



# 12 | TUTORLESS TUTORIALS

**U**NDERGRADUATE STUDENTS, IN PARTICULAR those in their first year at University, have the tendency to be passive during tutorials expecting the tutors to provide them with “ready made” answers. In order to stimulate and challenge these students, we have adopted a much more self-directed learning approach to the tutorials whereby students take more responsibility for their own learning. We have introduced weekly tutorials conducted in the absence of a tutor where students are responsible for the running of the tutorial. They are expected to prepare for the tutorial in their own time and come to the tutorial with answers to a series of questions/issues that are related to the lecture content but have not been taught formally. They are thus expected to analyse problems, locate relevant source material and develop habits of independent study.

The aims of these tutorless tutorials are to:

- \* promote self-directed learning;
- \* improve student participation in small group sessions and oral communication skills;
- \* improve student confidence in the topic and understanding of the topic; and
- \* stimulate students to form “study groups”.

## METHODS

Before the tutorless tutorial, staff referred to as “Syndicate”, tutors allocate a topic on a specific theme to groups of two or three students. For example on the theme: “The role of enzymes as diagnostic markers”, each group of students will need to research on one particular enzyme which is used for the diagnosis of a (or several) disease(s). Students are required to answer a series of questions drawing information from a variety of sources such as textbooks, journal articles, websites, computer programs or sometimes newspaper articles. At the beginning of the first year, such references might be given to the students but as time progresses, students will be required to search for the material. Answers to these questions are to be submitted electronically before the beginning of the syndicate session. The aims of these pre-syndicate self-directed learning (SDL) sessions must be clearly outlined so that students know what is expected of the SDL.

At the syndicate session, one student is elected (on a rotation basis) by his/her peers to act as a facilitator. The role of the facilitator is to:

- \* overview the running of the session;
- \* ensure that students participate (there are generally 12 students per syndicate); and
- \* collate answers from the students, summarise these answers with participation of all members of the syndicate and engage the students to compare and contrast the answers from the various groups in the syndicate. For example, groups will compare and contrast their findings on the structure, role and diagnostic value of the various enzymes. The completed answer sheet, the content of which is examinable, will be handed in to the tutor at the end of the syndicate. In some instances, students will be asked to give an oral presentation, in the presence of their tutor, at the next tutorial session. If the group encounters difficulties with particular answers during the syndicate, the facilitator can obtain from the tutor (who is in the tutorial room next door) a copy of the answer sheet. The tutor can also come and talk personally to the students if more explanation is required. The convenor of the course will generally attend part of these sessions at random. If any further problem arises, the convenor will ask the lecturer to clarify this issue to the students in a formal lecture.

Assessment of these tutorless tutorials is based on the answers to the SDL sessions corrected by the tutors and on peer assessment. The latter is introduced gradually throughout the semester and follows very well defined criteria based on participation rather than on the correctness of an answer.

## RESULTS

At first, students are reluctant to participate in tutorials without tutors. However, as time progresses, they show an increased interest and confidence in the topic and they participate more actively in the syndicates as they come to the sessions prepared and thus more knowledgeable. They also participate more as “they are less afraid to say something wrong in front of their peers than in front of their tutor” (comments made by many students). Students also learn to form study groups, a very important aspect if they live off campus in large cities and have therefore little contact with fellow students outside class time.

Surveys have shown that even though students encounter some difficulties with the concept of tutorless tutorials, especially at the first year level, they overcome these difficulties as the year progresses. A minority of groups cannot work in the absence of a tutor. When this occurs, students are allocated to other groups. Exam results have not indicated that students are less knowledgeable in the topics they learn in the SDL sessions; to indicate if their knowledge has improved would require extensive surveys that have yet to be conducted.

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