance that students and tutors confront each other as equals has gone” (p. 85). Perhaps the tutorial is no longer a relationship of equals (if it ever was), either because students no longer feel equal to tutors with specialized knowledge and/or perhaps tutors no longer know how to convey collegiality? Are students now less well prepared than formerly? Or, is there a changing social dynamic?

But, why would a shared sense of equality be a necessary part of the tutorial relationship other than the working together on reading and writing as described above? In response, we offer that a relationship of equality would lower emotional barriers to learning. The foremost barrier for the student is the fear of making mistakes (A. Smith, 2001, p. 102). A related emotion is that students feel intimidated by the tutor’s superior expertise. A student, who experiences one or more of these interrelated emotions will hardly be operating without distraction, may feel stupid, lose face and confidence. Such a student will find it difficult to learn to teach herself or himself. A shared sense of equality would lead to greater trust on the part of the student and, consequently, more positive risk-taking with ideas. Yet, it may not be that an equality of roles is either desirable or possible, but rather a condition of mutual respect that is needed.

How do things vary concerning the equality questions that have been raised? As Ryan questions: Does equality, in fact, remain an important issue in the social order of tutorials? If not, does the traditional hierarchy in teacher-student relationships prevail in the tutorial as in most educational settings? For those who endorse a strong equitable relationship, how does equality contribute to teaching students to teach themselves? Ryan suggests that a traditional hierarchy makes it harder to accomplish such a goal (personal communication).

“Nowhere to Hide”:

Developing Students’ Engagement and Risk-taking as a Learning Style

Another tutorial principle related to equality, code name “Nowhere to Hide,” is that, in general, pupils are assumed to have a natural inclination to avoid attention and assessment in class, the more so if they are unprepared, a condition that occurs with some frequency. Pearson (2001) refers to: “The...tutorial as providing a place where the pupil

cannot hide” (p. 43). In larger groups students may try to avoid teachers’ gazes, hoping not to be called on. Instructors, of course, much prefer to talk to those who want to talk to them and may let some students off the hook. In tutorials of one or two students it is virtually impossible to hide. The inverse is true: during tutorials the student is almost continuously engaged by being required to hold up her end of the activity. In tutorial dialogues, each party must be ever alert to incoming messages and each needs to check constantly as to how speeches are being received and taken up. The concentration and extension of attention under such conditions is without equal in any other educational format.

Nevertheless, however engaged through dialogue, the student may refrain from risking his thinking to the fullest extent possible. This may result from feelings of intimidation. “New students remain nervous about speaking in front of their tutor...uncomfortable about confronting an acknowledged expert in their field, fearing they will find themselves out of their depth” (Clark, p. 107). Ryan states that students today seem less comfortable with confronting tutors: “There has been a reduction in the verve with which eighteen year-olds contradict their fifty year-old teachers” (p. 86). To the extent that students fear risking their proposals, or find themselves unable to answer questions due to lack of confidence, or feelings of intimidation, they will neither fully engage their tutor’s ideas, nor receive feedback on their own. These students are surely at a disadvantage in learning to think for themselves. Tutors may need to contrive new methods for dealing with these anxieties.

Do dons agree with Clark and Ryan that students are uncertain about confronting them in tutorials? Have they made adjustments in their approach to manage this problem in some students? How do tutors deal with the students’ fear of making mistakes and reduce the sense of intimidation? It would be interesting to collect the lore of advice on coping with these problems.

*Overcoming the Student’s Perception of the Hierarchy through the
Tutor’s Indirect Style of Interrogation*

But can true equality be achieved in what is inexorably an asymmetrical power relationship featuring, by design, a deliberately wide gap between the tutor’s expertise and the tutee’s?

The answer may lie in the tutors' assumption of an *indirect style* of teaching that minimizes the tutor's superior expertise. An indirect style is characterized by tutors who teach through interrogation. "...[M]ake it clear that students *teach themselves* and that the tutor's task is to interrogate them in such a way as to discover how well they have taught themselves and in that way help them build up their ability to teach themselves" (Ryan, p. 80).

The question Ryan leaves to be answered is what he means by "*in that way* (our emphasis) help them build up their ability to teach themselves?" There is a temptation to agree with Ryan if he means that the student learns to think for himself by internalizing the kinds of questions asked of him by his tutors. But other mechanisms may be suggested. The student learns that the tutor asks provocative questions as part of his repertoire of techniques and the art of questioning becomes just as much a standard of tutorial performance as brilliant answers. Students may naturally compete for excellence in questioning during the tutorial. And, students might prefer to answer their own questions rather than face those coming from their tutors. Through any of these processes students may begin to ask good questions of the material. The tutor's encouragement to do so (what question would you ask here?) would seem to be helpful in accomplishing this goal. When students ask interesting questions about subject matter, these become fair game for tutors to request answers thus extending the dialogue. But, pupils, also, may be self-motivated to answer questions they have formulated and so extend the dialogue themselves.

It is assumed that tutors vary in their questioning and it would be interesting to study both the frequency and kinds of questioning used during tutorials. Convergent and divergent questions are only one of the many means of classifying questions. A thorough analysis of questioning style derived from the analysis of tutorial transcripts might yield a range of effective styles. Research in many educational settings shows an extraordinarily frequent use of questions, yet there have also been arguments against too many questions, particularly questions to which the teacher expects a pre-ordained answer. While this is probably not the case in the Oxford tutorial, do any dons tend to ask relatively few questions or have arguments against education by interrogation? How do they think interrogation leads students to think for themselves?

Socratic Questioning of the Student into a Web of Self-critique

While the indirect style of questioning serves to reduce the tutor's function in conveying direct instruction and, hence, supports the student's equitable teacher role, the sequence of questions may have other pedagogic intentions "...the object of the encounter is that the student should teach himself by understanding how to emerge from a spider's web of questions: "If you think *that*, then what do you want to say about...?" (Ryan, p. 80). Robin Lane Fox's (2001) essay places the use of questioning in tutorials in Socratic perspective. Lane Fox's first tutor based his approach on the early Socratic dialogues (e.g., the *Apology*) in which Socrates "leads his young pupil obliquely by questions until the pupil's confusions and contradictions are exposed and the working definition [of central concepts in life, such as justice] turns out to be unworkable" (p. 54). "Socrates tends to focus on one pupil at a time, taking him individually through a path which exposes his mistakes" (p. 54). We will assume that Ryan's "web of questions" was intended to communicate the same idea: that the "spider-student" catches himself in a web of his own making, the web having been stimulated by the probes of the fellow "spider-tutor". The student is led through a ritual of self-criticism that undermines his argument and at the moment the error is realized, he or she will experience it emotionally, even cathartically, just as it is intellectually transforming.

Ryan and Lane Fox appear to assume, reasonably, that the tutor's questioning leads the student to self-questioning. It would be interesting to learn more details about the conversational language used as this skill is transferred from tutor to pupil. Shale adds that the tutors' questions probe at students' ideas and beliefs. "Higher learning is a process of questioning many of the ideas and beliefs that are otherwise taken for granted. That is how new knowledge is created" (pp. 94-95). Thus the web of questions is designed to catch out students' beliefs in a tangle of illogically argued answers, so that there is self-realization that the beliefs need change. The web of questions appears to be a time-honored principle of Oxford tutorial pedagogy. Whether it exists in pure Socratic form for most tutors remains a researchable question. We suspect that dons today use the method more judiciously so as not to drive the instruction unduly nor to trap students, both actions that would seemingly undermine the aims of equality.

Learning through Co-Teaching

Throughout this analysis of tutorial pedagogy, our case has been building that students learn to think for themselves by assuming the teacher role during tutorials. When students present their essays to the tutor they are acting/performing their argument, as if they are lecturing from a script; however, their presentations are ones in which the audience may constantly interrupt and engage them in discussion about the very line or previous argument they have uttered. In this role, the students learn that in their presentations teachers must be prepared to justify and defend their propositions and their supporting evidence.

When a student assumes the teacher role, this may contribute to better equality in the relationship, because at least for a time both student and teacher function as teachers. They are teaching together, just as they are reading together. The teaching together will involve a complex pattern of alternating roles, in which the tutor is the teacher and the tutee may assume the roles of both teacher and student. The teacher role is assumed by the tutee through the use of characteristic teacher speech acts: professing knowledge; asking questions; and providing feedback.

If there are two pupils per tutor, then each pupil has the opportunity also to teach his co-tutee.

“Tutorials as a pair gives you both a chance to ask your individual questions, to be challenged by the questions from your partner, and to join in discussion actively. It gives you and your partner a chance to discuss problems before the tutorial and to run things together. Sometimes your tutor will run through solutions and explain material. Sometimes he will ask you to do that, especially as a response to the questions of your tutorial partner. There is nothing like trying to explain material to someone else to find out what you really understand!” (Probert, p. 69).

Probert, at least, believes that students learn best when performing as teachers, taking on the responsibility for teaching their essay to a fellow-teacher. There was some dispute among the dons whether or not the student’s essay should be read out orally to the tutor, with some dons holding that, in requiring an oral performance they could better determine the level of student confidence in their arguments and, sometimes, the degree to which it really was a student’s argument. Clark’s study of students revealed that they

consider the oral performance a waste of time. But we suspect that the oral performance may be at the bottom of students' "no place to hide" nervousness. This is a crucial choice to be made concerning the tutorial: students could lose by not fully participating as a teacher; teachers communicate through oral performance and do not simply refer to a written text; a less than full performance of the teaching role diminishes, in turn, the degree of equality achieved in the tutorial environment.

As oral delivery of the essay proved to be a controversial issue in Clark's student study and has implications for the student role as teacher, it would be very important to measure the dons' current practices in this regard. What are the alternatives to oral presentation? Where there is no oral presentation does discussion proceed as if everyone has read the essay? How is the essay corrected? Interestingly, given the prevalence of two tutees per tutor, there was no discussion of variations in the roles students play under these conditions. Is it simply the case that students take turns presenting their essays or are there other practices that warrant consideration? Tutorials could evolve through innovative approaches in assignments to co-tutees. How do dons encourage competition or collaboration between the tutees as supportive of their learning to think for themselves?

Writing: "The Improvable Object"

A written presentation that is orally performed in a tutorial perfectly resembles our image of the teacher. Thus far we have described the social context of learning in the tutorial, but little of the content of the discourse. Without exception, the dons heralded writing as an essential feature of the tutorial. As writing is such an implicit part of the tutorial, no tutor felt the need to justify writing as a practice to increase students' abilities to think for themselves. However, Ryan's observation that students themselves use writing to understand what they know about a text is some evidence of the crucial role of writing: "knowing that he will not know what he thinks until he sees what he has written" (p. 79). Therefore, the very idea of "thinking for yourself" is embodied in writing. Not only is writing, obviously, the supreme method of communicating thought, but just as obviously it lays down a record of thought's progress.

In his historical and linguistic study of the transition of oral discourse to writing, Olson (1994) analyzed several distinctive properties of writing, among numerous

possible, that demonstrate its quintessential importance in education. “Literate thought is premised on a self-consciousness about language, for it is modern writing that provides a relatively explicit model for the intentional aspects of our language and so renders them conscious” (Olson, 277). Because writing creates representations of thought, that are more precise and reliable than oral discourse, such as concepts, evidence, and arguments, it allows these forms to become self-consciously the object of further reflection, analysis and design (p. 266) and affords further discourse (p. 51). Writing is thus the unique pathway to attain the ability to think for oneself.

According to Scardamalia, Bereiter, and Lamon (1994), researchers at the Ontario Institute for the Study of Education (OISE), knowledge building requires an “improvable object” as the focus of the activity. The improvable object may be orally communicated ideas or an artifact, such as an essay prepared for a tutorial. The goal is to transform the “object.” We think that any scientific model of tutorial pedagogy will inevitably require concepts and methods that provide evidence of the serial transformation of the object. Marjorie Reeve’s observation in this regard is apt: “it is to set the student the task of expressing his thought articulately, and then to assist him in subjecting his creation to critical examination and reconstructing it” (cited in Palfreyman, 2000, 7).

This assumption is elaborated by Wells (2001):

“...for the students, *the goal of inquiry is making not learning*, or as I put it above, working on an improvable object....Learning is an outcome that occurs because the making requires the student *to extend his or her understanding in action*—whether the artifact constructed is a material object, a demonstration, explanation, or theoretical formulation” (Wells, 2001, 190).

Because in tutorials, the student artifact, the essay, is the starting point, the outcome of the “making” is a refined essay, the object reconstructed. Nevertheless the “improvable object” is not limited to writing but also to speech. In tutorials, students are expected to improve steadily their oral arguments in the face of criticism. Therefore, a model of tutorial pedagogy would need to explain how both the written essay and/or its oral presentation are transformed during and across a number of tutorials.

Do tutors agree that the improvement of writing is *the* “improvable object in tutorials?” Do they have theories as to why writing leads students to think for themselves?

The Tutorial as Dialogic Education: Questioning, Response, and Feedback Exchanges

If writing is the focal object to be improved, dialogue during tutorials is the method for improving writing and oral argument. In this section we emphasize that dialogue is more than questioning. Scardamalia, Bereiter and Lamon (1994) and Wells (1999), another (former) OISE educational researcher, use the concept of *progressive discourse* or *dialogic inquiry*, respectively, to characterize knowledge building during discussions (p. 7). From an analysis of a large corpus of classroom dialogues, Wells (1999) concluded that dialogic inquiry consisted of inquiry-response-evaluation (IRE) exchanges (also modeled as Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) exchanges by the Birmingham school of discourse processes), that offer evidence of a ubiquitous conversational structure, with variations, that contributes to knowledge-building in a wide range of educational settings. Because of the flexibility of turn taking in dialogues, either tutor or tutee may initiate and sustain several exchanges of IRE/IRFs. This may afford researchers a means of measuring the extent to which students are directing or co-directing tutorials. The proportion of direction over instruction taken by students or tutors may indicate the extent to which the equality principle is being followed and whether there is a co-teaching approach down in the trenches of the tutorial discussion.

Linguistic theorists (Halliday, 1993) and educational discourse processes analysts (Coulthard & Montgomery, 1981) also assert that *exchanges* of dialogue are the meaningful units to analyze in conversations involving information transfer. The interpretation of exchanges implies that any particular dialogic move be analyzed in terms of the preceding and succeeding moves. Only exchanges could adequately show how knowledge was co-constructed by participants in dialogue. We assume that this ubiquitous conversational structure, with complex variations, is used during Oxford tutorials and that analyzing these patterns could lead to a better understanding of the precise differences in the pedagogic principles we seek to document.

We have previously discussed the tutor’s use of questions, whether or not questions are designed to form a “web” or are simply methods for inducing students to

think for themselves. Student responses to tutor questions, of course, provide material for evaluation and other forms of feedback. Consistent with the IRE/IRF model, Mash proposes that tutorials are exceptional settings for providing extensive feedback: “Tutorials should offer excellent opportunities for feedback that is positive (while always being honest), and the frequency of feedback should help the process whereby students settle in mentally and feel that, subject to the required effort, they can be successful” (p. 91). The only caution here is to recall that students probably experience feedback as assessment, which is one of their anxieties in the “no place to hide” syndrome. Mash’s statement indicates sensitivity to this issue. The extent and contingency of feedback in tutorials is surely one of its distinctive pedagogic features, particularly when contrasted with the less frequent and less expert feedback afforded by peers in small-group seminars. In a dialogic educational environment, the study of tutors’ variations in feedback/assessment should prove just as interesting as variations in questioning.

As the essays did not provide much information on feedback and assessment, this is an area that should be further investigated. Does the type of assessment offered vary with different students? The issue also seems to be how explicit the assessment is: What are the many ways, direct and indirect, tutors may offer critical assessments? Do some tutors try to avoid explicit assessments for some pedagogic reason?

Tutor Modeling of Answers to Questions

Lane Fox’s second tutor based his method on the later Socratic dialogues, in which the Athenian starts with questions, but this proves limited; he turns to long speeches where he sets out his own answers to the questions he has posed. Lane Fox’s experience with the use of questions also proved unsatisfactory, despite his adoption of longer wait times. His second tutor modeled his course after the late Socratic dialogues. This tutor both “led us to see the errors of our essays” and “began where we left off and led us down a new path, point by point to our tutor’s own inexorable views instead” (p. 56). This method consists of “reasoned, decisive arguments against other scholars’ views; ‘refutations’ which were, and remain, entirely cogent. I had gained a remarkably wide and thorough grasp of the evidence and ‘answers’ to each topic. I had also gained an invaluable sense, not lost since, that historians can make progress by ruling out other historians’ indefensible views and that, inch by inch, they are also advancing by

excluding error” (pp. 56-57). Thus, Lane Fox thinks that it is valuable for the tutor to provide a close examination of his mind to the pupil. In pedagogic theory parlance, the second tutor is teaching by modeling learning, by comparing his reading and refutation of the same sources that the pupils have used to write their essays. Exposing the pupil to the tutor’s mind may also reveal occasions when experts may be mistaken. “This process entails “...learning to think while also learning how others think, and learning that even the most authoritative thinkers are fallible and, sometimes, wrong” (p. 60).

In his own tutorial practice, Lane Fox decided to compromise between early and late Socratic approaches: “Each week a pupil has to work through a question for himself, put together an argued case and (in my tutorials) deliver it verbally. Unlike a lecture, this experience forces him to commit himself and go through the supporting evidence in person” (p. 58). Doing it in person, adds Lane Fox, may also reveal the level of confidence the pupil has in his argument and perhaps to what degree he understands his own or, perhaps appropriated, argument. Such understandings may only be grasped in the intimacy of dialogue with one or two pupils. What we also learn is that during the tutorial dialogue, at least this tutor may step out of the questioning strategy to deliver up refutations of literature as well as the essay before him. In delivering these mini-lectures in the tutorial, which are more forceful and personal and responsive because they are face to face, Lane Fox adds weight to Ryan’s supposition that in our age of specialized knowledge the instructors now need to give more instruction than in previous generations.

Lane Fox provides a strong defense of the tutorial as indispensable to the professional historians he intends his pupils to become. “The skills which this process teaches are transferable. The presentation of an argument, the defence of this argument (rather than a question-begging narrative) and its use of evidence can be carried over from any period of history to another” (p. 59). More than a method for training historians, of course, as Lane Fox himself might argue, this mode of thinking can be carried over into other fields as a general intellectual ability. Lane Fox, in fact, provides us with the skill-standards for assessing whether students are learning to think for themselves: can they can argue, defend, and use evidence authoritatively?

Do dons agree with Lane Fox that tutors should provide answers to questions during tutorials? Would they offer complete refutations, if required, of student essays? Do tutors agree with Ryan that tutorials now involve a greater degree of direct instruction than formerly? Do dons agree with Lane Fox's characterization of the tutorial as a transferable skill, the skill being essentially that of presenting arguments?

The Social and Cognitive Order of the Tutorial Environment

Our analysis of the multiple pedagogic principles and techniques underlying the Oxford tutorial suggests a social and cognitive order of extraordinary complexity and flexibility. Perhaps the most important principle is that good tutors seek to maintain as much equality in the relationship as possible in an environment in which they are endowed with considerable power by dint of their faculty status and expertise. Our theory is that tutors, with various levels of awareness, seek to balance their structurally superior roles by placing students in the teacher role. One way they do this is by creating an environment in which tutors and students work together to help students think for themselves. But, this is accomplished primarily when students assume the teacher role leading to the social arrangement that we have called co-teaching. Students are teachers because they author papers and then use these papers to teach the material to tutors and peers. The role transformation this engenders turns tutors and peers into critics. While tutors and peers are still co-teachers in this arrangement, their primary function is to respond to the teacher-presenter's arguments. Even in such equality-tending environments, there is still a lively competition among all parties for advancing and refuting ideas. We claim that these equitable arrangements contribute to student engagement, confidence and risk-taking in thinking for themselves.

However, we have also identified practices that might serve to reinforce the structural hierarchy if not used with sensitivity and discretion. Assumption of the teacher role may lead students to feel exposed as they present or defend their essays. The "nowhere to hide" environment, while positive in the sense of strengthening mutual focus and attention, may arouse students' fears of making mistakes and confronting authorities. Unable to escape questions and assessments, students may feel like cornered prey, hardly an equitable position. When tutors adopt the method of Lane Fox's second tutor (the late Socratic model) and provide complete refutations of either the student's presentation or

of the literature, they are inevitably displaying expertise that reduces the student's sense of equality. And, when through the tutor's web of questions, students feel caught or trapped and, perhaps, humiliated through the collapse of their arguments, the tutorial environment cannot feel equitable. Nevertheless, the potential benefits of these methods may outweigh their costs and it is not our intention to suggest the abolition of strategies that presumably contribute to students learning to think for themselves. Suffice it to say that tutors might become more aware of these features that potentially contribute to student uncertainty and lack of confidence.

We conclude that the social and cognitive order of the tutorial environment is a highly dynamic and flexible one, encompassing communications that foster both equitable and hierarchic roles among the participants. The tutorial environment maintains its powers to move in either direction through the use of dialogue. Because of turn taking, both tutors and students always have the opportunity to assume the teacher role. By using the primary teacher speech acts - - that is, questions, discourses on subject matter, and assessments - - either party may take control, albeit possibly temporarily, over the direction of the tutorial. When compared with any other teaching arrangement, tutorials thus provide a greater range of opportunities for students to learn through teaching. And, tutors have the flexibility to adopt responsive and indirect roles in supporting students' teaching while reserving the option of providing direct instruction when needed.

Discussion: Tutorial vs. Seminar

The principles of the pedagogic model provide a framework for analyzing the implications of replacing the traditional tutorial with the seminar. While both pedagogies may have the goal of preparing students to think for themselves, this paper argues that the seminar implies a qualitatively and quantitatively different approach to undergraduate education that runs counter to the pedagogy of the tutorial. By applying the objectives, principles and techniques developed in this paper to the seminar, the power of the model to make useful comparisons will surely be tested.

As an overview, we cannot see how the instructor of a seminar can fulfill in a comparable way any of the tutorial teaching activities to which Emma Smith made reference, namely, to "monitor the students' working habits and learning in between the tutorials...or to situate the tutorial within this broader learning context [of classes,

lectures and individual research] (p.74). With a group to instruct, there simply isn't sufficient time to supervise the overall intellectual progress of individual students. In considering the ideal of teacher-student equality, it is clear that in seminars with several or more students there cannot be the same relationship to the don as in a one:two arrangement. In the seminar, the instructor typically assumes the role of discussion leader and this can only diminish the potential for equality. The one-on-one possibilities for teacher and students in discussion groups are lessened, paradoxically, by another equality principle, that of assuring participation by all students. In seminars, the equality objective, in fact, is transferred to the peer group, who are supposed to be treated equally by the instructor. However, because peer groups, whether in collaborative projects or in discussions, tend to form hierarchies, that is divide into relatively active and relatively passive sub-groups, the role of the instructor becomes either one of making sure that all students are engaged or as we have observed, he becomes part of the hierarchy-forming tendency. Dons naturally contribute to hierarchies by responding selectively either to weak students to remediate poor communications, or to strong students to use as examples for the group as a whole, or to reinforce an individual's excellent performance. Because peer groups learn best through argumentation, the seminar is education by competition. While we do not challenge the growing literature showing advantages to this method of learning, it is inimical to the tutorial goal of equality between tutor and students.

The "nowhere to hide" principle is also undermined in the pedagogy of the seminar. Again, levels of student participation will vary and some students, inevitably, who are unprepared, more passive generally, or just weaker, will hide out to one degree or another. In any case, even in a perfectly equitable arrangement, each student will receive only a fraction of the attention that is possible in a one-two tutorial. Because of the need to keep discussion going in the group, the instructor will tend to direct traffic by calling on student Y who may most plausibly answer student X. Student Z may fall through the cracks and in the competitive spirit of the group, the instructor may be tempted to feel that Z will just have to learn by listening to X and Y. This was precisely the result of a tutorial consisting of three students that was observed by the author. Under

such conditions we cannot say that all students are engaged or taking risks to their highest potential.

The tutor's indirect style of interrogation is not as easily employed in the seminar. It is less likely that the tutor will choose to interrogate individual students in such a way that it becomes apparent that they teach themselves as Ryan has observed. The use of indirect interrogation to lessen the tutor-student hierarchy is probably not pertinent in the seminar as the instructor is playing a different role in any case. Concerning the intellectual purpose of interrogation, the tutor will probably not pose an extended string of questions that lead individuals into self-criticism, as others in the group listen passively. This is unlikely because of the restricted amount of time for each student and the need to ask questions of several students who, perforce, will be concerned with diverse aspects of the problem under consideration. Hence, there will probably be fewer follow-up questions and the seminar discussion is liable to jump around more than a traditional tutorial. The discourse, then is likely to be more wide than deep. This is perfectly acceptable if both tutorial and seminar are available to students. In the zero-sum game of the tutorial's replacement by seminar, the loss to individual students is irretrievable.

The goal of co-teaching in tutorials that has been put forward is compromised in the seminar. While student presentations may be rotated so that each student may, in fact, serve as teacher to the group, they would get to do so only a small fraction of the time. Nevertheless, it could be argued that presentation to a group more completely simulates the role of a teacher in a class and many graduate seminars are conducted in this way. In fact, it may be more plausible for the essay to be read out to a group as in a lecture than in the tutorial. The genius of the tutorial, however, is that the student as co-teacher has the undivided attention of the tutor, who can jump in as needed to fulfill his or her end of the co-teaching arrangement. While the group presentation provides the normal environment of teaching, feedback to the student as teacher is provided, principally, by the peer group. This is well and good, but it greatly restricts the amount of feedback that will be given by the instructor.

It is education in relation to the written essay, the "improvable object," that is most damaged in the seminar. We will assume that written corrections to the essay itself

are not in question here as they may be treated equally in both pedagogies. But the instructor's response to the essay as performed must be more meager or non-existent in the seminar, whereas we have commended the rich response possible by the tutor as the essay is read out. In the group seminar, it is highly likely that the "teacher" will finish her presentation, if this occurs at all, before discussion ensues. The bulk of the discussion, of course, is likely to be conducted by the peer group. To reiterate previous implications, the instructor will have far less time to discuss the presentation. While some tutors treat the written correction of the essay as a separate exercise out of class, there will be no time in the seminar for those instructors who might wish to discuss with an individual essayist their reasons for marking the writing.

It will be obvious that the instructor cannot dialogue as flexibly with an individual student in the context of a seminar. While group dialogue is possible and frequent in conventional group classes, it tends to assume more of a question-answering pattern than the IRF that has been documented in tutorial dialogues. In other words the instructor is more likely to pose questions to the group, and then to consider various answers made by different participants. Follow-up and feedback is more likely to be conducted by the peer group that, after all, is responsible for keeping the discussion going. While it seems that the flexibility of turn taking in the seminar environment must be restricted, we cannot discuss the merits of using dialogues in tutorials or seminars with any authority given the lack of research in this area.

Concerning the tutor's modeling of answers to questions, such as Lane Fox's presentations of refutations to ideas in readings, we are similarly handicapped by lack of research. Here the seminar may, indeed, have an advantage. It is certainly more efficient for several students to hear a don's refutations, than for him to present them consecutively. But we should not think of these refutations as lectures in this regard, but rather suspect that the refutations are models that respond to particular problems or issues raised by individual students. It is not at all clear that they would be equally relevant to all students in a seminar. In fact, if the essays presented by students are on different topics each session, then the don would have to offer a different refutation for each essay and other students listening to this might not have the advance preparation to benefit from his argument.

To summarize the discussion to this point, tutorials would lose essential elements of pedagogy by going over to the seminar. In seminars, the tutor's participation would be greatly decreased and the role, which can no longer be called *tutor*, becomes more of a discussion leader and occasional lecturer, and less of a co-teacher, confidant and coordinator of individual students' academic lives. The relationship between teacher and students becomes more hierarchical owing to peer group competitiveness and the ideal of teacher-student equality is sacrificed. Changes in the form of dialogic discourse with individuals are to be expected - - certainly fewer in depth series of questions or feedback - - but this aspect needs research to fully assess the impact. Above all, there is the complete impracticality of close attention to individual student's written essays orally taught in class and the consequent diminishment of tutor-student collaboration in working on the "improvable object". While theoretically possible to have this focus retained, at best it could only happen occasionally and would probably be lost altogether because group education tends to favor either efficient information transmission or learning through peer discussion.

In his recent work on the lessons of educational research for higher education, Bok (2006) supports a point made repeatedly by the dons in this study, that learning to write is a goal second to none. He cites research emphasizing that learning to write requires "persistent and frequent contact between teacher and student...and requires spending a great deal of time with individual students" (1989, 84). The amount of feedback was found to correlate significantly with progress in writing (89). These findings will not be surprising to dons. In concluding the present study, however, what we wish to argue is that the traditional tutorial method that asks students to teach their essays, orally, is a superior approach and only this in-depth approach affords the time to combine the don's scrutiny of the text and its discussion in class. Olson (1994) provides a rationale for our claim. Consider that the tutorial process begins with a student's reading that is to serve as her intellectual matter for the written essay. Because the author's writing only captures some of the intended meanings, reader interpretation may be required to infer the "illocutionary force," that is, how the author intended for their texts to be taken, whether statements are declarations or expressions of feeling, for example. "Writing has difficulty communicating prosodic features, such as rising intonation,

volume, voice, quality and ironic tone” (Olson, p. 266). Such intentions as “sincerity, seriousness, and commitment are poorly represented in script” (266). Now these problems in interpreting authors will be treated more or less successfully in students’ written essays. But when students read out their own essays, some of these problems are circumvented, because they are orally communicating their own writing. The strength of their declarations, their sincerity and commitment, for example, are more apparent. Therefore, the tutor may better interpret the adequacy of the essay by having both the student’s written text and its oral performance to consider. And in-depth, oral discussion of the essay facilitates the resolution of disputed interpretations: “The way to decide the intended meaning of an oral utterance [about a text] is to keep talking until some understanding and agreement is reached...the agreement is the mutual understanding” (Olson, p. 180). Such close attention to meanings and interpretation and their relevance for improving student writing requires extended, individually focused, dialogues, discourse only possible under traditional tutorial education.

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