

Teaching in Tutorials

Tips for Tutors

Successful tutoring, like teaching, is not an exact science; it is based on thorough planning and good communication between students and tutor. 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.

How do I create an effective learning environment in a tutorial?

Students are a very diverse group, coming from a variety of ethnic, religious, linguistic, social and economic backgrounds. Tutors need to take this into account and aim to create a safe learning environment so that all participants feel included. This guide will discuss various skills you may need and strategies you may like to try. Overall, effective (and enjoyable) small group learning sessions often have the following in common:

- Students feel as if they are part of a group
- Students are acknowledged as an individual – i.e. the tutor spoke to them, or recognized them, or knew their name
- Tutors facilitate and support good relationships within the group
- Students' contributions to the group were welcomed and acknowledged but they didn't feel compelled to contribute
- Students aren't 'put down' if they make a mistake
- The tutor shows interest in the material and in the group itself
- The tutor is well prepared, or at least had a good structure for the session
- The aims of the session are clear and achievable
- Everyone had a chance to participate and the tutor was able to get students actively involved
- The tutor challenges students: questions and probes students' reasoning processes and critical thinking
- The tutor varies the activities in tutorials
- The tutor can anticipate the difficulties and problems that the students are likely to have
- The tutor can demonstrate flexibility: admit to not knowing and be open to learning *from* students as well as *with* them
- The students left the session feeling that they had learnt/achieved something

How do I start my first tutorial?

- Introduce yourself. Write your name on the board and give a contact number and your office hours (if you have them). Tell them where your office is (if you have one). Cover key administrative information - key dates, assignments, contact details
- Do a 'getting to know each other' session. This gets the students talking to each other and takes the heat off you for a while.
- Discuss expectations about what will go on in the tutorial and negotiate some ground rules. It is a good idea to write the ground rules down so they can be referred to later, if necessary. Establish participation as one of the ground rules for contributions to the tutorials
- Learn your students' names, as students will respond to you more if they feel that they know you, and above all, that you know them.
- Students in tutorials often arrive from different parts of the University and home and need to orient themselves to your tutorial. Instead of launching straight into the task for the day consider starting with a brief warm-up exercise.
- Icebreaker session
- Set up the room in a way that encourages active participation. The best arrangement is a circle or semi-circle, or you can ask the students themselves what they think would be a good arrangement.

Skills and Strategies you might use

1. Use effective *Questioning Techniques* such as:

- Use open rather than closed questions. Closed questions require only a yes/no response. Open questions require students to give an explanation for their answer and to expand on their response.
- Consider whether to use lower vs. higher order questions. Lower order questions are usually “what” questions. They typically test the knowledge students have about definitions or meanings. Higher order questions tend to be “why” and “how” questions which encourage students to think more deeply about a concept or the reasons for an answer. Your groups should include both types of questions, with an emphasis on higher order questions which challenge your students and make them think.
- Give students time to answer. Allow plenty of wait time, the space of time you allow between asking a question and receiving a response
- Ask questions that check for student understanding, invite student comments and participation, and challenge students’ thinking.
- Encouragement plays a key role in questioning and comes in many forms. You may give verbal encouragement: “Good answer”, “Yes, exactly – well done”, or encourage through body language such as nodding your head, maintaining eye contact, or using hand gestures to encourage students to pursue their answer.
- Show that you value all answers by non-verbal signals (eye contact, nod, smile) as well as verbal responses.
- Identify your key questions in advance and anticipate the range of student responses. Some facilitators plan key questions ahead of time. You may do this by writing down questions on a running sheet for the group. These will act as prompts to guide your questioning.
 - Encourage students to take more responsibility for *asking* questions.
- A common question is “Do you understand?” It is sometimes too easy for students to simply answer “yes”. Instead, perhaps ask them to summarise the key points. It is a good idea to check if students have any questions - make sure that you allow them enough time to ask their questions before rushing on to the next topic.

2. Learning *How To Learn* in Interactive Small Groups

- Tutors play a key role in giving students strategies on how to learn, and opportunities to use those strategies.
- By scaffolding students’ learning by providing them with guidelines on how to approach a problem in their reading, study and exams, you are helping them to become more independent learners who are able to take responsibility for their own learning.
- Independent, motivated learners are the key to successful interactions in your small group.

Your support may come in the form of:

- clear instructions that explain how to solve a problem step by step
- modelling how to approach a problem or read strategically
- scaffolding students’ problem-solving by asking a series of questions

3. Providing *Feedback*

- Feedback may be formal (e.g., assignment marking) or informal.
- Make feedback clear and constructive
- Provide feedback about what the student or group has done well and what needs improvement.
- Let students know when you are giving them feedback on their learning or their assignments/tests and why it is important.
- Consider making a special time in each tutorial for feedback.

4. *How do I get feedback on what students have learned?*

- What was the most difficult concept covered in the lecture/tutorial?
- Which problem/reading did you find most difficult? Why?
- Quick quizzes at the start of the tutorial
- A one-minute quiz at the end: List one/two/three questions about the work we did today that you still have at the end of this tutorial
- Self-reflection/ self-assessment
- Assessment of the class – may be submitted anonymously – partway through semester
- Key question activity: Key question/problem on overhead. All students given an index card to write their response. Distribute a large envelope to collect responses (anonymous or named).

5. Strategies for *involving “quiet” students*

- Avoid rushing in to answer all the questions – give students responsibility for answering each other’s questions, with your guidance
- Get people talking to each other using non-threatening situations, such as ‘ice-breakers’
- Ask students to brainstorm ideas on paper first, before the discussion begins. They can then pair up with a neighbour to build up a bit of confidence, then share with the whole group (think-pair-share). Other activities you might try are:
 - Buzz groups – are pairs or small groups of students who are assigned a task or discussion topic for a limited period of time (5 minutes max). A good moment to suggest a ‘buzz’ is when you want members of your tutorial to reflect actively on something and come up with quick ideas. The discussion itself may be enough, or you may get them to report back.
 - Syndicates – teams of students work for a longer period of time (15-20 minutes) in parallel on the same task – analyzing a problem or case, studying a text or artefact, preparing a proposal or bid, then each team presents their idea to the whole group.
 - Fishbowls – students in a small circle of chairs have a discussion. Students in a surrounding larger circle listen in. The outer circle can join in the discussion by swapping seats with someone in the inner circle. This can be useful for a focussed discussion in quite a large group. It’s also fun.
 - Brainstorms – a task is set and small groups quickly ‘brainstorm’ their ideas and these are fed through to the larger group without discussion, elaboration or criticism. They can then go back through the suggestions to see which are worth pursuing.
- Alert participants about an upcoming discussion (a week before) so that anyone who is nervous has the opportunity to do adequate preparation, and will feel more at ease about the prospect of contributing.
- Don’t assume that silent students aren’t involved. There may be cultural or personal reasons for their silence. Work on a range of activities that allows for individual, pairwork, small groups of 3/4 as well as larger groups.
- Think of activities in which everyone has a turn to answer/contribute – i.e., let’s go around the group and each person identifies one thing that is going well or one question/problem they would like to discuss in the group today.
- Recognise that people adopt different roles within a group or team situation. For more information about team roles, read

6. Strategies for *managing “dominant” students/talkers*

- Develop and maintain ground rules. Being able to refer to ground rules will often help defuse a potentially irritating or disruptive problem. If you only let the dominant one(s) talk, others will become resentful and will probably stop coming to the group.
- Work with individuals. This may mean talking with them before or after class alone, chatting with them when small groups are working. Explain how they might give their peers a chance to contribute. Have a quick conversation about what interests them before or after the group, then let them know that the group time belongs to the whole group, not just one or two contributors.
- Affirm the dominant individual. Let them know that you value their contribution, but out of fairness to all members of the group, everyone needs a chance to contribute. If at all possible, move around the room so that you do not stand/sit close to the dominant personalities all the time (often they will sit up the front, close to the tutor).
- Respond carefully. For example, if the dominant student constantly answers or asks questions, you may use humour sensitively, where appropriate, to let them know that someone else needs a turn! Usually the dominant ones know who they are and respond well to someone who works with them. Sarcasm or put-downs are never the way to go.
- Be assertive. This may involve stating your opinion or request, moving around the room to involve other group members, and remaining calm rather than confronting individuals who may become irritating.

7. *Resolving conflicts*

- Develop and maintain ground rules. Being able to refer to ground rules will often help defuse a potentially irritating or disruptive problem.
- Be assertive. This may involve you stating your opinion or request; listening actively to another person’s opinion; reflecting back on what he/she says without comment or criticism; then calmly restating your point of view.

- Confront the situation. Confronting has the connotation of aggression, but positive confronting simply means stating your concern about behaviour you find unsettling or disruptive. Self-disclosure can be useful. “I feel it’s unfair on the larger group when a small group does not participate.”

8. Activities to *enhance learning*

- Read some material - Ask some students to read part of a handout and note their response to it. Alternatively, ask them to read from an overhead transparency, followed by a small group discussion.
- Write a question - Ask students individually or in pairs/groups, to write down one or two precise questions on a recent lecture. These can be dealt with in a variety of ways. An effective way is to put them in a hat and draw them out at random and get the whole group to suggest answers.
- Solve a problem/answer a question - Set a problem or a question based on a lecture, a chapter from a text etc. Ask students to solve the problem or answer the question, individually, or in small groups, or individually followed by group work.
- Give an example - Ask students to invent examples of a presented concept and compare them with another student.
- List pros/cons - Ask students to consider briefly likely advantages and disadvantages, or strengths and weaknesses, or a procedure or theory and then discuss.
- Watch a video-clip- Show a short video, giving clear instructions on what to look for and then discuss.
- Read your notes - Ask students to read their recent lecture notes or summary of a chapter in a text. Invite students to exchange and discuss notes so that they can add to their notes and compare approaches.

8. *Concluding the tutorial*

- A common challenge is running out of time towards the end of tutorials. This often means rushing through the last few minutes of the tutorial which makes students feel frustrated and possibly anxious.
- Make sure you conclude in a way that gives students confidence about what they have discussed and a sense of direction for how they will manage their tutorials, lectures and assignments to follow.

Five Final Tips

1. Put yourself in their shoes: The most successful tutors empathise with group members – try to remember how you felt in your second and third year and share this with the group if/when appropriate.
2. Be confident: Even the most experienced teachers have bad teaching days and “not so effective” groups. If something goes wrong, have confidence in yourself and the experience you have to share.
3. Talk to your peers and share ideas: Sharing ideas and strategies is one of the best ways to learn and develop as a tutor.
4. Be enthusiastic: Students value teachers who are enthusiastic about their subject and sharing with their tutorial group.
5. Maintain your sense of humour!

Evaluating your tutorials

- It can be very instructive to do some kind of evaluation before the end of the semester, and then you can make changes if you need to.
- An informal evaluation might simply involve you asking your students how they feel about the tutorials.
- You might decide to get students to answer some questions on paper, anonymously.
- You could ask another tutor or some other colleague to sit in on your tutorial and give you some feedback.
- A video-tape of your tutorial by a colleague (although it sounds daunting) can be very effective in allowing you to reflect on your performance. It can also help you to analyse interaction within the group.

Adapted from:

Small Group Teaching Strategies Resource Pack

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Hints and Tips for Interactive Small Group Teaching

Induction Program 2004

New Tutors in 2/3-year Subjects

Faculty of Arts, The University of Melbourne

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