

6 : TUTORING AND COUNSELLING

No matter how good our teaching materials, and how efficient our distribution system, distant students have to work by themselves without the support that comes from tutors, or from other students, in a conventional class. We need to consider how we can give them the individual encouragement, help, tuition and guidance which they need, and so overcome the barriers of distance and the remote student's feeling of isolation. In the previous chapter we suggested that some of those feelings, and some of our students' uncertainties, could be overcome if students met together, even without a tutor. But there remain functions which properly belong to a tutor. Before considering which kinds of tutoring need to be done face-to-face, and which can be done at a distance, it is useful to distinguish between the different groups of people who may do tutoring and counselling in distance education. They may include:

- local or field tutors where these are employed;
- college of education staff, who will do some tutoring at residential sessions, but may also tour to visit students;
- head teachers, if it is possible to involve them as supervisors of trainee teachers in their own schools;
- correspondence tutors;
- radio tutors, if radio programmes are used to give general advice to students;
- a student adviser, where one is employed on the staff of a distance teaching institution.

Local tutors

Local or field tutors play a valuable role where it is possible to employ them. Field representatives were employed by the UNRWA/Unesco Institute for Palestinian refugee trainee teachers. They had a team of some 26 tutors, called field representatives, each of whom was responsible for between 70 and 80 teachers. The field representatives toured the refugee camps and met students in seminars to discuss topics which the Institute felt lent themselves to face-to-face discussion. The field representatives were provided with filmstrips, flip-charts and other audio-visual aids. As well as running the seminars, field representatives also visited trainees in school in order to observe the lessons they were giving and played a part in the residential sessions which students attended from time to time.

In Tanzania adult education co-ordinators, most of whom were originally trained as primary school teachers, served as local tutors for the teacher upgrading scheme. They had a two-month training course in this new job, which they took on in addition to their existing work. They supervised the work of the trainees on the two days a week they spent in study centres, and marked their correspondence lessons, sending a copy of the marks back to the headquarters in Dar es Salaam.

Unfortunately, as we saw, there has been little evaluation of distance-teaching programmes for teachers and we do not have enough information to say how successful either of these approaches has been.

In some cases it is not possible to have field tutors. Students may be so widely separated that it is not practicable to employ local staff. Or political considerations may make this difficult or impossible. The National Teachers' Institute in Nigeria, for example, is a federal institution, but face-to-face training of teachers is a responsibility of the individual states which make up the Nigerian federation. Any nationwide system of local tutors, therefore, involves negotiations with all the state governments.

Other staff

All college of education staff have, of course, a role in advising and tutoring students. This is part of their regular work when trainees are attending a residential course. In some cases it extends beyond that: as we saw, the college staff in Swaziland paid regular visits to trainees throughout the country and that kind of visit helped to relate what was done in the classroom to what was done at the college.

Similarly head teachers can try to establish that link. Head teachers have long had a role in supervising trainees where pupil-teacher schemes are in existence. Their role for trainees who are being taught at a distance is essentially the same. If the training at a distance is to be effective, and trainees are to apply what they have learned in the classroom, then the support of head teachers is vital.

No matter how much help is provided by local tutors, college of education staff or head teachers, a vital role remains for the correspondence tutor. In much distance education the correspondence text is the heart of the teaching system. It is by working through the text, and doing assignments, that the student learns. In the Palestinian refugee camps, the role of correspondence tutor was originally given to the field representatives but this did not work well, partly because of the other burdens on them. At the Correspondence Course Unit in Nairobi a team of part-time correspondence tutors were recruited, whose work was supervised by subject specialists on the staff of the Unit. Many other institutions have adopted this same compromise of having some part-time correspondence tutors but having control through the use of their own full-time staff. It is important that the regular academic staff of a college which is using distance teaching should do some correspondence marking in order that they can learn more about their students and about student reactions to the courses.

The essence of a correspondence tutor's work is that it is individual. But, as a course proceeds, some problems will arise which are common to a variety of students. Here, useful tutorial help can be given by a radio tutor. If there is a regular part of a radio

programme dealing with student problems, then a tutor who always gives advice to students at that point can gradually build up a valuable rapport with them.

There remain some problems which are individual but are not necessarily about a particular subject. There are problems about how to go about studying, when to take examinations, about not receiving books on time and the like. Students may need advice before they start working. A distance-teaching institution needs to have somebody who has the job of answering student enquiries. If the institution is large enough, it will be necessary to employ a student counsellor or adviser, or even a team of advisers. If it is on a smaller scale, then this job will fall to one of the academic staff. There are two sides to the student adviser's job. The first is to answer, as helpfully as possible, the enquiries which come from a student and to work out which of those should be answered by a subject specialist and which are more general. The second, and often more demanding and more contentious, is to represent the students' interests to the rest of the institution. The student adviser is the person who is most closely in touch with student difficulties and problems and so the person who has the best view of what is going wrong inside the institution. If there are delays in production, for example, the student adviser is the person who will see how that is stopping students from working. A good student adviser therefore combines the ability to help students sympathetically with the tact and toughness to improve the workings of the institution in the interests of those students.

Organising tutorial services

It is clear that the job of teaching and advising students is shared among a larger group of people in a distance-teaching institution than in a conventional college. As a result it is necessary for somebody to have the responsibility of seeing that the various teaching and counselling functions do fit together - to see that what is done in supervising trainees teaching practice fits with what is done in face-to-face sessions and with the comments and advice that are given on students' printed work. This co-ordinating responsibility may rest with the student adviser, but more often will rest with a senior member of staff on

the educational side of the institution.

In organising tutorial help to students we can distinguish various functions for tutors. These functions are different from those of teaching in a conventional class as the role of conveying information has generally been taken over, from the live teacher, by print and radio. But what remains is of the greatest importance and analysing the different tasks that remain helps us decide who should undertake each of the tutoring or counselling activities.

The first is simply to help students. As we have repeatedly said, students at a distance lack the regular help that most students get from the teacher.

They lack the support from their peers and they lack an easy point of comparison with their peers. All kinds of problems - concerned with particular subjects, with the process of learning more generally, or with broader family or social issues - are likely to hinder their work. The first function of a tutor or adviser is to be helpful and sympathetic.

The next is closely related: it is to encourage the learner. And this imposes certain disciplines on our tutors and especially on correspondence tutors. If you were seeing a student you could scribble "so what?" or "I don't follow" or "see me" in the margin of an essay and still encourage the student when you next see him. If you receive that sort of comment when you are 300km away from your tutor it can depress you to the extent that you give up studying altogether.

But, of course, a tutor does have the function of checking that students have understood the work set for them and looking at the quality of their work.

The next function is to stimulate discussion and dialogue; this is particularly difficult to do at a distance. This difficulty suggests that open-ended discussion has an even more important role in meetings of students, or in residential courses, than it does in conventional study. But, as we saw, it is possible to design lesson materials, and to add comments on assignments, which provoke discussion and argument. The tutor's aim here is to encourage the student to explore ideas for himself and help to move towards independent thinking and learning in which he is

progressively less reliant on his teachers or printed texts or broadcasts.

The tutor's next job is marking. Whether or not students' marks are to be included as part of their final assessment we can assume that most students are very anxious to know what mark has been awarded them. This is perhaps particularly so if they are remote from other students: without another student to compare their work with, they are forced to rely enormously on a mark. So marks are important to students and they may be important to the institution. Where marks are included for assessment, then it is necessary to have some kind of procedure to standardise the marking done by different tutors. But, for all that, what is most important on a student's work is the comments rather than the mark.

In the light of these different tutorial functions, and of the facilities which are available to a distance-teaching institution, it should be possible to decide how the functions should be shared between different people, and in particular between those employed at or near the headquarters as correspondence tutors and the others. Three principles can guide us in making those decisions.

First, it has been the experience of a number of projects that students find it helpful to start their course with a residential session. This was the pattern in the teacher training project in Swaziland. At an introductory session they can be introduced to the kind of printed materials from which they will work, to the techniques of studying at a distance, and to the people who will be in touch with them as they work through their materials. Similarly the ZINTEC programme in Zimbabwe begins with a 16-week residential course. This kind of initiation can overcome many of students' hesitations about working on their own and at a distance.

Second, problems will still arise and it is important that students should be quite clear where and how they can get help. At every stage in their work they need to know just how to get whatever kind of help they need. This affects not only the kind of tutoring system we provide, but also the kind of printed or broadcast instructions which the students are sent.

Third, even when all the other elements are well organised and developed, the role of the correspondence tutor is perhaps the most important.

The correspondence tutor

The best correspondence tutors are people with a mastery and enjoyment of their own subject, who can correspond warmly and sympathetically with students, live near the institution which is receiving work from and sending it to students, and always work promptly. Cynical administrators will put the list in the reverse order.

In order to do that job tutors need to go beyond the minimum marking of right and wrong and to provide much more guidance, help and stimulation. Indeed, a good correspondence tutor has a slightly different function from that of marking, which is to build up a relationship, with the student. If the student feels that his tutor is a real person, and gets to know him through correspondence even if he never meets him, then each will get much more out of the relationship. In order to encourage that kind of relationship some colleges send students a short, one-page, biography of their tutor and encourage students to write back to the tutor about themselves. It is easier to develop that sort of relationship if students are allocated permanently to one or more tutors so that, for any one subject, the same tutor always deals with the same student.

The tutor needs help and support from the distance-teaching institution in order to undertake these duties. The first thing which he needs is a clear statement from a distance-teaching organisation about how it works and what he is expected to do. He needs information about the administrative procedures of the college so that his own work is made as simple as possible and he can concentrate on advising his students, rather than coping with the college's bureaucracy. Figure 8 shows the list of documents which are provided by Murdoch University in Western Australia so that its processes and its printed forms are clear to the tutor.

The tutor will also need to keep some kind of record about students and their work. Each tutor may want to

MATERIALS FOR TUTORS

To help support and maintain consistency in the overall interaction between tutors and students, and to provide clear, simple, time-saving procedures for tutors, the External Studies Unit provides each tutor with:

- A. a copy of "Open for Learning" : A Student Guide to External Studies at Murdoch University;
- B. a copy of "What*When*Why*How";
- C. a wallet file in which to retain course work until it is evaluated;
- D. a list of the tutor's students', with name, address and telephone number;
- E. a system of notifying students of the hours and days when the tutor is available by telephone or for personal interviews. The tutor provides this information on a small format slip (enclosed) supplied by the External Studies Unit and the slip is forwarded to the student by the External Studies Unit along with the tutor's comments on the student's first course work
- F. on-going notification regarding any alteration in a student's enrolment (a copy of all such information which goes to individual tutors is also forwarded to the Co-ordinator);
- G. a standard format for responding to course work the Assignment Attachment consisting of 3 carbonised sheets, one copy of which is retained by the tutor (examples are enclosed);
- H. a format letter for the use of tutors when a student's course work has not been received; (enclosed)
- I. a system of handling student course work, through which
 1. course work is received from the student by the External Studies Unit (students are provided with return envelopes), the date of receipt is recorded and the work is forwarded to the tutor the same day;
 2. course work is returned to the Unit by the tutor, with the blue and yellow Assignment Attachment copies of the tutor's comments and, the same day, is despatched to the student, with the date of despatch recorded and a copy of the Assignment Attachment retained on the student's file.

Source: Murdoch University Tutoring at a distance

Figure 8: Information for external tutors
at Murdoch University

NATIONAL EXTENSION COLLEGE				STUDENT'S COURSE CARD		
ASSIGNMENT	TO BE COMPLETED BY STUDENT		TO BE COMPLETED BY TUTOR		NEC	
	Target date for completed assignment	Actual date sent to tutor	Date sent to NEC	Computer marking		REMARKS
Diagnostic Test						
A			13.11.82	7	Good pass	
B			23.11.82	7	Good pass	
C		24.12.82	30.12.82	9	Excellent	
D		12.1.83	17.1.83	5	Disappointing	
E		24.1.83	26.1.83	7	Good pass	
F		8.2.83	12.2.83	5	Too close for comfort	
G		11.3.83	15.3.83	5	Too close for comfort. Needs repeating	
H		2.4.83	6.4.83	8	Very good	

Student's Name and Address

Student's number 025631

Course number U23P

Course title Pure Maths 'A' level

Date of enrolment 26.10.82

Figure 9: National Extension College student's course card

work out his own way of doing this. In some cases, however, it is useful for a card with a summary of the tutor's comments to accompany each piece of work and pass backwards and forwards between the tutor and student. In that way both can see how the student's work is progressing from assignment to assignment. Figure 9 shows an example of such a card. Many good tutors send fuller comments than can conveniently go on a card.

The tutor will also need guidance on marking students' work and on commenting on it. Each institution may have a system of marks or grades, which may be alphabetic or numeric, and tutors will generally be asked to use a standard format for these. As we have seen, commenting on a student's text is more important. Advice to tutors on the kind of comments needed by students have been summarised by Murdoch University, following work by the British Open University, in the following way:

"(i) Comments which indicate that the assignment as a whole has been received and considered, for example an acknowledgement that you can see what the student was trying to achieve;

(ii) Correction of errors of text or misunderstanding, explaining why something is incorrect or including a precise reference;

(iii) Comments on essay and study techniques - cases, for example, where the work shows an obvious lack of perspective, or where an otherwise reasonable essay is marred by atrocious grammar or spelling. However in this latter case it is important for tutors to emphasize the reasons why grammar and spelling are important;

(iv) Comments on the relevance of the content or approach. Some courses involve a discussion tape which offers an opportunity to explain the criteria of relevance, and explore the benefits of certain approaches. The isolation of external students, which prevents them from trying their ideas out on their peers, makes comments from the tutor in this area all the more valuable;

(v) Encouragement: As the Open University tutor's booklet says, 'Even when an assignment is poor, you can usually find some positive virtue to praise. A written invitation to the student to discuss points of difficulty in writing or on the telephone will further assist him to "balance out" his comments, and renew his commitment'. Although an apt and vitriolic comment may help ease the frustrations of a tutor who has just waded through ten pages of ill-considered prose, these are often wounding to a distant and perhaps anxious student.

(vi) An explanation of the assessment. On receiving his assignment back from his tutor, a student will open it and look at the grade (if any) - then, possibly, at the explanation on the Assignment Attachment. Thus, this teaching summary should give an overall view, commenting not only on the reasons for any specific grade on the assessment but also relating this assessment to the student's progress in the course.*

The role of a correspondence tutor is a demanding one. We cannot assume that all tutors will find it easy and it will be necessary for a distance-teaching institution to monitor some of its tutors' work in order to see if the marking is being done properly. Two other things will help the development of good tutors. The first is the production of a handbook for tutors which will advise them both on the administrative procedures they should follow and on their teaching techniques. The second is for a distance-teaching institution to provide training for its tutors. A brief workshop, in which tutors can learn about the college's courses and administration and also react to specimen assignments and be guided on their marking can be of the greatest value.

* External Studies Unit (1978) Tutoring at a distance: workshop materials (Murdoch University)

Summary

1. Tutoring and counselling distant students may be provided by:
 - 1.1 local or field tutors, who visit students, run seminars, liaise with school and college staff;
 - 1.2 college of education staff, either at residential courses or by visiting students or both;
 - 1.3 head teachers, who may supervise the classroom work of trainee teachers;
 - 1.4 correspondence tutors, who mark and comment on assignments;
 - 1.5 radio tutors, who provide advice common to many students;
 - 1.6 a student adviser whose main job is to solve students' difficulties.
2. One person, or group of people, should co-ordinate the various tutoring and counselling activities.
3. Tutoring and counselling involves:
 - 3.1 helping students;
 - 3.2 encouraging them;
 - 3.3 checking their work and commenting on it;
 - 3.4 stimulating dialogue;
 - 3.5 marking.
4. Students often find it helpful to start their course with a residential session.
5. They need to know where and how to get help.

6. Correspondence tutors should:
 - 6.1 be knowledgeable, encouraging and prompt with their marking;
 - 6.2 build up a personal relationship with their students;
 - 6.3 always comment as well as mark.
7. To help its tutors, a distance-teaching institution should:
 - 7.1 provide its tutors with all the information they need about the institution and how it works;
 - 7.2 guide, supervise and monitor their work;
 - 7.3 consider giving them a tutor's handbook and/or arranging training workshops for them.