
Re-Inventing the Tutorial in an Internet World: An Enhancement of an Old English Tradition

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Abstract: *This paper explores a new innovation in the traditional tutorial model of an Oxford education. The tutor and the tutorial have been a central part of the English tradition of higher education at Oxford and Cambridge Universities for nearly half a millennium. That tradition, though presently under siege from a British government obsessed with parsimonious legislation, has served the British people and the global academy with distinction. However, with the onslaught of educational*

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technology, the increasing demand for a restructuring of the traditional model of tutor/tutorial matrix is daily being called for and, in this paper, there has been a carefully constructed response to that call. This paper explores the use of the internet as an enhancement of the traditional tutorial and draws from a five-year employment of what is now being called the E-Tutorial.

Keywords: *tutor, tutorial, e-tutorial, internet learning, Oxford and Cambridge*

1. Introduction

The words “tutor” and “tutorial” have been around a long time. In fact, they seem to be an indispensable part of contemporary conversations about educational philosophy and pedagogy and fit nicely in all discussions of competency-based learning in the modern world of education (Ryan, 2007). Of course, any historian of education will know that the terms are linked at the root to the great educational institutions of England, namely, Oxford and Cambridge. In fact, the first usage of both words is found in the early documents of these universities and have for several hundred years constituted the core and framework of their educational endeavors (Mayr-Harting, 2007). The first recorded use of the term “tutor” was at Oxford University in a document from Brasenose College, dated 1309, in which reference to students included the statement that “...the desires of their parents and the directions of their tutors” (Williams, 2007). Subsequently, the first recorded use of the term “tutorial,” according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, was in 1822 when Macaulay recorded in his *Life and Letters* the statement, “I begin my tutorial labours to-morrow.” The fact that during the past few years the discussion of the meaning and merits of the tutorial system has re-emerged within university circles has led to a re-examination of the tutorial philosophy and its central role in higher education (Bailey, 1965).

2. The Oxford Tutorial Model

Though the tutorial model of education was developed in Oxford and Cambridge centuries ago, it was Professor Benjamin Jowett of Balliol College (and subsequently Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University) who put in place this method of education as the standard bearer of English learning and teaching (Beadsley, 1963). It was upon the dialectic of the student in discussion-based tutorials which constituted the uniqueness of an Oxford education for, it has been argued, this method fosters dialogue, argumentation, and independent thought elicited in one-on-one interactive engagement between the student as learner and the tutor as teaching scholar (Trigwell and Ashwin, 2003).

The Oxford tutorial has been said by many, including most recently by David Palfreyman of New College, Oxford, “to have an almost mystic, cult status,” and though many of the younger dons of Cambridge and Oxford have sought to hide from the weekly twelve-hour tutorial schedule to which tradition has faithfully adhered. However, the tutorial by any standard is still considered “a pedagogical gem, the jewel in Oxford’s crown” (Palfreyman, p. 21). Oxford has never been, of course, without its lectures, its classroom presentations, its open forums for discussion between students and faculty in groups large and small. But still and all, the beauty of the tutorial is that it “prevents (the student) from following false and valueless trails...” being guided, prodded, challenged, and admonished by the tutor. The North Report of 1997 argued persuasively that “...the tutorial system encourages the student to take an active rather than a passive role in learning and develops skills in self-directed study and working independently ... and provides a mechanism for the discussion of particular topics in considerable details one-on-one with a tutorial master in the field” (North Report of 1997, pp. 163-64). The Royal Commission of 1922 argued enthusiastically in favor of the Oxbridge tutorial method of education, i.e., Oxford and Cambridge, defending the accusation that this method was too expensive for the government to maintain by contending that the student “gets more teaching in return for his money,” based on the presumption that one-on-one

engagement between tutor and student elevated the quality of the time spent in interaction (Royal Commission of 1922, pp. 38-39).

A Fellow and Tutor of St. John's College, Oxford, Dr. Will G. Moore, has spoken extensively about the virtues of tutorial education, emphasizing its simplicity and its administrative practicality. "At its most simple," Moore explains, "the tutorial is a weekly meeting of the student with the teacher." The process is quite basic. For the term's eight weeks, the student and tutor have agreed upon a block of literature to be worked through together. The student comes once a week to the tutor's digs, a comfortable room or rooms with soft chairs, old carpet, usually a fireplace, and, at least in an earlier day, a pipe or two between them and a glass of sherry or port. The student reads a paper covering about a half to three-quarters of an hour, being intermittently interrupted with the tutor's questions, observations, suggestions, and clarifications. The tutorial was never imagined to replace other learning methods such as the classic address in the lecture hall, now disparagingly and all too often correctly called "the talking head." The tutorial assumes these but the tutorial itself is existential, not designed for the tutor to "teach" content of any kind as that has been covered in the mutually agreed-upon readings, but rather an educational "event" wherein the student presents a formally prepared paper to which the scholar/tutor engages in discussion and constructive criticism (Moore, pp. 15-18). Moore concludes his *apologia* for the classical tutorial by suggesting that the "root of the tutorial method is skeptical, a method that inquires, probes, scrutinizes. It is not at its best an *ex cathedra* authoritative statement, but in criticism, theory, analysis, and comparison." In the final analysis, he suggests that the tutorial model "prefers the relative to the absolute, the tentative to the dogmatic, the essay to the treatise."

3. The Efficacy of Tutorial

Lending further evidence for the efficacy of the tutorial and coming to its defense with might and main is Dr. Marjorie Reeves, Vice-Principal of St. Anne's College, Oxford,

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in testimony before the Franks Commission of 1966. “When every effort has been made to make instruction effective, it is still true that there is no substitute for the individual tutorial.” She is quite clear about this, based both on her own teaching and that of Vice-Principal of one of Oxford University’s leading women’s colleges. The tutorial’s function, she continued before the Commission, “is not to instruct; 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.” All teaching methods – lectures, group discussions, independent study – should ultimately have this as the goal. “This,” she continued in her testimonial argument, “is the process of handling material for oneself and of bringing together one’s own analysis, reflection, judgment in a form which is really a creation of individual thought.” In a typical tutorial arrangement, the student prepares such a document once each week for eight straight weeks. This formalization of one’s own ideas, thoughts, insights, challenges the student to be the best he can be for he is to present the material personally and singularly to the master tutor. “No one,” Dr. Reeves proclaims, “will dispute that this is the crown of the education process” (Franks Commission of 1966, pp. 65-66).

As we well know, neither Oxford nor Cambridge have ever suggested that the tutorial model has not been altered with time and circumstances (Shale, 2000). The model itself is conducive to innovation, variation, and re-modeling. “The flexibility of the tutorial system,” Tapper and Palfreyman have suggested, “has enabled it to survive: it has been continuously redefined to meet changing conditions and new demands, and, in some form or other, it will persist into the twenty-first century” (Tapper and Palfreyman, p. 122). This will be explored later when we deal with the 21st century and the internet. For now, let it suffice to say that the weekly tutorial is, as Palfreyman has said in his now acclaimed classic, *The Oxford Tutorial* (2008), “...there is no place for the ill-prepared student to hide in a one-on-one tutorial...” (Palfreyman, p. 35). Whereas in the lecture hall or large classroom, the shy student, the unprepared student, the student seeking to avoid attention, may very well succeed in his deficiencies not being discovered, not so with the tutorial

model. “This,” he continues, “is the Oxford tutorial as a pedagogical process ... a process that develops critical-thinking, reflective-learning, or deep-learning is a concept equally applicable to any degree subject or academic discipline” (Palfreyman, p. 40). Few contemporary Oxford dons have been as outspokenly in favor of the tutorial than has Richard Dawkins, the Charles Simonyi Professor of the Public Understanding of Science in the University of Oxford and a Professorial Fellow of New College, Oxford. “I continue to think,” says he, that “the Oxford tutorial is better than any alternative on offer. I still think the Oxford one-to-one tutorial was the making of my entire career” (Palfreyman, p. 59).

4. Challenges of Tutorial

Granted the nomenclature of the tutorial educational model can sometimes be troubling caused by the uncertainty as to how to describe the relationship and explain how it functions. Emma Smith, a Fellow in English at Hertford College, Oxford, has suggested in Palfreyman’s collection of essays, that calling the relationship one of teaching is problematic as teaching is not so much what is occurs in the tutorial relationship, and to call it “giving a tutorial” is not quite it either as nothing specific constitutes the item given. “Delivering” is far from good to say for though one might deliver a baby, one hardly delivers a tutorial. She finally settles happily upon the phrase, namely, “working with” which seems to do the job for the tutor is working with a student (oddly called the “tutee”!) in the reading and critical analysis of a block of literature or a bolder of ideas conflagrated into the student’s weekly read papers. Finally, Dr. Smith concludes by saying that “while I couldn’t really claim that I have ever taught anyone how to think, I do try to provide a tutorial environment in which students’ thinking, and my own, can be developed, challenged, and encouraged” (Palfreyman, p. 78). Her colleague at Hertford College, Oxford, Dr. Christopher Tyerman, Fellow of History, has summarized the University’s best thoughts and reflections on the subject with these words: “The tutorial remains one of the best, most efficient and effective ways of encouraging

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the necessary individual critical approach to ideas and arguments because it reflects and encourages precisely what education is actually *about* granting and gaining *not knowledge but independence*" (Palfreyman, p. 94).

Acknowledging Emma Smith's dilemma as to the "proper" nomenclature to describe the precise and subtle nature of the tutor/student relationship, Dr. Suzanne Shale, sometime Director of the Institute for the Advancement of University Learning at the University of Oxford and sometime Fellow in law at New College, Oxford, has chosen to characterize the relationship by sharing a story told by W. G. Moore in his book, *The Tutorial System and its Future*. "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." Shale continues: "Being taught by Dr. X suggests a world in which students and their learning are the objects of other people's, that is tutors, endeavors. On the other hand, a student 'reading this part of her subject with Dr. X' is engaged in a working partnership in which her own endeavors lie at the heart of her learning and are really of far greater significance than the efforts of her tutors" (Palfreyman, p. 99).

Alas, with the emergence of the internet and online education, revisiting these two terms, i.e., tutor and tutorial, seems in order. Tutor implies teacher and student and tutorial suggests text and discussion. The role of the tutor in working with a student is to serve as a provocateur and responder to the student's insights and observations relative to the textual materials being considered in the encounter (Brewer, 1992). Rather than lecturing to a gathering of students on a pre-set topic, i.e., the infamous "talking head," the tutorial is predicated upon a give-and-take triadic encounter of tutor, student, and text. This "sacred triad" constitutes the essential ingredient in the tutorial formula. Thus, rather than students looking to the teacher to explicate the topic being examined, the student engages the tutor with a critical assessment of and response to the textual topic under consideration (Beck, 2007). Whereas

lecture settings are conducive to student passivity and teacher dominance, the tutorial lends itself to student activism and tutor responsiveness.

5. E-Tutorial

The E-Tutorial is a creation of the Graduate Theological Foundation, an educational research institution involved in post-credentialing continuing education of professionals, and was first used in the descriptive literature of that institution's teaching philosophy published in 2010 (Morgan, 2008b). As an affiliated institution of the Oxford University Department for Continuing Education, the Foundation has developed an educational mechanism built upon the Oxford tradition of the tutorial within the context of the internet. The E-Tutorial relies solely upon e-mail as the transfer mechanism of the online student's response to the tutor's assigned textual materials. Using one-on-one interfacing communication via the internet, the student reads the assigned portion for each of the syllabi components, responds via email to the tutor who, in turn, critiques and comments upon the student's response and returns via email that communication to the student. Students are mid-career professionals completing their doctoral studies and the tutors are highly credentials scholars in their fields of research. Students hold graduate degrees and the tutors must hold at least one doctorate and be significantly published in their tutorial field. Each E-Tutorial is built around six required reflective papers by the student in response to a mutually agreed-upon corpus of literature, not infrequently the tutor's own publication. Each week, the student sends via e-mail a 500 to 1,000 word critical response to the block of materials assigned for that week. In turn, the tutor responds within 72 hours to the student's critical comments. This occurs once each week for six week producing, in the process, up to 6,000 words from the student as well as the tutor's critical comments. To complete the E-Tutorial, the student combines all of the papers including the tutors comments with which the student agrees or disagrees and submits that final paper via e-mail to complete the course requirements. The interaction via e-mail between student and teacher dealing critically

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with a relevant block of textual materials is quite intense owing to its one-on-one character. No group chats as the course is taught asynchronously, allowing both student and tutor time for considered responses. The E-Tutorial, then, is essentially a revitalization of the traditional legacy of classical education inherent in the tutor, student, and textual triad (Highet, 1950).

This system of the student reading/responding and the tutor critiquing/responding allows for in-depth engagement with the textual materials in a one-on-one interactive triad of student, tutor, and text. In the absence of the group-think classroom and lecture hall context, the student enjoys the individualized one-on-one interaction with the tutor, drawing not from a multiplicity of participants but from the individual student's own personal insights, questions, comments, and criticisms regarding the assigned textual materials. Whereas the lecture hall may stifle individual response and the classroom may produce reluctance to participate on the part of the hesitant student, the tutorial demands engagement from the student with the text which is shared as a critical commentary and analytical critique with the tutor. While the American system of higher education has struggled in the lamentable absence of a national standard of measurement for quality education (Morgan, 1008a) as well as the scandalous phenomenon of a myriad of uncompleted doctoral studies (Morgan, 2004), Oxford and Cambridge continue unabated, unbowed, and unapologetic with the tutorial model of quality education which has served these universities and the British people for centuries. My own community of scholars at the foundation have simply taken this Oxford gem, viz., the tutorial, and added the capabilities of interpersonal communication via the internet, and have produced the E-Tutorial for the 21st century, especially effective in the post-credentialed continuing education of practicing professionals. The E-Tutorial's effectiveness is proven every day and its longevity is assured owing to the demonstrable success of the classic and historic tutorial teaching model.

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