

That Important First Tutorial Session

(after: TEDI, *First meeting with students*; Barrington, 1998, p. 3; Bertola & Murphy, 1995, p. 13.)

The first time that you meet your group is very important. You can use the occasion to reassure the students that tutorials will be a positive, valuable and safe learning environment.

You probably remember how worried, nervous and tense you were at your first tutorial, especially if you were a student new to university. If you show that you are enthusiastic, friendly and open, your students will relax and you will open the way for a positive tone in the group. Remember that students may see you as having, as indeed you do have, the power to intimidate, hurt and fail them.

During this important first session, besides providing reassurance and a positive base, you can also accomplish a number of important tasks that will help make the remaining sessions more productive. Too often, tutors both new and experienced, rush into content and neglect spending time in helping tutorial members to get to know each other and in establishing ground rules.

Some General Advice

- Aim to show that you are well organised and consultative.
- Do not assume students have extensive knowledge about your discipline or school or the university, particularly if this group is largely first year students.
- Show enthusiasm for your course – how and why does this field excite you?
- Always be well prepared – this includes content and arrangements in the lecture theatre/seminar room/laboratory. Ensure all equipment and materials are working properly and arranged as you wish.
- Identify student fears about the paper or the tutorials you will be running and relate to these fears.
- Include activities that really capture students' interests and attention.
- Provide a structure for each class that is clear and unambiguous.
- Show students that you aspire to being objective or 'fair'.

The First Class

1. Start the class on time.
2. Introduce yourself to the class and include the title/name by which you prefer to be called. Write your name on the

whiteboard; explain your role/function in your Department/Hall or in that paper or course, perhaps giving a brief professional background. Tell them your office location (if you have one) or where they can get in contact with you.

3. Briefly, share something of yourself with your students – who you are and what you are like are of great interest to students and will give them a sense of you as a ‘real’ person. Share your philosophy of teaching with students. Avoid focussing on your own inadequacies or limitations.
4. Do a “getting to know each other” session (an icebreaker). This will get the students talking to each other and take the heat off you for a while.
5. Discuss expectations about what will go on in the tutorials 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.
6. Even though the students may have received a handout or handbook about the paper, it is useful in the first or second session to go over some of the essential information that they need to know to successfully complete the paper. You may not have time to do this in the first session – it will depend, to some extent, on the size of the group.
7. Things to explain:
 - Safety rules and procedures. These apply in any tutorial situation, but especially if you are working in a laboratory or using specialised equipment
 - critical dates – assignments etc
 - the Departmental policy on important matters such as getting extensions for written work
 - weighting of on-course assessment versus exam,
 - your availability outside office hours
 - attendance requirements
 - work expectations
 - appropriate behaviour
 - etc
8. Ask the students if they have any questions or concerns. Get them to talk about these in pairs (or on paper to be collected anonymously), before they raise them with you.
9. It is very easy to spend most of the first session dealing with housekeeping matters. Try to include some content in this first meeting so students can make a connection with the real substance of the course, not merely administrative details.
10. Leave time at the end of the first meeting for student questions

11. Invite student feedback at the end of the first class. Ask them to write down two things they found of use or two things they learned from the first session and two suggestions for how they think the class could be run in the future. These can be handed in anonymously and you can use their feedback to provide clarifications, feedback or reassurances at the beginning of the second class.
12. Leave students with the impression that not a minute of time spent in your class will be a waste of time.