Tutorials - The Why and How

The Role and Style of Tutorials

Tutorials serve to complement lectures. Specifically, they provide teaching and learning opportunities for which students assemble in (relatively) small groups. That context allows interactions that are not feasible in lectures. It follows that tutorials are not repeat lectures – nor, indeed, are they lectures of any kind. Rather, they provide opportunities for participation by individual students, who may respond to questions, or pose questions of their own.

The nature of those questions depends on the character of the subject matter of the course. Where a course provides instruction in techniques – as, for example, in much of econometrics and accounting, and in some parts of economics – a common and legitimate use for tutorial time is practice in using the techniques. The lecturer sets exercises that the student answers, perhaps by rather mechanical application of the techniques that the lecturer has presented.

Like brushing one's teeth, this may not be very interesting; nevertheless, it is essential. Often, such practice leads the student to discover features of the technique not previously understood. Then the tutor may play a valuable role in answering student questions. The tutor may also be able to give practical guidance on matters not covered in the lectures – for example, on how to organise calculations.

For lectures on some kinds of subject matter (for instance, the principles of economic policymaking), the lecturer may be able to set tutorial questions about actual (current or recent) policy cases. Because of the inevitable complexity of the 'real' world, such questions may be ill structured; and reasonable answers may be diverse, even (perhaps) mutually conflicting.

The student may find these features daunting. Even so, three positives emerge. Often, an important purpose of a tutorial is to confront the student. Moreover, even the daunted student may become well motivated by the clear relevance and importance of the policy issues. Above all, the student needs to learn that the 'real' world *is* ill structured.

Whatever the subject matter of the questions put to or by the students, the tutor shuns a lecturing stance, and instead deploys the Socratic method. Where a student doesn't understand a large question, it may be possible to break the issue into its parts; then, the tutor's role is to identify the first sub-question and put that small question to the student. The iterative process continues until the entire issue is covered.

Of course, the tutor may have to make some definitive statements. The aim, nevertheless, is to keep these to a minimum. Instead, the tutor guides a student's thinking by structuring the sub-questions, and (with luck) getting the student to answer most of the sub-questions – usually, a task that is easier for the student than is wrestling with an ill-understood large issue.

Where a sub-question does not elicit an effective answer from the student of immediate concern, then (of course) the tutor turns to other students to see if any of them can offer a good answer. By these means, the tutor appears to guide rather than dominate

Good Teaching Develops Generic Graduate Attributes

In teaching a particular course, the immediate objective is to inculcate knowledge and understanding of the subject matter of the course. It is also important, however, to use the course as a vehicle for developing some fundamental general purpose skills. Indeed, this second objective may outweigh the first, especially for a student whose career will involve work that is outside the scope of the subject-specialisation of the course. (Many of our students will become managers, or public servants, or teachers or whatever – rather than accountants, economists, econometricians...)

In order to function well in those broader contexts, and (indeed) to be effective as citizens and consumers, each of us needs to be able to deploy general-purpose skills. In particular, each of us needs to be able to:
- communicate effectively;
- conduct research using the library, web and other resources;
- work with people from diverse backgrounds with inclusiveness, open-mindedness and
- integrity;
- engage in logical reasoning;
- understand how a conclusion depends on premisses (as well as on reasoning);
- appreciate the distinction (however fuzzy it may be at the edges) between value judgements and factual data;
- marshal arguments and other material, especially to get the pieces in the most useful order (sequence);
- express thoughts clearly and precisely (which is especially important in order to avoid ambiguity, and downright error of fact or logic);
- understand what information and arguments are relevant to the consideration of an issue, and avoid cluttering the landscape with the irrelevant.

The effective tutor takes every opportunity to foster the development of these skills. For example, a student may arrive at a conclusion apparently unaware that it depends on a tacit value judgement; the tutor then asks the student to spell out the reasoning, insists on identification and revelation of the values, and tries to ensure that the student understands the process of analysis. For such a student, it may be helpful to invite the student to start with a different value judgement, and develop the argument to see whether and how the conclusion changes.

In another case, the student may have done a good job in stating the premise, while making a logical error in the reasoning. Here the tutor tries to ensure that the student understands where the argument has gone wrong, and appreciates that the problem is in logic, not in values.

When faced with a specific question involving some subject-field, X, students commonly offer all they know about X instead of addressing the specifics of the question. This may be a strategy of desperation: if you can't handle the specifics, just waffle. On the other hand, it may reflect an inability to stick to the point. Either way, the tutor can give great help by emphasising the importance of relevance, and showing what is and is not relevant in the case in hand.

This Faculty has a Faculty-specific statement of generic attributes. This can be found at http://www.econ.usyd.edu.au/grad_attributes/

Cultural Differences among our Students

In 'western' societies, the traditional hierarchies and gender distinctions have been eroded in recent times. As a consequence, behaviour in tutorials has become more egalitarian. Authority stems less from position and more from knowledge, intellectual ability and powers of judgement. Some students are ready to question, and are ready – sometimes, too ready – to argue.

In contrast, many international students come from cultural backgrounds that diverge markedly from that pattern. The capable tutor is aware of the differences, and knows how to allow for them. Here are the most important issues that may arise:

- Students may not question a teacher because it is considered impolite to do so. Similarly, students may not ask for clarification or admit that they have not understood something because of embarrassment or loss of face. (It is easy for the tutor to assume – mistakenly – that students who do not speak out in class are not interested or are unmotivated.)
- The behaviour of male students may differ markedly from that of female students. For example, it may be considered inappropriate for women to initiate a conversation, and to speak loudly.
- Students may expect more assistance from their teachers than is commonly considered appropriate (or possible) here.
- Students may not value the opinions of other students. Since knowledge is supposed to come from above, they may be perplexed by the notion of horizontal learning and interaction.
- Silence may be taken as evidence of ignorance or indecisiveness in western society, but may be seen as a mark of wisdom in Chinese society.

It makes sense for the tutor to encourage behaviour in tutorials that accords with a western pattern of conduct. This promotes tutorial efficacy. And the approach is desirable because the tutorials are being given in a western society, and the international students have come here in order to benefit from studying in a western university.

Teaching students from other cultures

At the same time, it is important to do all that is appropriate to make welcome those who come from other cultures, and to ensure that they are included in the tutorial activities, and feel themselves to be included. To this end, the tutor needs to employ several strategies:

- Show the students that the University values cultural diversity, especially because each of us can learn from someone who comes from a culture that differs from our own.
- If you are not sure how to pronounce a student's name, ask the student for guidance.
- Do not assume that someone who looks Chinese (for example) has Chinese as their first language – that person may have English as their first language, perhaps by being Australian-born.
- International students often do not have the background knowledge of Australian government, legal system, politics, and history that we take for granted. Assist such students by advising on background reading, to help bridge the gap.
- Where appropriate be ready to explain (in the tutorial) some of the organizational and other features of Australian universities

Outside the tutorial itself, methods and styles of study can differ between cultures. The western tradition has emphasised independent study, with independence in thought being especially highly prized. At the same time, where a student finds useful evidence and ideas in the writings of others, it is entirely proper to include such material in an essay or thesis where this helps in the development of the argument. However, the tutor should emphasise to students that when they make such use of the work of others, it is essential to acknowledge the source of the material. (How to make acknowledgement is considered on page 5.)

TIP: Resources

How to pronounce Chinese names:

• http://www-2.cs.cmu.edu/~zhuxj/readpinyin.html

Coping with Language Differences

Many international students are not native speakers of English. For every student whose first language is not English, the University makes admission conditional on the student reaching a set standard in an English language test (IELTS or TOEFL). Even so, such people still take time to 'tune in' upon arrival in Australia.

Furthermore, those who come from other English-speaking countries may find that there are differences in vocabulary, colloquial expressions and (of course) accent, between Australian English and the English that they know. These issues arise even for those coming from the UK or the USA.

To assist all such students, the tutor can adopt several important practices:
- Speak at a moderate pace and articulate words clearly.
- Avoid the use of colloquial and slang expressions; or if you do use such an expression, explain its meaning.
- Repeat important information.
- Make good use of visual aids; for example, write notes on the blackboard, or use PowerPoint or overhead transparencies. (International students often find it easier to understand written English rather than the spoken word.)
- Ask questions to discover whether students have understood.
- Give international students more time to respond to questions – it takes more time to formulate an answer in a foreign language.

Differences in vocabulary can be confusing. A tutor who has a large vocabulary may well find it helpful to avoid showing off. Where there is a choice, use a simple word rather than an unusual synonym. Where the same word has different meanings in different countries, there is no simple strategy. Extensive knowledge helps, of course.

The following example illustrates the potential for confusion:

In American English, a solicitor is a salesman, in the sense of someone who 'solicits' (seeks out, or invites business or trade). (An American university may have a sign at the main gate: "No solicitors") To convey the Australian English (and English) meaning - that of a legally qualified professional - the word lawyer may be used.

In addition to the issues that arise from different cultures and different first languages, there is a more general issue – the promotion of good communication between *all* members of the tutorial group. The capable tutor seeks to communicate well, and to encourage the students to do likewise.

Group Work and Tutorial Projects

Across the courses given in the Faculty, there is considerable variety in the nature of the subject matter. Accordingly, there are also differences in how the students' tutorial tasks are shaped.

In some courses, the lecturers set project work; commonly, such projects are undertaken by groups of students, rather than by individual students. In such cases, the course arrangements spell out how the groups should be formed.

In other courses, students are set specific questions (rather than projects), and each student is expected to work independently. In that case, collaboration with others is not desirable, and is not permitted.

The tutor can help by ensuring that the students recognise that there is diversity in the practices found in different courses, and by spelling out the arrangements specified for the course that the tutor is teaching.

Referencing and Plagiarism

Ideas and evidence put forward by others (especially material that is put in writing) can be useful in developing a student's essay or paper. Such use is legitimate, provided the student acknowledges the source of the material. (Any ideas that are commonplace – that is, ideas that are found in many written sources, especially textbooks – do not need to be acknowledged.)

Acknowledgement requires identification of the author and of the published work. For such referencing, there are several standard procedures. In this Faculty, the so-called Harvard system is used in most courses (other than courses in Commercial Law, which use a different procedure that prevails in the legal profession). For a referencing guide with Harvard examples, see
http://www.lib.uts.edu.au/information/writing_skills/referencing_styles

Where the student quotes a phrase, a sentence or a paragraph (or two?), the selected words must be placed within quotation marks, and the reference must identify the page number(s) from which the quotation comes (as well as the standard details of author, publication title and year of publication).

An important role for the tutor is to ensure that the student practices proper acknowledgement, with referencing undertaken in the manner prescribed for the course. It is especially important for the tutor to ensure that the student realises that if words are quoted without being placed inside quotation marks, and without identification of the source, the practice amounts to the form of dishonesty known as 'plagiarism'. Any student who plagiarises risks very severe penalties.

Academic honesty

To assist you and your student with the clarification and application of honest academic practices you could:
- refer to the University's policy on Academic Honesty in Coursework http://www.usyd.edu.au/ab/policies/Academic_Honesty_Cwk.pdf
- consult the Faculty's procedures in the Administration Manual for Students http://www.econ.usyd.edu.au/2383.html
- encourage students to complete the self-paced academic honesty module available via Blackboard. See http://www.econ.usyd.edu.au/14838.html

Commencing students from 2005 onwards should complete the module before their first assessment submission. The assessment cover sheet contains a box to tick to indicate completion. http://www.econ.usyd.edu.au/content.php?pageid=2138

Some Further Practicalities

- Please be careful with your behaviour as it reflects on yourself and on the Faculty. Be careful in your dress and your language. Swearing is never acceptable in the classroom. Obviously, we all occasionally forget but please apologise to your students if you do so. At all times treat the students with the same respect that you expect them to accord you. This does not mean that you are expected to tolerate poor behaviour from the students.
- If a student obviously doesn't understand something and the rest of the students do, try to spend some other time with that student.
- In an exercise class, wander around the room and check exactly what the students are writing down. You will be amazed at what you see. Also in the first few weeks, students will often ask you questions as you pass by rather than when you are up the front. Students are expected to work but you may allow some chatter. But stop them if the noise level gets too loud.
- If this is a first-time tutorial, you will find that it takes at least two hours and probably three hours to do your preparation. Good preparation always pays dividends. You should always do **all** the questions before the tutorial. Make sure that you have a written copy of the answers because it is easy to forget and then get very muddled as you do the question on the run. You may like to use an overhead projector if you are repeating the tutorial twice or more.
- Overheads - Always make sure that those students at the back of the class can clearly see. Make sure that your overheads are in letters that are big enough to see from the back.
- Never be afraid to admit that you are not sure or don't know the answer to a question. Students prefer honest replies to incorrect information. If you are not sure of the correct answer, assure the student that you'll work it out and get back to them next week.
- You must teach for the full time period of the tutorial. Obviously there may be occasions when you finish 5 or possibly 10 minutes early, but this should not happen regularly.
- If you are teaching a two-hour workshop, you must realise that two hours is too long without a break. Always stop for about 5 - 10 minutes around the hour. Even if students wish to continue working, it is not a good idea as most are incapable of concentrating for about 100 minutes without a break. It is desirable to give the students time to chatter. It breaks up the monotony of hearing the tutor's voice.
- Consultation hours: ensure that your students can make the times you set; always be sure that you are in the specified room for the specified consultation period.