14. The Oxford Tutorial from the Students' Perspective

James Clark, sometime Fellow in Modern History, Brasenose College

Like the admissions interview itself, there is no shortage of stories about what it is like to have a tutorial at Oxford, but a truly accurate account is much harder to come by. Certainly, there is little or no enlightenment to be found amongst the celebrated authorities on Oxford life. Charles Dodgson (Lewis Carroll) claimed that the principal purpose of the tutorial was for 'the tutor to be dignified and to remain at a distance from his pupil' – he thought, preferably in a different room – 'and for the pupil to be degraded'. Evelyn Waugh, who with his 'poor third' presumably could claim only a passing acquaintance with tutorial teaching, considered there was little to be gained from close confinement with tutors 'who give the impression of having been suddenly stirred from a deep, eternal slumber [in his case with] the untimely mention of Wales'. Even in our own day, we still trade tales of the best, worst and wackiest in teaching experiences. There is any number of eccentric dons; the tutor who gets up and leaves the room when the student has barely begun his essay; the tutor who falls sound asleep; the tutor who insists on listening to essays whilst lying prone on the floor. There are also the undergraduates behaving badly; the student who comes to tutorials in pajamas, clutching a cup of tea; the student who reads a perfect, precise essay, from a blank sheet of paper; the student who is bad – or brave – enough to plagiarize from one of his own tutor's books.

Of course, a genuine insight into tutorial teaching can only really be gained from speaking to those students who are currently studying in Oxford, before distance, dementia or the desire for revenge has distorted their views. To this end over the past academic year (1999/2000), I interviewed no fewer than forty undergraduates to find out what they thought about the tutorials they had experienced. They were drawn from six different colleges – roughly a fifth of the total number – and from a variety of arts and science subjects. There was a mix of first-, second-, third- and fourth-year students, and a little over half of the interviewees were women. Their response was enthusiastic: tutorials continue to play a prominent part in the life of any student at Oxford and there is no doubt that they think about them a great deal, how they work (and sometimes do not work) as a way of learning and teaching. Their views should be of interest to both critics and supporters of the system.

In the first place, it is very clear from the students' comments that there is much about tutorial teaching that has changed, and continues to change in contemporary Oxford. For the most part, of course, the tutorial does still set the pattern for the students' week; it is still their principal point-of-contact with their tutors and the focus of most (if not all) of their written assignments. Generally speaking it is also still a college-based activity, allowing students to form a close relationship with others of their cohort in the same subject area. But in other respects it has become something very different. The traditional one-on-one tutorial, between a tutor and a single student who reads an essay – or presents some other assignment – and receives (often peremptory) feedback is undoubtedly a thing of the past. It is now very common for

students to take a course of tutorials in pairs, and many of those interviewed had also experienced them in groups of three or four. In the Sciences groups can be larger still. This seems to have been a welcome change. Most agree that there is far more to be gained from group discussion than from the somewhat stilted exchanges between a tutor and a single student. Generally, these larger tutorials have allowed a less formal and more natural atmosphere to develop in which students find it easier to express their views.

In many cases, the role of the essay (or other written assignment) in the tutorial has also changed. In many of the arts subjects it is now common for students to submit their written work prior to the tutorial, so whilst it does still form the basis of the discussion there is no time lost to a formal reading. In groups of three or four, it is often the case that the tutor will invite each student to give a brief presentation of their views on the subject as they have emerged in the preparation of the essay, before opening up the tutorial to a wider discussion. Once again, most students see this as a change for the better. Reading aloud has long been unpopular, both on practical – it uses up valuable time – and pedagogic grounds, tending as it does to reinforce the division between themselves and the tutor. In a less formally structured setting where no assignment is read in its entirety, students say they have found the confidence to enter fully into discussion with their tutors, to challenge interpretations and test out ideas of their own. Perhaps the only problem from the students' point of view is that it is now difficult to find an opportunity to discuss the specific strengths and weaknesses of their own written work. There is a danger that with the decline of one-on-one teaching we lose the opportunity to offer the kind of detailed, in-depth advice to an individual that was always a distinctive feature of the traditional tutorial.

Of course, the inner workings of a tutorial are not always (if ever) familiar to students when they first come up to Oxford. [Hence this book! – Editor.] Many admitted that they had arrived with the image of an arrogant, authoritarian tutor whose only aim was to expose the intellectual weakness of his students. Some said they had benefited from the Student Survival Kit and other similar advice booklets issued by a number of colleges, which try to de-bunk some of the more pervasive myths about student life. There are not yet enough of these manuals, however, to counteract some of the more disturbing impressions conveyed in the media and colluded in by the more mischievous alumni. New students remain nervous about speaking in front of their tutor, expecting the tutorial to be something similar to their original interview. They are also uncomfortable about confronting an acknowledged expert in their field, fearing they will find themselves out of their depth. There is also a suspicion that the tutorial does serve as one, unspoken mode of assessment, even if a written assignment is not given a formal mark. For many though the greatest anxiety is quite simply not to know exactly what it is that their tutor expects from them in each tutorial. Most of the students I spoke to said that their understanding of tutorials had grown only slowly, largely through a process of trial and error. Like many aspects of Oxford life, it seems that many tutors themselves still regard the art of the tutorial as something that cannot be taught and that understanding comes only through some mystical

process of self-realization. Some tutors – especially the younger generation of college fellows – do now give their students guidance on how to approach and how to make the most of their tutorials. But it seems in most cases it is only after two or three terms, and sometimes after Mods or Prelims, that students say they are entirely sure about what they expect to do in, and take away from, their tutorials.

Once they have mastered the art, there is no doubt that most of the students do find their tutorials to be a great source of stimulation. Many draw a contrast with their experiences at school where direct access to tutors was limited and where class sizes and timetable demands meant the syllabus was covered only superficially and at a break-neck pace. Those I interviewed especially appreciated the degree of focus possible in a tutorial setting, where the finer points of a subject, its factual content but also its further implications could be painstakingly picked apart. At the same time, students also enthuse about the breadth of discussion possible in their tutorials. In comparison to lectures, or seminars that they often find contrived, in their weekly exchanges with their tutor and one or more partner they found there is far greater scope to explore a wide range of themes. There is a marked preference for those tutors who do not set any very specific agenda for discussion, and when spur-of-the-moment ideas can be pursued to their logical conclusion. Some liked it best if the tutorial became a testing-ground for ideas, an opportunity to identify problems and raise questions. Others preferred there to be a conscious debate over one, or a cluster of issues. If these discussions become heated then so much the better from the students' point of view; as one of them put it, 'the best tutorials are like Newsnight with the tutor as Paxman'. Either way, it is agreed that the advantage of the tutorial when it is working like this is that discussion is open, and open-ended, and there is every opportunity for the students to chose the direction or focus of it for themselves.

It would be wrong, of course, to claim that current students' opinions of tutorial teaching are unwaveringly positive. Most maintain that the character and quality of tutorials varies enormously across the University, and that much may depend on a chance meeting with a charismatic tutor in a single term. There was a suspicion – in this author's opinion, unfounded – that there is more to be gained from a tutorial led by a graduate student or a younger tutor than from a more mature, established scholar. Perhaps a more convincing point is that the great strength of the tutorial, that is to say the opportunity it provides for interaction between tutor and student on a personal level, can also on occasion serve as its greatest weakness. It does demand that the student can establish a good (and good-natured) working relationship with their tutor and, for a variety of reasons as much to do with the student as with tutor themselves, this is not always the case. Some students also made the more specific criticism that, whilst tutorials are an important forum for debate and discussion, they are poor preparation for the examinations (whether Mods, Prelims or Schools) themselves. In their view tutorials do nothing to expand their knowledge of their subject and yet it is this subject knowledge that forms the basis of the examinations. One interviewee opined: 'tutorials have taught me to argue…about anything, but not how to pass the exam'.

A small minority of students also raised a further point of criticism; that the tutorial system as practiced at Oxford is inherently gendered, favouring styles of learning that are more natural to men than to women. In their view the emphasis on debate and discussion in a tutorial setting places male students at a definite advantage given that young men tend to be far more self-confident, willing to argue and, quite simply, louder than their female counterparts. Certainly, it is important to register this concern and to recognize that students who are naturally shy, whatever their gender, can all too easily be marginalized in a lively tutorial discussion. But it would be dangerous to suggest that any of these capabilities could be inherent in only one gender.

Generally, current Oxford students are enthusiastic advocates for tutorial teaching. They value them as a prominent and stimulating part of their course. Initially, the prospect of debate and discussion with expert tutors does seem daunting, and it is only through the on-going cycle of weekly meetings that most have been are able to master the art. But in time students do find them to be an engaging – even exciting – means of developing and expanding their understanding of their subject. If anything the opportunities for wide-ranging discussion and debate have increased in recent years as the formal one-on-one structure of tutorials has been modified. The tutorial in contemporary Oxford has evolved into a dynamic, flexible and popular method of teaching. Perhaps the only (slight) disappointment is that the eccentrics so prominent in the past are now so decidedly thin on the ground.