

EDUCATION 2 - TUTORIAL TEACHING

Dr Kester Brown, President WFSA, Melbourne , Australia

Tutorial teaching is ideally conducted in small groups of 4 - 10 people, and has the advantage of being interactive between students and tutor. It is an ideal method of teaching when students already have a significant amount of knowledge. Students should have been notified of the topic of the tutorial beforehand to allow preparation, so that they are ready to discuss and gain from the session.

Everybody should be encouraged to participate. This sometimes requires the tutor to suppress those who always want to talk, and encourage those who tend to remain silent.

How can we achieve this? At the start of the tutorial the tutor should explain that everyone is expected to contribute and that students should feel free to express their ideas. Occasionally the tutor may have to ask talkative or disruptive students to hold their answers, while others give their opinion. This gives the everyone a chance to participate and provides a more balanced session.

The quieter people may have to be encouraged to contribute. This may involve asking them simple questions at first which they can answer, or it may need a way of showing that everyone can participate without embarrassment as fear of this is the commonest reason for holding back. A question can be asked with a numerical answer. Several people can be asked for the answer. If different answers are offered then one can put them to the vote. Some may still not participate. Not everyone is prepared to take the chance of being wrong. Take another vote. Then give the correct answer and show that you do not mind if they did not know the answer as long as they do when you have finished. An example is to ask how many mmols of chloride are in a litre of normal saline, usually in relation to a question on vomiting or pyloric stenosis. This approach often breaks down any barriers and facilitates participation.

There are teachers who threaten and belittle the students if they do not know something. This usually results in the student either being sure he knows the next time or not coming at all. It can be effective in the short term, but it is not conducive to creating an enjoyable atmosphere where the students think rather than learning by submission. Often a resentment develops between the teacher and the student.

What is the role of the tutor? The main role is to act as a catalyst and guide to the discussion. Many people do this by planning a series of questions which are worked through in order to generate more detailed discussion. The tutor tends to dominate the group in this approach.

A better approach is to let the students contribute more to the overall plan. This can be achieved very effectively by giving them a question which covers much of the topic of the tutorial. They have five minutes at the beginning to write a summary answer.

The advantages of this are that their brains are fully activated at the start, they then have comments to make when asked, and they are contributing their ideas. The tutor then uses their summaries to work out with them a logical answer with all the points included. The detail can be discussed by the students with the tutor adding comments where appropriate and acting as a catalyst during the discussion. This summary answer approach has other advantages. It can be used in bigger groups when several questions can be posed and different groups each answer one.

Ultimately, if a group meets repeatedly they can run their own tutorial and the tutor then becomes more of a facilitator, a resource person clarifying contentious issues or filling in points that they do not know. This technique uses some of the principles of self directed learning. The tutor can also highlight the key points. Some students have difficulty discerning what is important from detail. The tutor can also explain the practical relevance of information which has been brought out in the discussion.

There are some key tactics in conducting the tutorial. Do not point to someone and then ask a question. Why? The unfortunate individual has a sympathetic response before even hearing the question. Cardiac output increases, tachycardia develops, sweating begins and the cardiac output is largely redistributed to muscle where no thinking takes place. The mind can go blank. The remainder of the class sigh with relief and relax. It is much better to ask the question, give a few seconds for the students to think about their answer and then ask someone to answer. The stress on the individual is much reduced and they have had time to think of the answer.

Do not go round the class in sequence asking questions. The person answering is stressed, the next person is becoming apprehensive and the sympathetic response is beginning to activate, while the others can sit back and relax and even go into "mental neutral"! Ask questions in a random order so that the students all have to remain alert throughout.

To summarise, ask a question and give the students time to prepare a summary answer. Take the main ideas from several students - they may vary in approach. Write them down to refer back to. Then try to put the main points into a logical order and develop each with further discussion. At the end there should be a comprehensive, logical answer which the student can use for a written or oral examination or as a framework for teaching others at a later date.

Tutorial teaching can be fun. It is lively because the speakers are changing frequently. It gives students a chance to put forward ideas that are sometimes new to the tutor. These experiences are stimulating and therefore contribute to the teacher's continuing education as well.