

Enabling and Shaping Understanding through Tutorials

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Introduction

The accent in many of the earlier chapters has been on the purposes in studying and processes of learning of individual learners. This present chapter reports a study of the student experience of tutorials – of discussion groups led by a lecturer – and so has a somewhat wider focus, looking at perceptions of learning-and-teaching. It describes types of teaching interactions during these discussion groups which students identified as valuable, and discusses learning as a joint activity by students and academic staff. It also examines students' expectations concerning the nature of the relationship that should exist between a tutor and students, how tutors should and should not exercise their authority, and the *moral order* that ought to prevail within tutorials. Students talked of marked changes in the nature and quality of their experience of tutor-led discussion groups as they became acculturated into the ways of the 'academic tribe' in the course of their undergraduate career. It is argued that this distinct developmental progression in reported experience of tutorials has important implications for tutoring practice.

Background

Tutorials, small group discussions that focus on some aspect of an academic discipline and which are customarily led by a lecturer, form an important part of the teaching which undergraduate students receive in most British institutions of higher education. These tutorials usually take place every week during term time in each of a student's courses and may take a number of different forms. Some centre around the discussion of a particular topic, and students are asked to read around this topic in the week preceding the tutorial. In others, an individual student, or a subgroup of students within the tutorial, may make a short presentation which is followed by wider discussion. In science based subjects, and also in some social science subjects, discussion usually centres around the solution of problems and the wider points of theory that are raised by specific problems. Particularly in the first year of undergraduate study, tutorials may be used to pass on advice concerning essay writing, examinations and other academic tasks. They may also serve as a forum where individual students are able to raise difficulties that they are experiencing in understanding aspects of a course.

Advocates of university discussion groups have claimed that they provide an arena where 'active' learning can take place and where critical thinking and the development of communication skills can be encouraged. It has also been claimed that 'democratically' run discussion groups can encourage students to think more independently and gain confidence in their own abilities. Abercrombie, for

example, who was a leading exponent of the benefits of tutorial group work, claimed that:

The group system aims to emancipate the student from the authority-dependency relationship and to help him develop intellectual independence and maturity through interaction with peers, by glimpsing not only the context in which a more experienced scholar sees his problem, but the various contexts in which several equals see the problem. (Abercrombie, 1974)

To further the aims of developing clear perceptions, objective judgement, critical thinking and autonomy in learning, Abercrombie argued that the tutor's main task was "to establish a climate in which all participants can listen and speak" (Nias, 1993, p.117). The tutor should also be socially reassuring and encourage spontaneous expression by the students (Abercrombie, 1960, p.70). This view of student-centred discussion groups, with the tutor setting up a climate in which understanding could be clarified and deepened, was consonant with wider developments in educational thinking at that time. The years which saw the advocacy of student discussion groups with this kind of 'permissive' atmosphere, also saw a 'child-centred' view of education come into prominence, and a belief in the power of 'discovery learning'.

The conception of the role of the tutor established by Abercrombie and others has, by and large, informed all subsequent writing on small group teaching. It also had a very influential effect on shaping the nature of much of the research that has been conducted on small group teaching, and led to a 'deficit model' view of tutor actions (e.g., Crick and Ralph, 1980; Luker, 1989). Guided by the assumption that small group teaching should be characterised by a 'hands-off' style of tutor facilitation and high levels of student participation, researchers have tended to see situations where tutors spend a lot of time talking, or where they play too 'active' a role – such as in paraphrasing or controlling a student's language – as evidence of deficiencies and the need for reform.

In the study that is reported here, no prescriptive stance has been taken on the nature of the relationships that should obtain within tutorials or the actions that a tutor ought, and ought not, to be pursuing. The intention, rather, was to gain a clear sense of the *students' perceptions* of what were appropriate, or inappropriate, teaching actions for a tutor to pursue.

Methods

The interviews with students concerning their experience of tutorials formed part of a wider study of tutorials, which was conducted within the Faculty of Social Sciences in the University of Edinburgh. This study of university tutorials involved:

- non-participant observation of fourteen tutorial groups drawn from different social science departments and different years of study,
- analysis of audio-recordings of the discussion,
- interviews with a sample of students (52) who took part in the observed tutorials, and

- interviews with ten tutors concerning their aims for, beliefs and feelings about tutorials.

The sample of 52 students was drawn from eleven of the fourteen tutorial groups which had been observed, and included individuals from each of the four years of undergraduate study. The style of the interviews was *focused* and *interactive*. A full account of the research stance adopted in this study, the content and style of the interviews, the process of analysis, and the approach taken towards questions of validation, can be found in Anderson (1995).

Two important cautionary observations need to be made concerning the context and content of the tutorials observed. Within the faculty, considerable emphasis is placed on students acting in a co-operative, collaborative fashion within tutorials. Other institutions might be marked by a somewhat different ethos and promote a more competitive form of interaction in small groups. It is recognised that variations in practices and values in differing institutional contexts will lead to differing sets of perceptions of small group teaching.

The nature of the content discussed within tutorial groups may also have a considerable effect on students' experience of this form of teaching and learning. In the majority of social science subjects there is much 'unsettled territory' where debate is vigorously engaged between the advocates of different perspectives. Early in their academic career, undergraduates are typically introduced to the debates that shape their discipline, and helped to appreciate that there may be a number of competing 'expert' positions on the same topic, all of which possess both strengths and weaknesses. To some extent at least students can engage, within discussion groups, in the argument between stance and counter stance. The content of most social science subjects thus seems to be particularly well suited to discussion by undergraduate students. By contrast, in disciplines where the content taught to undergraduates is more 'settled', less marked by continuing, active debate, discussion may be different in nature. Given the potential importance of these disciplinary differences, caution will have to be exercised in considering the potential generalisability of our findings to contrasting disciplinary backgrounds.

In the space of a chapter it is not possible to present a fine-grained analysis of the wide-ranging accounts which the students provided of their experience of tutorial groups. That has been provided elsewhere (Anderson, 1995). Here, the strategy for reporting and examining the students' comments on their experiences is to concentrate on a few principal matters. Accordingly, an overview is initially presented of the features which were identified as important for active discussion and listening by most of the students. Then, differences between students in their *preferences for how debate is structured* are reviewed, and their implications for tutoring practice are considered.

Much of the previous work on small group teaching has had a fairly narrow focus, concentrating on aspects of the process of discussion and group dynamics, with little attention being given to the tutor's role as subject expert and teacher. In an attempt to redress the balance, the next section of the chapter – *talk on teaching* – presents and discusses accounts of teaching actions that students valued.

A key finding of this study was that a distinct developmental progression can be discerned in students' reported experience of small group teaching. This developmental progression is detailed in the section, *change in the experience of tutorials over time*, and is followed by a consideration of the *moral order* that students believed ought to prevail within tutorial groups.

Features that Promote Active Participation and Listening

Table 1, below, lists what students saw as the key features in promoting active participation and listening within a tutorial, including *tutor actions* and *group dynamics, student characteristics and actions*, and the *content* of the discussion. While many of the features mentioned by students are unsurprising, and fit closely with what has previously been reported both in research findings and staff development handbooks (e.g. Brown and Atkins, 1988, Ch. 4), this study moves away from a narrow focus on the *processes* of discussion to consider, in addition, the purposes and content of tutorial discussion.

TABLE 12.1

Features promoting active participation and listening

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • informal group atmosphere • tutor's skill in facilitating debate in an authentic, engaged manner • not too large a group • students themselves investing effort in discussion and creating a good group atmosphere • students' own self-esteem and confidence • the nature of the subject matter being discussed • personal interest in the specific subject matter being discussed • personal knowledge of the topic and of the discipline as a whole • appropriate preparation by the students • clear focus for preparation provided by the tutor • not too much pressure from other coursework |
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The first set of features to be discussed relate to the context of the tutorial discussion. As in previous studies, students identified the existence of an *informal group atmosphere* as a key determinant of the quantity of participation and the quality of discussion and listening. They not only appreciated the more comfortable, relaxed social atmosphere that prevailed in groups with an informal character, but also had a strong belief that such groups functioned more effectively, reducing anxiety and so increasing the willingness to participate. Informality was also viewed as creating a secure climate within which it was easier to raise difficulties and to explore problems in understanding. For example, one third-year Accountancy student commented that:

I find that tutorials are at their best when there is a very, very informal nature about the class... Because if you can feel as if you can open up, right, ask questions without either fears of being stupid.

There was a general expectation that tutors would *energetically apply the skills appropriate for facilitating debate*. One of the facilitating skills that students particularly commented on was the tutor's expertise in ensuring that all members of the group were involved in the discussion, at least to some extent. Students also expected that tutors would act to moderate students' contributions to prevent the 'floor' being monopolised by a few 'dominant' members of the group. In addition to facilitating debate, tutors were very much expected to *tutor*, in the older sense of the term meaning to teach. Students appreciated tutors who engaged in one-to-one teaching interactions with individuals to enable them, and the group as a whole, to gain new knowledge and perspectives and to refine or to construct new understandings of particular topics. The specific teaching actions felt to be helpful will be discussed in a subsequent section.

The *manner* in which tutors applied the skills of facilitating debate was seen as contributing markedly to the success or failure of a tutorial. Several students contrasted tutors regarded as unsatisfactory, who were merely going through the motions of their job, with those who displayed real interest, enthusiasm and engagement with their students. It was generally expected that tutors would perform their role in an *authentic, engaged* manner.

The quality of the tutorial experience was seen to depend on the size of the group, which also affected willingness to interact. There was a strong consensus that tutorials ran much better when there was *not too large a group*. Group functioning, participation, listening and intellectual benefits were all seen to be advanced by a smaller group size.

Although students' comments revealed that they saw the tutor's actions as the key determinant of the success or failure of a tutorial, they also recognised their own responsibilities, in terms of the students *themselves investing effort in discussion and creating a good group atmosphere*.

A large number of informants explained active participation or lack of engagement, by themselves or others, partly in terms of individual characteristics such as *self-esteem* and *confidence*. A lack of confidence was not, however, considered immutable. As we shall see later on, students in the senior, final two years of their degree course recognised that their confidence in taking part within tutorials had increased over time.

The remaining set of features listed in Table 1 relate mainly to the content of discussion. Although this aspect was clearly seen as very important in facilitating both engagement in the discussion and reflective listening, it has attracted rather little attention in previous studies. Quite a number of students drew attention to *the nature of the subject matter being discussed*, recognising that some subject areas were much more amenable to active debate than others. Some informants drew contrasts between disciplines, while others observed that even within a particular discipline some subjects were more likely to spark lively discussion than others. *Personal interest*, or lack of interest, in a particular topic within the

overall content of a course was generally described as a very important influence on how students prepared, took part and listened within individual tutorials. It was also felt that the manner in which lecturers and tutors dealt with a subject could either increase or diminish their interest. Several students recounted instances of tutors arousing their enthusiasm for topics they had previously had no curiosity about. Their comments on how tutors had awakened their interest in a topic resonates with the account presented in Chapter 10 of how certain students gained a "vicarious experience of relevance" from some lectures.

Personal knowledge of the specific topic being discussed, together with their general background of *knowledge of the discipline* which increased over the course of their undergraduate career also allowed individuals to contribute more to the discussion. But such knowledge could, of course, only be achieved by investing time and effort in studying. The students described the importance of *appropriate preparation*, in terms of reading relevant literature or becoming familiar with solving a particular class of problems. They recognised that achieving a good, and highly interactive, discussion was dependent on students coming along to a tutorial with the requisite knowledge. Strong disapproval was expressed of peers who came along to tutorials unprepared and therefore unable to make an appropriate contribution.

Preparing effectively for tutorials was also regarded by some students as a matter which depended not only on their own investment of time and effort, but also on the actions of the tutors. Preparation was seen as easier to achieve when tutors provided *a clear focus for preparation* through well focused reading and a clearly defined topic for the next tutorial. However, the amount of preparation that could be done was constrained by competing *pressure from other coursework*, such as essays, that had to be completed. As this other work, unlike tutorial work, was usually formally assessed, it tended to take precedence. This finding fits into a range of other examples, provided in Chapter 13, where assessment has been found to have profound influences on the quality of studying.

Contrasting Ways of Structuring Debate

The preceding section has outlined the key features that students agreed encouraged active participation and listening. However, there were distinct differences in perspective among the informants on how debate should be structured. Tutors can vary considerably in the way they conduct tutorials, some preferring a style which keeps discussion clearly and fairly tightly focused on a topic, or set of topics, while others prefer to have a rather more wide-ranging discussion. When the students were questioned on whether they preferred a more free-ranging or a more focused discussion, the differences of opinion revealed were wide and fairly evenly distributed. Responses to this question could be categorised for 51 of the 52 interviews. Sixteen students preferred more focused discussions, while eighteen would rather have more wide-ranging discussions, leaving nine adopting a 'middle-of-the-road' position. Seven students did not indicate an overall preference, saying that a desirable and appropriate style of structuring talk would vary according to the subject area, or even the individual topic, being discussed. One mature student

firmly believed that in the first two years of the undergraduate degree discussion should be clearly focused, becoming more wide-ranging only in the third and fourth years.

The following two quotations provide some sense of how participants' preferences concerning the structuring of discussion were described. The comments come from two third year women students from the same Economic and Social History tutorial group.

I want it to be always very focused. I want it. I don't like them to be just [unfocused]. They are a waste of time if you just sit there and everyone just talks about what they feel like talking about.

I don't like when tutors focus all the time because I think that's wrong, it is to me very important to understand the relationship between two things which maybe initially you don't think of relating but as you go to discussion you think, "Oh, maybe they are"; and I think that's very important ...

These differences in stylistic preferences suggest a need to rethink the prescriptions that Abercrombie, and other pioneers of the use of small group teaching, provided for the structuring of discussion. Such writers had placed great stress on the tutor facilitating a free-ranging discussion (Nias, 1993). A wide-ranging discussion of that type may well be of very considerable value to some students, yet create a sense of frustration among other students who want a clearer and tighter structure. It thus seems unwise to make any firm, unqualified prescription of wide-ranging, open discussion as the ideal way to assist students' intellectual and personal development. Rather, good tutoring practice should include the ability to vary the structure of discussion to take account of the stage of the course, the differing stylistic preferences of students, and the content and specific aims of the tutorial.

Specific Pedagogic Skills Shown by Tutors

Besides facilitating debate, whether in a free-ranging or a tightly-focused fashion, tutors were expected to teach. A considerable number of students commented approvingly on specific questioning strategies, or teaching tactics, which tutors had employed. Two main themes covered teaching actions which were perceived to be of considerable value. One was an appreciation of the shaping and direction of understanding provided by the tutor's actions, while the other reflected the motivating effects of this supportive shaping of understanding by the tutor. For example, the following quotation indicates a welcome from the student not only for the intellectual direction provided by the tutor's 'lead questions', but also for the way the tutor supported her efforts to contribute to the discussion – in her own words "backing her up".

Normally the tutor will back you up, follow up and say, "Yes, but do you not ...?" You know, he can sort of ask little questions, little lead questions (such as): "Would you not think it's more this –", and you think, "Oh, yeah, well", and go on like this.

Interviewer: Is that useful?

Yeah, that's useful. [laughs] Puts you on the right track.

Another second-year student drew attention to the benefits that came from tutors being able to imagine how students might be interpreting a topic and also engaging them in an interactive process of 'clarifying' their understanding of a particular topic. The following two extracts from his interview illustrate how he described both of these benefits.

Having an encouraging tutor helps, rather than someone who is obviously very clever, but so clever that they can't see your problem, because they understand it. It's nice having someone that can see why you've got a problem...

Often you sort of say something and it's a bit unclear. So, it's nice for them to sort of help *them* sort out what you mean, and help yourself sort out what *you* mean.

The latter comment contains an interesting observation on the way in which the 'diagnosis' by a tutor of a student's difficulties, and the construction by a student of a new personal understanding of a topic, may be intimately connected. The following short quotation from another part of the same interview demonstrates even more clearly his appreciation for tutors whose talk *constructs a space within which students can think*.

It's nice when it's ... , it is built upon and twisted around and things. It gives you room for thought.

A third year Accountancy student gave an account of actions which clearly revealed the tutor's *scaffolding* (Wood, Bruner and Ross, 1976) of the student's problem-solving. It is interesting to note how this student distinguishes between the direct transmission of information, which is seen as not being useful, and the beneficial effects of the tutor guiding and structuring the student's own exploration of a problem. The tutor's scaffolding activities are seen not only as compatible with, but indeed as a strong aid in, *thinking for yourself*. The statement seems to provide a valuable insight into how learners may view their own agency in 'thinking' and conceive of the practice of thinking.

Yeah, he won't tell you the answer, he makes you think for yourself, but he sort of prompts you along the lines. I mean he won't come out and say what the answer is, but if you don't get it somebody else might be thinking along the same lines.

Interviewer: So you are quite happy with that.

That is a good way. I mean there's no point of being spoon fed all the time, and if somebody tells you the answers even you'll see. That's not doing you any good. You're not thinking for yourself. And in the way he does that it, sort of, it does make you think. It structures your – your thoughts.

In a somewhat similar manner, another third year student described how certain tutors are skilled at 'correcting' students' statements, at *drawing in* students' understandings towards expert positions in the discipline. His words also express an appreciation of the fact that this process of "bring[ing] it round" is accomplished in a *sensitive manner which is not at all face-threatening*.

You normally find tutors that can sort of like, they don't say you're wrong, but they can sort of work, work it round so that you realise that you were wrong. Yeah, I mean, so you agree with [them] eventually... You know, they never say, "Oh, you're wrong", put it that way, sort of laugh at you or whatever. It's the way they do it, sort of, getting you to bring it round.

The very interactive shaping of students' understanding of a topic described in the preceding extracts was indeed a common occurrence in the groups led by the ten skilled tutors observed in the current study. Examination of the transcripts of tutorial talk reveals that these shaping, and scaffolding, actions were also achieved in a socially sensitive manner.

While some students stressed the value of tutors insisting on the very clear and precise formulation of statements, including the exact use of technical terms, others commented favourably on tutors who widened out and enriched discussion, introducing new aspects to debate and encouraging a more differentiated view of topics which had surfaced in discussion.

Tutors were also expected to act as mentors to studying, and tutorials are generally seen as providing an opportunity to provide advice on essay writing and other academic tasks. In this study, students stressed the importance of tutors making explicit to them their expectations of how they ought to be engaging with their studies, and also making clear the criteria used in their discipline to judge the quality of course work.

On the evidence of the interviews with students (and of the transcripts of talk in tutorials), tutoring involved an interplay between *taking out* an expert's view of a subject to students, in terms that novices are likely to understand, and *drawing in* students' more common-sense understandings towards expert positions within the discipline.

Change in the Experience of Tutorials over Time

Comments from students make clear the need for tutors to adjust their teaching and facilitation actions to the level of knowledge and academic stage of the students in a particular tutorial. Students reported marked changes over time in their experience of tutorial groups, as they became accustomed to the social and intellectual practices of small-group discussion in particular, and of university life in general. These changes involved two stages. At first, students are faced with the transition from school to university and making an adjustment to the social and intellectual demands of small group teaching. Then, there follows a slow process of long-term change in the quality of the students' experience of tutorials and of their assimilation of the practice of academic discussion.

Many students described how, at the beginning of their undergraduate career, they were faced not only with the uncertainties involved in meeting new people in their tutorials, but also with the need to make sense of a new *type* of social context and to act appropriately within it. Their comments drew attention to a number of specific adaptations that students may need to make in this initial period at university. They may have to get used to tutors taking a less directive, authoritative, stance than their teachers did at school, and realise that they

themselves are expected to show more initiative and take more responsibility for their own learning. Students coming from schools with an individualistic, competitive ethos may also have to adjust to the norms of co-operation which prevail in university discussion groups.

Some students described tutorials in the early part of their degree course, not only as a novel social situation in which they were somewhat uncertain about how to act, but also as a source of considerable anxiety. This concern about the social and intellectual challenges was, however, counter-balanced by a recognition of the potential benefits of establishing new social contacts and friendships. The value of having a sense of personal contact with a member of academic staff within the tutorial was also recognised. This personal contact with tutor and peers was particularly appreciated by those students who, at the beginning of their academic career, saw university life as rather impersonal or 'faceless' in character.

Entering fully into the practice of academic discussion involved more than making an initial set of adjustments to the values, and ways of acting, within a novel social situation. It required a much longer, slower process of acquiring knowledge in a discipline and of fuller acculturation to the ways of academic work and the forms of academic discourse. Student participants in the later years of study identified a progression in their experience of tutorials in terms of:

- *greater demands;*
- *an increase in confidence;*
- *changes in the quality of social atmosphere and interaction;*
- *the benefits of experience, including the understanding of expectations;*
- and
- *subject knowledge and the quality of discussion.*

In brief, students talked of how, over the years, there had been an increase in the intellectual demands that were placed on them, and in the requirement to demonstrate rather more independence and personal initiative in their studying. This increase in intellectual demands over time was accompanied by a decrease in the perception of tutorials as *socially* demanding. Students noted a distinct increase in confidence in participation within tutorials as they progressed through their undergraduate career. They also identified a marked change in the quality of discussion between first year, and third or fourth year, tutorials, which was linked to an increase in the knowledge of specific disciplines and knowledge of how to engage appropriately with academic tasks. For example, a fourth year Psychology student gave a very clear account of the effects of differing levels of subject knowledge on the nature of tutorial discussion. He talked in the following terms of the problems which can arise when first year students are not given sufficiently focused advice on tutorial preparation, and have insufficient background knowledge of the subject on which to draw.

I dislike tutorials where we haven't been – I mean, it happened a lot in first year – we weren't told "Right, prepare something" – and I suppose in any given area, particularly in first year, if you're not given any kind of instructions to go and do some reading beforehand, then people have much

the same view, ... the sort of layman's view of the subject, and there's no discussion at all.

He then went on to draw a contrast between first and later years of study:

It's more difficult in the lower years – I mean a lot of the stuff in the higher years, the discussion arises from people's own views anyway that they've acquired through the years. There's a lot more general knowledge obviously in the subjects that you've picked up.

This increase in knowledge, the building up of experience in taking part in tutorials, and the clearer understanding of the expectations governing debate, changed the value some students attributed to tutorials. These students described how the benefits of tutorials had become more salient as they had gained experience in the ways of academic life.

This reported increase in the quality of discussion in the later years of study was accompanied by a qualitative change in the social atmosphere of tutorials, and in interaction with peers. Informants also pointed up a certain change in the nature of the relationship between tutor and students. As the intellectual distance between students and staff diminished, the social relationship between them was perceived as becoming somewhat more equal.

Implications for practice of changes over time

In a real sense, the first and fourth year tutorials observed within the current research project were somewhat different phenomena. Therefore, there can be no single, ideal way to proceed, appropriate for both first year and fourth year groups. Indeed, the tutors in the present study reported marked differences in the way that they conducted first year, as opposed to final year, tutorials commenting that they needed "to do less" when they were leading fourth year groups. In contrast to the fourth year groups which could be run in a more "hands-off" fashion, some tutors described how with a first year group they needed to give direction to the discussion and to take a very active part in shaping the content of the talk. Analysis of the talk that was recorded within tutorials also reveals striking differences between first and fourth year tutorials. The adjustments in style that tutors described themselves making could indeed be observed happening in practice. Rather than seeking to define a single, invariant set of features associated with success in tutoring, it would appear more sensible to view good tutoring as requiring flexibility of response – an ability to tailor actions sensitively to the characteristics and needs of individual groups of students.

The Moral Order of Tutorials

So far, we have reported the conditions and actions seen to affect active participation, listening, and learning in tutorials. However, the student's talk on many of these features, such as maintaining a safe, informal group atmosphere, can be seen to have a dual aspect. Students saw direct benefits from an informal climate which encouraged engaged participation and attentive listening. But their

comments also suggested that an atmosphere where individuals could feel that they were safe from threat *ought* to be provided – there was a moral obligation for such a group climate to be created. Students were thus saying what *did work well*; but they were also concerned with *how things should work*.

In the interviews, students and staff described in similar ways the *moral order* that they believed ought to prevail within tutorials. Tutors and students alike were expected to avoid treating individuals in a threatening way; and to contribute to a friendly, co-operative ethos. Students viewed their peers as having to make an effort for the common good by preparing for tutorials; and expressed strong disapproval of 'dominant' students who took an unfairly large share of the 'floor'. A democratic form of discourse was expected within tutorials, with students agreeing on what constituted legitimate and unacceptable displays of tutor authority.

Unacceptable displays of tutor authority included the overt display of power, or actions which highlighted the differences in social status between students and the tutor. Such actions clashed with the expectations that status differences would be minimised – expectations established by the informal atmosphere and 'democratic' forms of address which usually prevailed in tutorials. It was also regarded as unacceptable for tutors to use their authority to moralise about the shortcomings of students or to scrutinise students' statements in a way which made them feel ill at ease. Actions of this type were viewed as conflicting with the students' rights to certain forms of respect.

There was also a feeling that undue pressure should not be placed on individuals to participate – what one informant described as "being put on the spot". At the same time, the participants viewed the tutor as having a responsibility to involve everyone in the discussion – a duty to be active in soliciting contributions, particularly from the quieter members. In effect then, the tutor was asked to walk a fine line between observing a student's positive freedom – to be drawn into the discussion – and negative freedom, to be safe from undue pressure to participate.

There were, as we have already seen, acceptable displays of tutor power. There was a clear expectation that tutors would make appropriate use of their authority as subject experts to *tutor* – that is to engage in teaching interactions. In particular, it was anticipated that tutors, in their role as subject experts and teachers, would act to re-direct a discussion which had gone "a bit astray". Informants talked of the need for the tutor "to correct", or "to clarify", student contributions to the discussion where necessary. At the same time, it was assumed that any 'corrective' teaching actions would be carried out in a socially sensitive manner which would not threaten the student's public face of competence. Thus, the disparity in knowledge between tutors and students was not viewed as inherently problematic. Key matters for the participants were the *manner* in which this knowledge was put to use, and that it should be displayed solely for the *purpose* of enhancing students' understanding of a subject (see Anderson, in press, b).

Constraining or Enabling Understanding?

Different interpretative stances can be taken towards the practice of shaping and

directing students' understanding towards appropriate positions within a discipline. One could, for example, follow the line of argument pursued by Valerie Walkerdine in her radical deconstruction of the discursive practices of child-centred primary education (Walkerdine, 1988). Walkerdine notes how the practices of child-centred primary education render the power relations between teacher and children invisible, and how "the *illusion* of choice, of security and safety, are key features of what is taken to be correct classroom life." (p. 211, italics added). She claims that:

The child is so positioned within the practice as to have not 'seen' power, and believes itself the originator of its actions, its choice. It is a powerful illusion, an illusion of choice and control over one's destiny taken to be centrally implicated in producing the possibility of 'rational argument' (p. 210).

A similar position could be advanced with respect to the discursive practices that prevail in university small group teaching. It could be claimed that the informal social atmosphere and the democratic forms of address which characterise such groups provide a false front of agency that disguises the real power of social discourses to shape the minds and actions of individuals. Such a radical critique, however, would appear to put into too sharp a contrast the nature of the relationship between university teachers and students, and of the purposes of teaching. Other publications stemming from this present study (Anderson 1995; Anderson, in press, a, b) have depicted the complexity of the relationships of power and of consent that exist between tutors and students, and have argued that this complexity is not captured by an interpretative position which focuses solely on constraint and the imposition of power.

Students' experience of learning and teaching within tutorial groups is more appropriately represented by recognising the way in which their understanding of a discipline is both simultaneously *enabled* and *constrained* by their tutors. Tutors in their dual roles as 'gatekeepers' for a discipline and guides to the less expert have to lead students towards ways of construing particular topics or problem situations in an appropriate fashion. This might be perceived as a *constraining* function. Yet, tutors are, at the same time, *enabling* novices to gain new framing perspectives on topics and so develop their abilities. They are assisting students to gain the knowledge and ways of acting needed for them to participate more fully in academic life, for example, by taking part in the debates which enliven and sustain many disciplines.

Shotter (1993a, 1993b, 1993c) has recently argued that gaining 'agency' within a particular culture is dependent on learning the appropriate performance of the practices of that culture. He suggests that:

... our own task in learning how to act personally, as an autonomous member of our culture, is in learning how *to do* all the things in our culture, like measuring, inferring, remembering, perceiving, listening, speaking, etc., we must learn how to do them as the others around us do them – we must learn how *to be* as they are. Indeed, if we do not, then they will sanction us and not accord us the right to act freely. (Shotter, 1993a, p.70)

The *enabling* and *constraining* functions of teaching can thus be seen to be necessarily interlinked rather than opposed.

Shotter also draws attention in this quotation to the intersubjective and interpersonal nature of learning and teaching – a theme which has featured strongly in the examination of students' reported experience of tutorials within this chapter, and which appears again in the final chapter of the book, *Understanding Teaching and Teaching for Understanding*. There, implications for day-to-day teaching practice are explored in ways which are consonant with the findings of this study of tutorials, and of other research which looks at learning from a similar sociocultural perspective.