
The Oxford Tutorial System: a Learning Theory

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THE oft-stated goals of tutorial education are to teach students to think for themselves, to work independently, and to have confidence in their own conclusions and opinions (Palfreyman, 2001). Tutorials are also expected to develop students' facilities to express themselves in writing, or other means of presentation. Other related pedagogical objectives are found in Moore (1968), who proposed that the purpose of tutorials is not to instruct or convey information to the student so much as to induce students to actively consider ways to evaluate evidence and make connections among diverse pieces of evidence. It is a sceptical method using initial inquiry, criticism, theory analysis and comparison. While Moore's criteria begin to differentiate the objective of teaching students to think for themselves, a learning theory is required to explain how the social and cognitive organization of the tutorial system leads to this outcome. This paper draws on insights from a three-year ethnographic study based on ob-

servations, papers on tutorial practice, and interviews with 34 tutors in 12 colleges at the University of Oxford.

I assume that learning to think for oneself implies the acquisition of several habits of mind. Such a student takes seriously the idea that his own thought and production constitute the basis for his development, that knowledge is self-constructed and not a commodity poured into his passive vessel. In the tutorial system the student does the work, that is, independently researches and prepares an essay that forms the content or starting point, at least, for the tutorial (Williams, 2007). As one veteran tutor asserted: no essay, no tutorial (Mayr-Harting, 2006). Independence is supported by training a student "to organize the work and motivate oneself" (Briggs, 2007, 20). But once the student's thought is revealed, as in his essays, thinking for oneself enters a new stage of reflection in the form of self-questioning -- what do I think? why do I think that? -- and self-assessment -- does what I have claimed

stand up to scrutiny. To a great extent, these habits result from his interactions with his tutor, whose role, precisely, is to teach through induction by the adroit use of questions and critical feedback. The habit of self-scrutiny implies a standard against which students judge themselves. While one's corpus of disciplinary knowledge is the primary basis for self-assessments, students also need to understand how proper arguments are formulated and what constitutes adequate evidence. Several tutors called attention to the fact that they adjust their tutorials to suit the individual abilities and needs of their students and, hence, there is a greater opportunity to make fine recalibrations in inducing intellectual self-understanding in their novices (Huffman, 2007, 21). There is no doubt that a classic tutorial (one or two students) provides a degree of individual attention without equal in any other form of instruction. Interestingly, this leads to a student who is "less demanding of attention" (Mustapha, 2007, 21). Briggs (2007, 20) refers to a culture of self-reliance in this regard. Presumably, in this private setting individual students may take risks in making knowledge claims even as they have "no place to hide" and may be forced to answer tutor questions and critique that confront their argument (Pearson, 2001, 43). I conclude, therefore, that the individual focus of the tutorial is a primary pillar supporting the student's habit of thinking for himself.

The dialogic structure of tutorials constitutes a second pillar contributing to students' abilities to reflect on their thinking. By constructing and reconstructing arguments together, students and tutors participate in a natural dialectic process that offers a continually shifting stream of alternative perspectives. This duality of knowledge construction lays the groundwork for the student's active consideration of alternative perspectives on truth claims. The habit of mind this engenders is to locate in one's own mind a critical "other" who surveys what has been proposed and whose job is that of skeptic. In those tutorials where students "teach" their essays, or at least present their arguments, the role reversal also contributes to seeing things from another vantage. Where two tutees share a tutorial, peer interactions may be exploited as an additional layer of dialogical perspective in approaches to problems.

A third pillar for supporting students to think for themselves consists in the tutorial's characteristic sequence of literacy activities. I argue that the sequence of reading and writing the essay, presenting it, and discussing it leads to students' metacognitive or self-reflective powers. Metacognitive powers refer to the development of a student's so-called executive or active control in thinking or reasoning about thinking and thinking about how one learns (Flavell, 1979). Metacognition entails strategies for planning, monitoring and evaluating progress toward learning goals. Such techniques as self-questioning and self-assessment are considered vital to the development of students' abilities to engage in higher-order thinking and self-regulated learning (Brown, 1987). All these are dimensions of "thinking for oneself." Writing: "The Improvable Object"

In the development of a student's literacy and metacognitive powers, writing is both a means and an end. As preparation for the tutorial, student work during the week consists of reading, peer discussion, and the composition of a written essay, without which a meeting with

one's tutor would be fruitless: no essay, no tutorial. Writing, it is not too much to claim, occupies a privileged role in expressing and developing the ability to think for oneself.

In writing, a student accesses the deepest levels of learning to think. Alan Ryan holds that students use their writing to understand what they know: "knowing that he will not know what he thinks until he sees what he has written" (2001, p. 79). Max Van Manen, an educational philosopher of writing, elaborates this idea: "Writing teaches us what we know, and in what way we know what we know. As we commit ourselves to paper we see ourselves mirrored in this text. Now the text confronts us... Research is writing in that it places consciousness in the position of confronting itself.... to write is to exercise self-consciousness" (1990, p. 127, 129). Literacy theorist David Olson (1994) adds: "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). In the short essays written by undergraduate students precision and tight arguments tend to become typical, very much the Oxford style, I think.

According to educational researchers (Wells, 2001; Scardamalia, Bereiter, & Lamon, 1994) 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." 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" (Palfreyman, 2001, 7).

Because it is reviewable, and rewritable, writing affords multiple metacognitive perspectives to students. Not only is writing, arguably, the supreme method of communicating thought, but it also lays down a record of thought's progress, and so facilitates the assessment of a student's development in thinking for herself. Just as writing enables a tutor to assess a student's thinking, it also enables the student to achieve metacognitive awareness of her own thought as it develops. But writing is only the first step in the tutorial system.

Presenting the Essay

After the essay is written, the student brings her paper to the tutorial session. Neither contemporary students nor faculty much care for the idea that students should present their essays prior to tutorial discussion. "It takes too long" and "I already have a written record" are two comments often heard. But, I want to argue for an oral presentation, although I agree with Elizabeth Frazer that the student should limit his remarks to five or so main points in the argument and that it should be delivered from notes, not read literally from the written essay. Why is oral presentation needed? As Henry Mayr-Harting says: "Out of their lips rather than the tutor's must come what needs to be said" (2006, 6). Naturally, this refers both to an individual's presentation and his role in the ensuing discussion with the tutor. Thomas Kuhn remarked that oral presentation is part of the essential discourse of the intellectual community into which the student is being socialized and integrated.

When students present their essays to the tutor they are acting/performing their argument, as if they are teachers lecturing from a prepared script. Knowing they will have to teach, and have to teach a rather knowledgeable audience in the tutor, particularly, students recognize they will have to be knowledgeable, as knowledgeable as a teacher. In this role, the students learn that in their presentations teachers must be prepared to justify and defend their propositions, warrants and supporting evidence. In playing the role of teacher, ostensibly someone who can think for himself, students may learn to think for themselves. Olson (1994) supports the practice of oral presentation in student learning: "Writing has difficulty communicating prosodic features, such as rising intonation, volume, voice quality, and ironic tone." Such prosodic features communicate intentions such as "sincerity, seriousness, and commitment [that] are poorly represented in script" (266). But when students present their own essays orally, some of these problems are circumvented. The strength of the student's declarations, sincerity and commitment in their arguments are more apparent when their written essay is combined with an oral presentation. Exposed to his pupil's confidence in his spoken ideas, the tutor may better question or confront his argument and later, be better prepared to criticise the adequacy of the essay. Doing it in person, adds Robin Lane Fox (2001) may also reveal the level of confidence the pupil has in his argument and perhaps to what degree he understands his own argument. To this latter point, Martin Ceadel points out that an oral reading enables the tutor to detect parroting, where students are speaking too literally the ideas of the authors they are conveying. Here arises another issue of independence: students need to assimilate and gain conceptual distance from their sources.

And, as the student orally communicates the essay, as we all have seen as we attempt to speak what we know, such shortfalls in meaning or confidence may also arise in his own self-consciousness: to what extent does he really know what he is talking about?

Tutorial Discussion: Teaching students to develop mental flexibility

How does the tutorial discussion carry on the work of the student presentation? Henry Mayr-Harting (2006) suggested that the function of tutorials "...is to turn out people who can survive and adapt to rapid change, who can bend their mental powers to new fronts as they emerge" (4). The tutorial discussion, in particular, provides a compact linguistic context of rapid intellectual exchange for training "mental flexibility." As students present their claims, they receive and participate in an insistent, fast-paced dialogical stream of tutor questions, alternative formulations, and feedback. To these emerging "fronts," they must adapt flexibly, either in defending or adapting these incoming ideas to their developing thesis or, realising that their argument is failing, there is a need to start over. In the process their mental powers are bent - to ponder and to answer the directions pointed to by the tutors' communications, and to re-compose their positions in response to criticism.

It might be claimed that in hearing himself talk under such conditions, or in hearing the tutor represent his argument, a student discovers what he thinks, just as his writing serves a comparable function.

In observing Oxford tutorials I have easily confirmed

Alan Ryan's claim that the tutor teaches largely through questioning. "...[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" (2001, 80). Briggs referred to his own tutor, Christopher Hill, who "never told us anything himself, but just asked questions and remained silent until one of us found an answer..." (20). Thus questioning serves to point students in directions they have hitherto not considered. The tutor is also helping to build an architecture of the primary question or problem of the essay. But the tutor tends not to build the architecture by telling, so much as by probing or asking, once again encouraging the student to do the work. Ceadel sees another outcome of the intense questioning in the tutorial: training puzzlement as a habit of mind.

While the indirect style of questioning serves to reduce the tutor's function in conveying direct instruction and, hence, supports the student's more equitable, self-teaching 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" says Ryan, "If you think that, then what do you want to say about...?" (80). In other words, questioning functions to point to parts of the argument that may be inconsistent or misunderstood. Student responses to tutor questions also provide material for evaluation and other forms of feedback. Richard 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" (2001, 91). Emma Smith described her role in the tutorial as less of a teacher than as a critic. Supporting this idea, Mayr-Harting offered some excellent advice about criticism and feedback on students' essays: "A pupil needs to hear why the tutor thinks it is a good essay...to understand what makes a good piece of work a good piece of work"; even for weak essays, the tutor should "build up the credit column all he or she can before going into the debit column" (5).

Developing students' abilities to argue

But what does it mean to be literate with respect to the activities of reading, listening, writing, presenting, and discussing as they lead toward the development of thinking for oneself? Pedagogical researchers claim that it means to master argumentation (Schwarz & Glassner, 2003). Here we arrive at the cornerstone of the tutorial's strength in enabling students to think for themselves. In a recent study Sabri and colleagues (2007) interviewed 12 Oxford tutors and 36 students on their experiences of the marking or formative assessment of essays in history and archaeology. Both tutors and students agreed that the assessments were largely concerned with the improvement of students' arguments:

"Tutors initial responses to the question about criteria for what makes a good essay was primarily [that] they are looking for an argument that consistently addresses the question. They define good essays in generic ways as incisive, precise, concise, critically evaluating arguments, containing personal interpretation and demonstrating independence of mind" (p. 12).

Aristotle theorized that the objective of argumentation, which was located in the dialectic of critical discussion and inquiry, was to expose error in thinking and to shape discourse toward a rational ideal. Argumentation ensues when there is communication about "an issue that has two sides and which provides for two opposing communicator roles: a protagonist who puts forward a claim and an antagonist who doubts that claim, contradicts it, or otherwise withholds assent" (van Eemeren, Grootendorst, Jackson & Jacobs, 1997, 209). To learn argumentation in a tutorial system, in response to a question or problem, students code arguments from readings, integrate the arguments and associated evidence into writing and oral presentations, and then engage in a metacognitive argument -- by arguing with the tutor and peer(s) about those arguments. The process by which argument is exposed and shaped is necessarily dialogic and argumentative because it requires an extended series of questions and feedback, activating different cognitive functions such as description, analysis, and evaluation to help students understand how intricate arguments may be parsed and constructed. Socratic dialogues are the most well known examples of argumentation through extended chains of questions and feedback until a neophyte experiences self-realization and repairs errors, contradictions, and fallacies in his thinking. Sufrin (2007, 22) sees the value to students of learning through mistakes: "what's important is learning to recognize a dead end when they see one, and having the stamina to explore other avenues, and the skill (and 'courage') to see where an argument or proof or design went astray" (21).

By some accounts, such argumentation, whether purely Socratic or not, may be practiced in upwards of 80 sessions devoted to different essays and a 15,000 word thesis during an undergraduate's career at Oxford. One principal student outcome of the tutorial system, therefore, is knowledge of the rules of argument.

How does the Oxford approach to training argument measure up? Schwarz and Glassner (2003) reviewed empirical research on the effectiveness of argumentation-learning activities. Two of the successful principles they analyzed are most relevant to the Oxford tutorial: a chaining or series of different literacy activities around the same theme; the chaining should involve an alternation of individual synthetic and social dialectical activities.

In the Oxford tutorial, there is an elegant, transformative chain of literacy activities in which: (1) Written notes taken from texts, lectures and classes, and perhaps dialectical discussions with peers in a residential setting, become the written essay, an individual synthetic activity; (2) The argument of the essay is then transformed by the oral presentation, another synthetic activity; (3) The argument of oral presentation is then transformed through dialectical discussion with the tutor and peer(s) during the tutorial; (4) If the student then revises her essay, this would comprise a concluding synthetic transformation.

In summary, the Oxford tutorial satisfies every requirement of an individually focused, dialogically constructed, metacognitive, and argument-oriented literacy education, not only teaching students to think independently but self-consciously. The various activities, a prodigious amount of reading and writing, the routine assumption of the teacher role by students, and engagement

in critical dialogues that induce repeated self-questioning, self-correction, and mental flexibility--all involve the exercise of self-conscious thinking. It is not only each essay that is improved, and writing in general, but across many essays, the mental object that is improved is student competence in argument itself. Through the rhythm of independent reading and research, writing and presentation, inductive discussion and collaborative repair and reformulation of student arguments, week after week, term after term, year after year, it is not surprising that most Oxford undergraduates will in the end learn to think for themselves.

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I was first exposed to tutorials as an undergraduate at the University of Chicago, where I had three tutors in my senior year to assist in the research and writing of my Bachelor's Thesis. Tutorials greatly influenced my research in the educational psychology of oral and electronic discussions, ranging from mother-child, family, to teachers in training (<http://www.lawrence.edu/fast/beckr/>). I had no experience of the Oxford tutorial prior to this study, which was conducted with the support of an Andrew Mellon Grant to compare it with tutorials at Lawrence University as part of an institutional research effort. I have taught at Clark University, l'Université de Montréal and am Professor Emeritus in the California Institute for Telecommunications and Information Technology, University of California, Irvine.