

Tutorial Conference: Opening Remarks

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The concept of “Community of Practice” was formulated by UC Berkeley anthropologist Jean Lave and organizational theorist Etienne Wenger in 1991 to model what they referred to as situated learning, the ways in which apprentices gradually acquired expertise in a community. The concept evolved to include any processes of social learning that occur when people or organizations choose to collaborate in order to exchange practices with a view toward both the consolidation of knowledge but also to foster change and innovation. With the coming of the Internet and increased potential for sharing practices technologically, the ideas and methods of communities of practice have the potential to link geographically disparate communities, and greatly enhance support for, or accelerate the rate of change concerning any particular practice.

Tutorial education or individualized instruction is the practice of one-on-one teaching and learning (or as we shall see, more than likely one instructor with two or more students) and has been a defining characteristic of liberal education for the past 150 years. It may seem paradoxical to use the concept of “Community of Practice” to organize a conference to share ideas about so personal and idiosyncratic an experience as tutorial education. The very nature of tutorials, depending so much on the individual personalities of teachers and students, would seem to defy the kinds of orderly knowledge that would be useful in enabling instructors and institutions to share their practices. Yet, as educators know, any teaching and learning activity is

accountable to the community, the academic institution in which it is practiced, and hence acquires at least the semblance of curricular design.

When I took up the presidency here at Lawrence three years ago, my first priority was to get to know the faculty. Wishing to see them in their own environments, I visited nearly 100 of them in their offices, labs, and studios over a year's time. The drumbeat I began to hear was that the tutorial was a ubiquitous phenomenon at Lawrence and that it had a long history – not long by Oxford standards to be sure – but had originated in the 1930s and was associated with two important presidents, Henry Wriston and Nathan Pusey. These two presidents, you must understand, in part because they went on to become the presidents of Brown and Harvard Universities, are two founding fathers in our mythology and any innovations they introduced, including both the tutorial and our Freshman Studies program, are treated with reverence and persist with vigor to this day. Nevertheless, as I made my long journey through the offices of our faculty, while I found enormous enthusiasm for the tutorial, I could find little consistency in the practice and did find great disparities in the number offered by individual professors, varying from zero to double digit offerings per year. Issues of quality control and workload began to emerge and it became clear that institutional research was needed to make sense of our approach to tutorials and other forms of individualized learning. The results of some of this research will be presented tomorrow afternoon by moderator Elizabeth De Stasio and other Lawrence faculty. They will be joined by Nancy Berner from Sewanee: the University of the South.

At the start of my second year on the job, I commissioned internal studies of tutorial practice at Lawrence and began the process of journeying first to Cambridge and then more advantageously to Oxford to visit the “mother of all tutorial communities.” Thanks to the Internet, Robert Beck and I first became aware of David Palfreyman’s interesting collection of tutorial practitioner accounts in his volume “The Oxford Tutorial” which I advise everyone in this gathering to acquire and pore over. Tomorrow you will hear from David as he sorts through not only the issues endangering the survival of the tutorial but the advantages of using the tutorial as a marketing concept. Through David we met Alan Ryan, the Warden of New College, who as a long-term Fellow in Politics at Oxford, and as philosopher of liberal learning, was perfectly positioned to provide us with perspective on both the history and philosophy of the tutorial. Through introductions and lunches organized by our friends at New College, Rob Beck was afforded the privilege of observing a number of tutorials and interviewing many more dons in their rooms at several colleges at Oxford, including Gavin Williams, a Fellow of St. Peter’s College, who will share his own tutorial experiences in South Africa and Oxford. We will hear from both Rob and Gavin this afternoon on the pedagogy of the Oxford tutorial.

In the midst of this transatlantic research activity, I began to explore which other liberal arts colleges in the U.S. have prominent tutorial programs. Among them is Williams College, about which many of us have read an interesting article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, concerning their innovative program. We will hear about this program from the Dean of the Faculty, William Wagner, and three Williams professors tomorrow, including Stephen Fix, who directs their program. Sarah Lawrence College,

of course, is well known for favoring the Oxford approach to education, not only assigning all students a tutor but calling their faculty “dons” after the practice at Oxford and Cambridge. We welcome Barbara Kaplan, Dean of the Sarah Lawrence faculty, who will address us this afternoon.

As we were gathering the potential participants for this conference, to my mind a bombshell was thrown by Margaret Spellings, the U.S. Secretary of Education, who called for something like “No Undergraduate Left Behind” accountability for our nation’s colleges and universities.

A recent report by a commission led by Secretary Spellings advocates the regularization of higher education by raising the specter of standardized tests for college students. But higher education is not monolithic and cannot be evaluated in the same way as other levels of education. College is not a continuation of K-12; ideally it is a departure into new ways of thinking and learning.

Liberal arts universities and colleges have a long tradition of preparing students to become thoughtful leaders. Small class size – and in many cases one-to-one tutorial learning – is often the launching pad for creativity that may not take flight in a learn-by-memorizing approach. The tutorial or individualized approach to education, practiced at many liberal arts universities and colleges, encourages students to follow the sparks of their own imaginations to leap to the next world of possibilities. The approach of standardized testing cannot begin to measure the methods of teaching and learning practiced at many leading liberal arts schools.

The President and Congress can make or break how the next generations of society embrace the world. Education must be a top-tier issue for all national presidential candidates and our next president must articulate intelligent and forward-thinking position on higher education. We challenge the U.S. Department of Education to be bold in envisioning how we can embrace a diversity of approaches within higher education, and not fall prey to assessment methods that would have us accept a low common denominator of achievement.

As I was pondering these challenges to liberal arts education, I realized that other presidents whom I had heard speak at the Annapolis Group of prominent liberal arts colleges were of a similar mind. This morning we will hear from two presidents, Chris Nelson of St. John's-Annapolis and Stan Hales of the College of Wooster, on their colleges' versions of individualized teaching and learning, as well as other issues.

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Is the group of practitioners and institutions gathered here a Community of Practice? I ask this question in the spirit of Professor John Dreher, who later this morning will “be” Socrates, raising questions, but not answering them. Whether we are or could become a Community of Practice will depend on our abilities to communicate and exchange, on whether we can learn from each other and, I suppose, on going forward, whether we can continue to share experiences. In pursuit of answers to these questions, I would like at this time to convene, officially, the conference, and wish all of us a productive time together as we explore and celebrate the tutorial.