

Tutorial Education at Sarah Lawrence College

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Sarah Lawrence has had a program in Oxford since 1984. Our education at Sarah Lawrence is based on the tutorial system. The result is that I find myself in many conversations with students and faculty on both sides of what my Oxford colleagues quaintly call “the puddle” about what are the differences and similarities between the two. They certainly, in some ways, look alike: tutorials there look like tutorials here. But the main question I get has to do with our insistence on individualized education and it is some variant, often bolstered by a cartoon from the *New Yorker* of, “Does this kind of an education lead to self-indulgence at best, to narcissism at worst? Does it simply intensify the naturally self-centered quality of late adolescence?” It will probably not come as a surprise to you that my answer is “no.” What it does instead is to provide greater rigor and richness to an education. So, within that context, let me turn to Sarah Lawrence.

Sarah Lawrence is a small liberal arts college with a distinctive and probably unique core structure but before I talk about our version of the tutorial system, let me talk about the larger picture of a Sarah Lawrence education.

First, our students take three courses at a time. We do this because of the depth of learning via the seminar and conference system it allows. For the same reason, most of our courses are year-long courses rather than semester courses. Second, we ask the students’ programs be designed individually. For some students this means a heavy concentration in their early years followed by a broadening out in later years. For others it is the reverse. Instead of the declaration of a formal major, we insist that the student, with the guidance of his/her don or advisor, develop the program that will be most challenging. It is a forerunner, I think, of what many colleges describe as individualized majors. Third, we place heavy emphasis on the performing and creative arts. We were one of the first colleges to treat the arts as equal partners within the liberal arts. Fourth, we replace grades with written evaluations. We believe that there is simply no way that the complexity of a semester’s work can be captured in a single letter. We believe that the emphasis on grades reduces and undercuts the meaningfulness of the academic enterprise. I have to admit, we do give grades for transcript purposes. Students are not, however, required to see them unless they want to and all of our work of following a student’s progress is based on the evaluations rather than on the grades.

Within that context, the core of the college is a commitment to individualized education which is expressed in a core structure that blends small seminars with individual tutorials. In brief, the vast majority of courses consist of two connected parts: a seminar and an individual bi-weekly conference or tutorial with the teacher in which the student and teacher together define and carry out the course of study that is most appropriate for that particular kid. Students are urged to design projects that arise from the connection of their questions to the received academic disciplines and to explore frontiers in the conviction that genuine accomplishment is realized only through active learning.

The tutorial tradition at Sarah Lawrence originated in the progressive movement in American education and especially in the work of John Dewey, who I am distressed to hear from Dr. Ryan

was a terrible teacher. The tradition of progressive education arose in a period when education turned increasingly to so-called scientific techniques such as intelligence testing and cost benefit management. Those techniques emphasized standardization and mechanization by a classroom control, management, obedience to authority, and a structured curriculum that focused on memorization.

In contrast to that, progressive education argued that students should be encouraged to be independent, creative, and expressive. This requires a recognition that our intellectual, social, and emotional lives are not as compartmentalized as traditional education assumed. Rather, there is an interaction among different spheres of life. Education must take this into account; it must also focus on the emotional and creative aspects of human development. For the progressive movement, an effective education must respect each individual's needs, interests, cultural identity, and talents. Dewey talked a great deal about the student learning about the world through his or her own experience rather than through received wisdom. For him, the act of making knowledge one's own was the central goal of education, the creative act he saw as crucial. The emphasis is on each individual finding and defining roles and values that are appropriate to themselves. The ultimate goal is not self-realization of the individual, although that is in it, but it is to enable students to become active, productive, critical, useful members of society. It is an interesting vision and it is an appealing one. It often leads to going against the grain in one's thinking; it always means thinking creatively and thinking for oneself. It is a full blooded vision, it is a powerful and imaginative vision. Its terms of success have to do with liberation, freedom, growth, expansion, development, creativity, and courage. It leads to an education that is both meaningful and exciting.

Sarah Lawrence was one of the first colleges to incorporate the ideas and ideals of progressive education in its curriculum. Like other fine liberal arts colleges, we believe in exposing students to the intellectual and artistic traditions and the challenges to those traditions to which people have always turned to make sense of life. But for us the angle shifts, the focus is on an individual student encountering material, on the process of meeting and absorbing great ideas so that they can be used and not just admired from afar. With Dewey's ideas as background, Sarah Lawrence developed a series of assumptions that serve as the basis for our tutorial systems.

First, we start with the understanding that students come to college not as empty vessels, but as individuals with different experiences, different urgencies, different styles of learning. For one student an approach that begins with a small curious detail and then leads outward is perfect. Another will work far more productively by throwing out a large generalization and then beginning to narrow and refine it. To ignore this difference is to ignore the reality of the student, to force students to learn in ways that do not flow from their abilities, and to lose a great deal of the power of the educational process.

Second, all of us work and learn better when our work matters to us, when it is something that comes from a question we want to answer, a goal we want to fulfill. It is no different for a student. The need to do meaningful work rather than assignments concocted for the purpose of evaluation, to own their work rather than doing it to achieve a grade or please a teacher, these are the elements that lead to vital and permanent learning.

Third, for a student's experience to be rich and full, it must engage the full range of his/her abilities, the intellectual, the creative and imaginative, the emotional. The need for analytical rigor is obvious. Less obvious is the fact that it is the active imagination that gives life and fullness to an analytical understanding. One cannot understand either the outrages or the triumphs of history unless one can imaginatively reconstruct the lived experience of the people affected by those events. One cannot understand *Anna Karenina* or the Hopi or a child's encounter with nature or the corrosive affects of poverty unless one can imagine. If we want to offer our students the deepest and most useful learning we must take this into account.

Fourth, we must understand that the individual learning process is rarely an orderly one. It has the chaos of developing energy, the need to move down side paths, to halt temporarily, to follow its own rhythms and find its own shape.

And finally, students are living in a world that is changing so rapidly that we must constantly re-examine our assumptions about what they need. At a time when students should expect to have several different careers in a lifetime, specialization takes on new and perhaps not so positive implications. Flexibility and agility of mind, the ability to define questions and explore new fields, these may be the most important skills for the 21st century, rather than too narrow a focus on rapidly changing and rapidly outdated knowledge. Dewey is alleged to have said that the purpose of education is to allow a student to continue his education and that seems very right to us.

How then do we build on these assumptions? As I've said, almost all of our courses are taught in what we call a seminar-conference format. Each course has two parts. The first is a seminar with a maximum of 15 students. Emphasis in the seminar, as one would expect, is on participation and the ongoing conversation. Students are expected to take responsibility for that conversation, readings are assigned for the entire group and paper assignments are generated for the whole class. It is a format that would be familiar to anyone from a small liberal arts college with several differences.

First, such seminars at many schools are reserved for more advanced courses. We believe they work well, indeed are crucial, for all classes including those for freshman. From their very first course, students learn to engage primary sources and think actively about the meaning of that material for issues that concern them.

Second, we do not have exams. We evaluate students instead on their writing and on their participation in the discussion.

But the biggest difference with other systems, and for us the heart of the matter, lies in the tutorial or, in our terms, the conference. Every student in a seminar has, in addition to the seminar, an individual conference or tutorial with the faculty member every other week. It is those tutorials that allow us to individualize the student's education, to provide the structure that lets us put into practice our belief in individual education. The content of the conference is a series of readings and papers in addition to the work of the seminar. Those readings and papers are chosen for that particular student at that particular point in his intellectual development. The work for the tutorial is an integral part of the course, not an optional add-on.

Typically, the first conference in a course would focus on a discussion of the student's background, interests, strengths, and weaknesses. Some of this will have already been discussed during the registration process. Then students interview the faculty who teach courses they might be interested in to determine whether it might work well for them. Once the student is registered for a course the first conference extends and deepens that discussion. Very often upperclassmen will come in with a clear idea of a topic they want to research, a question they want to explore, a thesis they want to prove. In that case the conversation will focus on the suitability of the project, on possible approaches to take. At the end of that first conference, students will go away with an agreed on reading or set of readings or with a mandate to develop a bibliography and reading in that bibliography to begin to define the work of the next conference. For a student with little experience with the subject, the initial conversation will be a bit different. A teacher will be looking to find out what would be an appropriate point of departure for this student, an issue that would be meaningful for him/her to explore. The possibilities will obviously vary from student to student and from discipline to discipline. It may mean finding an author whom the student responds to, an issue that matters to her, a question that has bothered him, a passion that deserves exploration.

What is most important is that the teacher and student find a question or a topic that is meaningful to that student and is appropriate for his/her abilities. It can be closely linked to the work of the seminar, loosely related to it, or even rather separate. In a literature class, for example, one student might read other works of an author being studied in the course; another might work on deepening his understanding of the historical context; while a third might decide to read works by contemporaries of the author or to look at a theme that interests him. A student who is new to and perhaps a little afraid of something like poetry might use the conference to work on line-by-line readings with the teacher of different poems even though that is not necessarily the central subject matter of the course. Or an upperclassman may want to relate something she did or is doing in another course or another field to the subject matter of this course. The goal again is to find work that is meaningful and challenging so that the student can own it, can become invested in it because it is something he/she wants to know about.

So, as I've said, the student leaves the first conference with a great deal of reading and thinking to do. She is expected to come to the next conference prepared to discuss those readings, to raise questions. And so begins the dialogue that can go in different directions. The initial reading may lead to more readings along the same line of inquiry. Or it may be a dead end and require rethinking and a fresh start. Or the student may be captivated by a new question suggested by the readings, and the readings and the dialogue will then move in that direction. What is really happening is that teacher and student together are reproducing the thought processes involved in serious academic inquiry: raising a question, refining it, etc. The student is learning the most vital skill of all, how to ask a question. This is a skill that simply does not come in a standard term paper assignment. At some point it will become clear what the main task of the tutorial will be and at that the task shifts somewhat. Conferences at this point are about refining the topic, raising further questions about it, techniques of research, leading to a finished product. In most conferences the result will be a long research paper that is the culmination of a semester's work, or in some cases, since most of our courses are year-long, a year's work.

At the end of the process, the student will have gone through a process of asking questions, following thoughts through even if that leads to dead ends, developing her own voice. She will, in effect, be learning how to think and, for a brief moment, she will become an expert on a topic. The work students do in conference will be as varied as the students themselves. In a psychology class, for example, conference topics ranged from depression and metaphors to children's experience of race in a multi-ethnic context, to reactions of the mind to music. Or in an anthropology course topics include selfhood and personhood and Balinese dance, the impact of the scientific revolution on concepts of body and mortality, concepts of the self in bilinguals. In every case, the task flows from the students urgencies and it is more meaningful and more rigorously and fully done because of that.

What I just described is the standard conference and the majority of conferences take that form. But the form never takes precedence over the need to develop work that suits that student. So if the long paper model I've described doesn't make sense for that student, others will be tried: a series of short papers, a strong emphasis on writing using conference time for a line-by-line analysis of the student's writing. In many classes, field work is part of conference work with the actual conference used to reflect on the field work and relate it to a larger theoretical question. A conference can be used where necessary to clarify something from class, to rejuvenate a flagging seminar discussion, or to bolster a student's confidence in the seminar. Always the principle is the same: to work from the concrete reality of that student and develop the projects that best suit his talents, learning style, and needs. It is the concrete application of our beliefs about the way a student learns best.

There is another variant on the seminar conference system that I should mention here and that is our first year studies classes. These are courses designed for freshmen only; they are limited to only 13 students and every freshman takes one of them. Sections are offered in every discipline in the college. First year studies classes follow the seminar-conference format with two differences. First, the teacher serves as the don or the advisor of all of the students in that class in addition to being their teacher. Second, conferences are held on a weekly basis instead of bi-weekly because of the dual role of the faculty member as both teacher and don. Now the tutorial takes on an added function. In addition to the usual work of the conference, tutorial time is also used to talk about the student's overall experience in her other classes, outside of class, whatever is important to her full development. Conversations may be as concrete as dealing with the adjustment to college life or as broad-ranging as looking at the ways in which the student's courses relate to each other. The overall purpose is to teach the student how to reflect on her own experience and how to grow through that process. This tutorial format is particularly effective in the advising process because the advisor is also teaching the student, he/she knows that student's concerns and habits of mind. That knowledge gives much greater depth to the process of choosing appropriate courses. Ours is an elective curriculum, of seeing the common patterns of thought that emerge in all of the student's courses.

The conference system also creates what we sometimes call the hidden curriculum. As a small college, our offerings in a given year are necessarily limited. In conference, however, students are working on projects that extend beyond the bounds of the formal curriculum. Indeed, a deliberate use of the conference structure for some students is to provide an opportunity to study

material that is not in the curriculum that year. The result is a flexible system with the possibility of real responsiveness to the changing interests and needs of students.

For us the tutorial is the heart of everything we do. Both faculty and students treasure it as the thing that defines us. But there is no question that there are a number of pressures that we have to deal with constantly and those will come as no surprise to you. Primary of these is the issue of faculty time. Because of the conference system, the teaching load at Sarah Lawrence is much heavier than that of comparable colleges. That means we need to work harder to make time for faculty to do their own work. As always money is an issue. Our system requires a low student/faculty ratio and that is not cheap. The increasing specialization of graduate education makes it harder to find young faculty who can handle the breadth required by the conference system. But the problem I find most upsetting at this particular time is the growing insistence, that Dr. Beck talked about at the beginning, by governmental agencies to define education in the narrowest terms, to treat it as a commodity that can easily be quantified, mechanized, and standardized. That kind of pseudo-scientific approach to education is reminiscent of the approach that the progressive tradition fought against over 50 years ago. The tutorial system seems to me to fulfill the central purpose of the liberal arts: to teach a student to think for himself. That can only be accomplished by an educational approach that is flexible and imaginative. It must flow from the realities of individual students, from a sense of joy in the play of ideas, and of humility in the knowledge that we can only educate students one-by-one. If we lose that understanding, we will have lost the incredible potential of education.

Thank you.