A DIFFERENT APPROACH TO TUTORIAL SESSIONS AT UNIVERSITY LEVEL: A CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Why are tutorial sessions considered less important than concepts and procedures by university teachers? The students come to our institutions with expectations in this field, especially after their experience in Primary and Secondary Schools. The position taken by university professors will influence the roles played by both themselves and students and, of course, on the development of the curriculum. Our research in a pre-service teacher-training programme informs us that there is a different way to approach tutorial sessions based on learner autonomy and reflection and the process of teaching and learning. During this experience, we verified the importance of this "different" relationship.

0. INTRODUCTION

Tutorial sessions have not, generally speaking, received adequate attention at university level in our context. The university should be the space where individuals have to develop all their potential: their ability to work in a group, reflect on what they are doing, share opinions and actions with others, grow in responsibility, use media, etc., in essence, be more autonomous. The opposite of what it should be is considered "normal" in the university context, apart from some personal but not institutional initiatives, as far as I know. A consequence of the free interpretation of tutorial sessions has been a diversity of approaches, interpretations and lines of contradictory performances in some cases or the absence of any action plan in many others.

When our students come to the university, they bring with them, in the majority of cases, the experience of having worked in tutorials sessions during their Primary and Secondary Schools. Why do we not take this experience into account and try to develop it as much as we can? When we asked our students in our research project about the lack of coherent tutorial sessions at university level, 96% of them answered *"we come here to learn what we are told and pass our exams. There is nothing more we can do. The university is what it is and it will not change."* Fate should be reconverted into active participation, by both professors/tutors and students, if we want this basic matter to change.

1. INITIAL REFLECTIONS

Taking into consideration the need for tutorial sessions at the university level, I want to reflect upon the following thoughts as a starting point:

1. Professors/tutors and students are active members of the tutorial sessions. Students are not the ones to learn and the professor/tutor is not the one to teach. Both roles can be interchanged.

2. Individuals grow in a group.

3. The cohesion and the coherence of our curriculum must be made explicit through our actions.

4. Guidance should be not confused with dependence.

5. Tutorial sessions should be developed from tasks.

7. Tutorial sessions should be considered an opportunity to solve "our" problems.

8. Tutorial actions should be taken gradually.

9. We must start from where the students are, not from where the professors/tutors are.

10. Different ways to involve students in the process of teaching and learning are essential.

11. Sharing is a means of reducing "our" (professors' and students') workload.

12. Efficient tutorial sessions have to be based on appropriate means of interaction.

13. Everyone's attitude and aptitude toward tutorial sessions must be taken onto account when planning, carrying out and evaluating our curriculum.

14. Tutorial sessions should be planned and shared as a part of our 'routine'.

15. The term 'tutorial sessions' should be considered an umbrella term under which we can find, among others:

 i) Learning to learn
 ii) Professional guidance
 iii) Process and management of the class group.
 iv) Learning how to work in groups. University students, although it seems curious, need more training in this respect. Our experience has shown us the difficulties they still have when working in groups.
 v) Growth in interpersonal relationships in the class group, including both professor and students (see "our experience", point 3, in this paper)

16. Tutorial sessions can be an opportunity to learn how to live in society.

17. Reflective tutorial sessions must substitute the tutorial sessions considered part of the teaching time.

18. The tutor should offer personal guidance.

19. Guidance is a co-operative task.

20. Our main role as tutors is not solving the students' problems but promoting the creation of a structure for the students to solve them.

2. THE CLASS AS A GROUP

We define the "group"[1] as:

- a moral person
- provided with its own finality, existence and dynamism
- different from the sum of individuals that form it
- but tightly dependant[2] on the relationships established among them.

From this definition, we can draw some conclusions:

i) Groups are not born but made. A number of students in a classroom is not a group but a grouping. As tutors, we have to look for concrete tasks and media to go from a mere grouping to the group.

ii) The group and the tutor are not two different realities. Tutors must make the effort to belong to that moral person (group). Our real influence within the group will be more based on our personal values and capacity for enthusiasm than on the authority we represent. Groups rarely change from the outside.

iii) The objectives of the group must be set up and made explicit by all the members of the group from the very beginning, although they must be kept open for continuous reflection (evaluation) and changes.

iv) The class itself is a special group. Its members are not there voluntarily. The objectives and the structure are also considered by the students as imposed.

All these difficulties are added to the ones that each group has. Possibly, we cannot solve them all but try to ease them by adopting two basic attitudes:
- Creating a positive atmosphere or life style in the group where communication among all the members is possible.
- Planning together a periodical and gradual reflection on the objectives, contents, methodology and evaluation of our curriculum. We cannot claim responsibility from the students' in the teaching-learning process without including them in it.

v) To form a group and not a grouping, the tutor must:
- analyse the informal structure of the class.
- observe the students: the leaders, the isolated and the rejected ones.
- improve cohesion and coherence through interaction.
- Stimulate collaboration instead of competition.

Within each group, we can find two different structures: the formal and the informal one. In the relationship established with the students, one thing is the "official"

and another the "real". For example, a class representative can be a determined student (formal structure) but the person who is really influencing the group could be a different one (informal structure). Taking these two structures into consideration, groups "pretend to be" (formal structure) and "are" (informal structure). The ideal situation is when they coincide. This is difficult but not impossible.

If we want to know the group, we must aim at the "official" approaching the "real", keeping in mind that the informal structure influences the style of the group more than the formal one. The roles played by students in each group will be determined by the informal structure not by the tutor's point of view (formal structure).

2.1. Levels of the group

Each group works at two different and complementary levels: intellectual or task (conscious or formal structure, the easiest to observe) and the socio-emotional or affective (mechanisms not always conscious but with a strong influence on the group, more difficult to observe). The tutor must be attentive to the class group to see: the tone of interventions, the people addressed, the physical postures and looks, the silences, the reactions to each intervention, etc. The tutor must take these two levels into consideration and offer the necessary measures to satisfy both, considering them as indivisible. For this, efficient organization and class atmosphere are crucial.

Here, we present the categories that R.F. Bales suggests in order to observe any group. They can help both the professor/tutor and the students to check the position taken by each member of the group:

Task level

Positive aspects:
The student: makes suggestions (persuades, convinces, stimulates), gives his/her impressions or opinions (expresses his/her wishes or needs), gives guidance (repeats, informs and clarifies).

Negative aspects[3]:
The student: asks for help (makes others repeat or clarify), demands ideas or suggestions (trying to avoid doing the work him/herself)

Socio-affective level

Positive aspects:
The student: shows solidarity (helps, stimulates, thanks), eases the atmosphere (reduces tensions, laughs, makes jokes), expresses disagreement (consents, approves, allows)

Negative aspects:
The student: expresses disagreement (does not take part, rejects, is stubborn), shows tension (increasing it), shows hostility (satirizes, is opposed to anything, is stubborn)

2.2. Steps and factors in a group's life

Each group could be seen going through an evolutionary process, having steps or phases which will inform us about its situation: the members' relationships, tasks that can be done, efficient means of interaction to be used in that specific moment, etc.

We can divide the group's life according to different aspects: psychological, organizational, task achievement, formal and informal structures, etc.

First step: Formation of the group

Characteristics: There is no sense of group, people feel insecure and do not show their true self and there are embarrassing silences.

Second step: Looking for a group

Characteristics: Members try to work together, feel less insecurity, try to be themselves (but not completely), feel a risk of attacking to defend or steady themselves, tolerance has not fully appeared.

Third step: Consciousness of belonging to a group

Characteristics: Tolerance, discussion starts to be more realistic, the group's atmosphere is more relaxed, there is greater participation, the group tends towards unanimity (everyone is afraid of splitting up the group), great number of concessions, easy verbal agreements.

Fourth step: Looking for a group structure

Characteristics: consciousness of the limits of the group's freedom, formal and informal structures are defined and accepted, the roles of the group are established, the procedures to work are settled, decision making takes place.

Fifth step: Self-regulation of the group

Characteristics: The group members know how to evaluate their progress, know how to organize themselves and channel emotions and incidents that appear, are open to changes.

Tasks are the key to making the group progress. Tasks should be gradual, depending on the moment in which the group is. The professor/tutor's role is supportive. Each group has to live its own experience if we want the group to grow. Any external influence can stop its evolution.

If we want the group to progress positively, we have to take into consideration that there are different classroom atmospheres when the members of the group start interrelating: defence, control and acceptance. These characteristics gradually evolve from one into the next if the classroom atmosphere is the right one to promote group work. To understand the group in relation to the atmosphere created in the classroom, it is necessary to take the following factors into consideration:

i) Cohesion (the tendency to stay together and in agreement) has some factors against it (disintegration): interpersonal aggression, sporadic drop outs, disorganization, lack of communication.

ii) The roles within the group. There are no neutral roles. Each member has a role. Sometimes the roles are chosen deliberately but other times they are given by the rest of the members of the group. Rotation must be taken into account as a healthy balance. Reflecting on the roles and their influence will subsequently be crucial to making the necessary decisions to achieve an equilibrium within the group. We can use any of the scales in the literature to observe the roles played by the different members of the classroom, including the professor (for example: Brunet Gutiérrez, et. al, 1996, Kirsten and Muller-Schwarz, 1978, Serranos García and Olivas Bravo, 1989).

iii) The norms within the group. These are extremely important to keep the group going. They could be formulated orally or in writing. The norms are tightly connected with the values of the group and give it a sense of security and should be the result of a consensus or agreement among all the members of the group if we want them to be respected. The norms must also be open to change.

iv) Conforming. The pressure of the group on each member is extremely important. It is a common fact, although not consciously recognized, that each group imposes a certain pressure on its members, giving them, at the same time, a sense of confidence. Our position, as professor/tutor, could only be that of making all the members of the group reflect on this fact. Our main aim must be "Do we want the group to be formed by individuals that are learning how to become individuals within a group or do we want the group to be emphasized over the individuals?" Consensus does not mean blind acceptance.

v) Competition or collaboration?

In general, the majority of social situations are neither purely competitive nor totally co-operative, although one of the two could be predominant. Our society is normally competitive. We have to learn how to be co-operative and the group itself is an appropriate structure in which to learn this. One of the professor/tutor's main roles is to promote collaboration.

vi) The conflict, understood as the disparity in criteria shown, is extremely positive if it is channelled appropriately. Solving the problems within the group could be a way to grow together, the opposite can drive the group towards disintegration.

vii) The role of the professor/tutor is special, although we include him/her as a member of the group at the beginning of this paper. In the interaction professor-students, the professor/tutor is a formal leader of the group. The way the professor/tutor assumes his/her leadership is determinant in the social-affective aspects of the class. The consequences of his/her decisions towards the group will make the group either grow or be dependent. We can see the different styles of exerting the professor/tutor's leadership as a continuum: ranging from minimum to maximum freedom for the students to choose under a democratic leadership. Developing and gradually transferring responsibility onto the students in decision making is crucial to make the group grow. As we have said repeatedly, reflection on the part of all the members of the group on what is being done is also essential.

Summing up what we want to emphasize, we think that a positive attitude towards the growth of the group is determinant. Carl Rogers[4] used the terms "*coherent, genuine and congruent*" to express the basic attitudes of the professor/tutor in his/her relationship with the students. That means: Being him/herself, trusting the students'

capability and potentiality to grow, being ready to listen to and comprehend the students, being open to the experience as it is with no pre-established rules, etc.

viii) All group techniques have some clear objectives:
- Developing the feeling of "us".
- Teaching to think actively.
- Teaching to listen comprehensively.
- Developing the capacities of co-operation, interchange, responsibility, autonomy and creativity.
- Overcoming fears, inhibitions and tensions by creating the feeling of security.
- Creating a positive attitude to solve the social problems that each individual encounters in his/her human relationships.

3. OUR EXPERIENCE[5]

The experience recounted here is the result of a three-year research project done with students in their last year of an undergraduate university degree. Similar projects have been carried out since then (1993) with pre-service teacher-training courses for both primary (undergraduate) and secondary school teachers (postgraduate). The central objective of this research was to study the influence of learner autonomy on the learning/teaching process in pre-service teacher training, in which working through tutorial sessions was one of the main pillars of the experience.

THE CONCLUSIONS REACHED WERE:

1. The professor/tutor's role as promoter or attitudes was clearly important. At the same time, the students' reactions to the professor/tutor's change in attitude were more positive.

2. Democracy is not deeply rooted in our university culture, or at least the students were not conscious of it. This was confirmed throughout the entire experience; maintaining and advancing it was not an easy task.

3. Responsible participation of the students in the teaching/learning process is still a challenge.

4. Group work is not a common tool in our university, its promotion and preservation require a continuous effort on the part of all the members involved.

5. The students were able to take on responsibility of the teaching/learning process but only gradually. The academic year was divided into Phases (0 Introduction, I Beginning, II Development and III End of the process). The interaction between the professor/tutor-the students and among the students themselves was gradually organized through continuous training: 1 planning tasks, 2 carrying them out, 3 evaluating them and 4 re-planning.

6. Participation, being open to change, negotiation, etc. depends on the necessary means to develop the co-responsibility of the students. The means changed according to the phases in which the tutor and the students were. For example, the follow-up sheet written by the students every fortnight started at the beginning of Phase I and disappeared during Phase II; group/personal diaries replaced it.

7. Students were able to work autonomously because they were prepared for it gradually. This affected the interaction between the professor/tutor-students and among the students themselves.

8. Our experience showed that it was possible to change the traditional professor/ tutor and students' roles by involving the students actively in the teaching/learning process. Everyone learned from the experience.

9. The cohesion and coherence of the whole process were the fundamental elements of the experience.

10. Our research showed that it was possible to train the students to use the necessary media and didactic resources for their immediate formation. That required having media, being able to use them and knowing how to use them.

11. The coherence and the regular adjustment of the tutorial plan was considered vital by all the members of the programme (professor/tutor, students and observers).

12. Co-operative work is still an important challenge in the regular university structure. The teacher's beliefs about co-operative work helped to overcome the difficulties encountered throughout the process.

13. Group work requires an additional effort. It is not forming the groups that is difficult but maintaining and training them. Our experience showed that it was possible to work in groups, although that obliged us to change our class structure: planning together, having a coherent follow up, self-evaluation, co-evaluation, negotiation, etc.

14. The cohesion of the group required responsibility on the part of each member. We must foment that responsibility, especially at the beginning, by creating the adequate and graduated tasks according to the moment or phase. A group is formed gradually and so are its obligations.

15. Decision making was fundamental in our co-operative work, one example of that is the representatives' meetings (each group sent one of its members to meetings where the whole process was evaluated).

16. One aspect that it is worth emphasizing is the professor/tutor's respect towards the internal life of the groups. Any unfortunate interference will build up an imbalance difficult, but not impossible, to overcome.

17. It was pleasing to know that 66 students, out of the 69 involved in the experience, said that they were more autonomous at the end of it.

18. The tasks developed throughout the process were similar to the ones that any teacher has to face in his/her career, which imply, without a doubt, co-operative and autonomous work.

4. FUTURE PLANS IN OUR CONTEXT

There is a research project to develop tutorial sessions in our center (Centro Superior de Educación). This plan will affect two different degrees: pre-service teacher training for primary school teachers (Musical Education, first year, second semester) and Pedagogy (4th year, second semester). The objectives, tutor's preparation and functions, students' roles, institutional roles, observers, etc. are now being discussed. The experience described above will be a starting point, due to which myself, and

some of the students who participated in our research project, have been requested to be part of the initial team as assessors.

Notes

[1] Aubry, J.M. y Y. Saint-Arnaud. *Dinámica de grupos: Iniciación a su espíritu y a algunas de sus técnicas* (Madrid: Euramérica, 1965).

[2] I prefer to define it as interdependent.

[3] I would not consider these aspects as totally negative at the beginning of tutorial actions but part of a gradual setting of communication I try to establish.

[4] Rogers, C. *Psicoterapia y relaciones humanas: teoría y práctica de la terapia no directiva*, (Madrid: Alfaguara, 1965).

[5] I use "*we*" because this experience cannot be understood without the students and the observers' contributions.

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