4 Tuition

Main Themes: *What is tuition? The diversity of tasks which may be carried out by staff designated as 'tutors'. The tutorial role of the tutor. Learner perceptions about tuition. Monitoring the performance of tutors and the quality of correspondence tuition. Unreliability in script grading. The importance of tutor comments on assignments and their role in learning. Criteria in assessing quality in tutor commenting and the correspondence role more generally. Face to face tuition and the different forms it can take. Measuring attendance at sessions and the student user rate.*

'Tuition' is used here to refer to course-related teaching/support provided by an individual for a particular learner or group of learners who are also using prepared materials as a resource. The tuition may take a variety of forms but is usually focused on *facilitating* the learning of a known group of learners not on replacing the materials. It usually involves a local tutor with whom learners are in direct (if infrequent) contact, whose role may be defined variously, for example, as interpreting course materials, enriching course content, diagnosing learning problems, helping with study skills and practical activities. The overlap with counselling may be more or less encouraged, depending on the kind of system set up, but counselling issues are treated separately here, in chapter 5.

What tutors actually do again varies widely, and they may have different titles in different systems—trainer, tutor-counsellor, learning advisor, teacher, and so on. However there are a number of major topics in tuition evaluation which provide a general introduction to the area—the tutor role, correspondence tuition and face to face tuition at workshops, resource centres and so on.

Role of the tutor

In systems like the Open University which commit very large amounts of resource to the design and presentation of multi-media
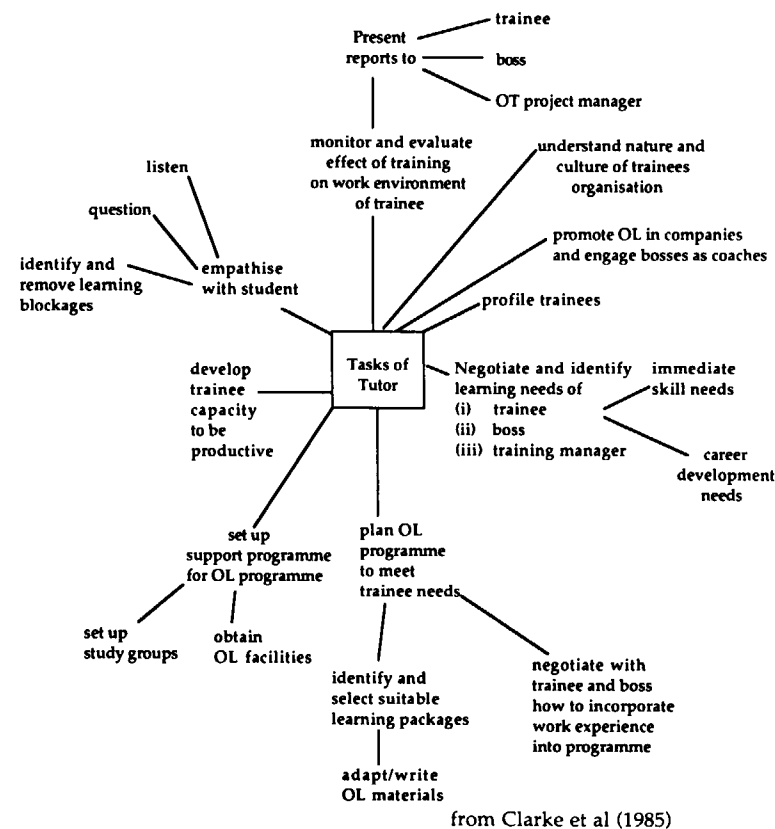

from Clarke et al (1985)

Figure 4.1   The main tasks of a tutor for the Kingston Open Learning Action Project for Industrial Supervisors

packages, the question 'what is the role of the tutor?' has been from the beginning a focus of interest, research and development, particularly among regional staff and tutors themselves. The University has of course designated the role of the tutor in its staff development materials, and oriented it towards the facilitation of learning, especially for new learners, with perhaps more emphasis on a remedial role after the first year, when it is hoped that learners will be increasingly 'independent' in their approach. However there has also been evaluation of the role that tutors actually do play at the OU and in a variety of open learning systems. During 1983–84, researchers from the Industrial Training Research Unit, (sponsored by the then Manpower Services Commission) reported on the role of the tutor in the OU and in 27 vocationally oriented
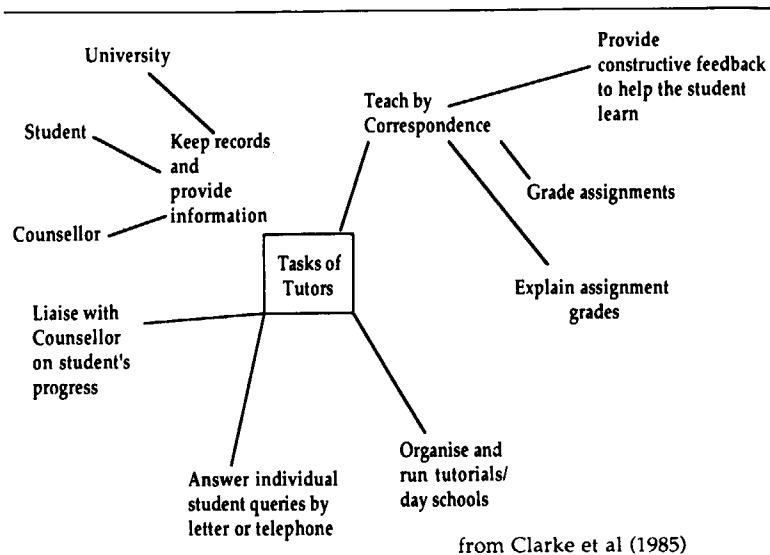
University

Student

Counsellor

Keep records and provide information

Liaise with Counsellor on student's progress

Tasks of Tutors

Answer individual student queries by letter or telephone

Organise and run tutorials/ day schools

Teach by Correspondence

Provide constructive feedback to help the student learn

Grade assignments

Explain assignment grades

from Clarke et al (1985)

Figure 4.2   The main tasks of an Open University tutor

open learning courses: 14 in colleges, nine in companies and four training association/ITB courses. (Clarke, Costello and Wright, 1985.)

The ITRU researchers distinguished between three main types of open learning which determine key differences between the role of the tutor:

1. those where tutors both prepare and deliver open learning materials;
2. those where bought-in materials are modified by tutors for a specific learner group and then delivered;
3. those where tutors deliver bought-in materials unadapted.
                                                            (Clark et al, 1985)

Forty-eight tutors involved in the 27 courses sampled, completed a questionnaire on a wide range of aspects of their role. A selection of some of the questions together with the responses is shown in table 4.1. The tutors surveyed were on the whole experienced, with an average of over five years in open learning and experience of around 50 learners on average. Fourteen said they had had some training for open learning, the rest not.

Five in-depth case studies of particular courses revealed that tutors may combine marketing as well as authoring with a tutorial

Industrial Training Research Unit survey of tutors on vocationally oriented open learning courses.

	Number of Responses	
	YES	NO
Are you involved in the preparation of learning materials for this scheme?	23	24
Are you involved with students before they undertake the course?	26	21
Do you arrange tutorials?	24	22
Where are you expected to be available?		
at all times 7		
at all times at work 4		
by appointment 24		
on the telephone 32		
Do you have to set assignments?	20	26
Are you responsible for marking assignments?	37	8
Do you keep records?	41	5
Are you responsible for evaluating/monitoring		
(a) the students	25	20
(b) the course	16	23

Table 4.1   Tutor responses on a selection of issues concerning their role

role, in some schemes. The authors mapped the range of tasks on each scheme and the example shown in figure 4.1 (the Kingston Open Learning Action Project for Industrial Supervisors) shows how all-embracing the role of 'tutor' can become, certainly by comparison with figure 4.2 (an Open University tutor).

The title open learning 'tutor' therefore can cover a very wide range of tasks, some of which have little to do with tuition, though they may influence how the tutorial role is carried out. This is summarised in figure 4.3.

However, whatever the job specification of tutors on different schemes, the *facilitation of learning* is often specified as at the core of *tuition* specifically. The components of this role are also varied, and not all schemes involve all those shown in figure 4.4 below. One of the key 'optional' areas for example is the counselling/guidance area, which may be provided independently of the tutor in some schemes, or not at all.

Tasks	Skills/Knowledge required
Negotiation with business organisations	Marketing, interviewing, negotiating skills. Understanding of business organisation and practices.
Selection and adaption of existing OL materials	Awareness of OL databases and course materials. Content of qualifying syllabus.
Preparation of OL materials	Knowledge of target audience, learning goals and assessment needs. Ability to author and design learning materials.
Pre-course counselling (determining learning needs and assessment of ability and potential)	Knowledge of open learning material available. Skill in assessment, counselling/guidance, interpersonal relationships.
Induction	Communication, guidance, knowledge of the course and the open learning system concerned.
Supporting learning	Knowledge of what OL involves. Coaching, adapting to learning styles, teaching of study skills and examination techniques, running tutorials, telephone tutorials, assignment marking, record keeping, counselling/guidance, dealing with personal problems.
Post-Course counselling	Counselling/guidance, knowledge of career paths.

Includes material from a table in Clarke, Costello and Wright, (1985 p.43).

Figure 4.3 A range of tasks which may be carried out by Open Learning tutors
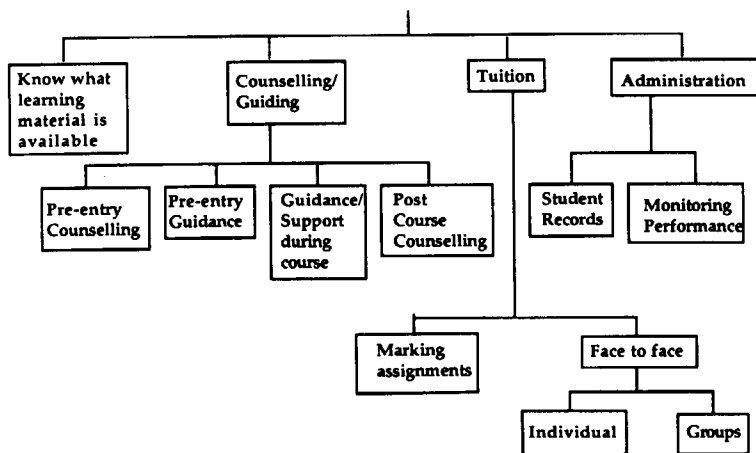
Adapted from a diagram in Clarke, Costello and Wright (1985), p.45

Figure 4.4 Component tasks of tuition in Open Learning

Learner perceptions of tuition

The role of tuition and the tutor within distance open learning has been explored in an OU project which surveyed over 5,000 students studying a variety of post-foundation courses, i.e. these students had already studied at least one foundation course at minimum, and many had studied and passed several other courses as well. They were asked to comment on their tuition on the course just completed, and on their experience of tuition in general. (Kelly and Swift 1983.)

The questionnaire used a five point rating scale to explore reactions to the provision of different media on the course students had just completed.

	Much too much	Too much	About right amount	Too little	Much too little	No answer
Components:	%	%	%	%	%	%
Correspondence materials (including units, supps., readers, set books)	2	17	76	5	0	1
Broadcasting (including TV/video, audio cassettes)	2	11	70	12	2	3
Tuition (including TMA grades and comments, tutorials, etc., informal tutor contact)	0	1	58	29	10	1

Kelly and Swift, 1983

Table 4.2 Student reactions to media provision

Of the three main components listed in table 4.2, tuition is the one eliciting most of the 'not enough provided' responses. Four in ten respondents noted too little provision of tuition and, when specifically asked, 45 per cent favoured reduction in TV broadcasts if that allowed more tutor contact instead, 29 per cent of students were also against this idea, however.

Having established something of the value of tuition relative to other media, the questionnaire then attempted to explore the quality of the role of the tutor in general. Students were asked to respond to a very wide range of statements, both about the course they had just completed (table 4.3) and about their experience of post-foundation tutors generally (table 4.4).

Type of help needed from tutor:	% needing A lot of help	% needing Some help	Total requiring 'some' or 'a lot' of help
Analysis of the errors and deficiencies in my TMAs	21	45	66
Explanation of what a good answer to a TMA would have been	21	37	58
Clear identification of the good points in my TMAs	19	39	58
The clearing up of problems, obscurities in the teaching materials	14	44	58
Developing a fuller, more rounded understanding of the subject area than that provided by correspondence and other materials	16	42	58
Analysis/feedback on how I was progressing in my understanding of the subject	15	42	57
Human support and encouragement from tutor	19	34	53
Advice on strategies for coping with materials and set tasks	13	38	51
Identification of the requirements of TMAs/CMAs	12	38	50
Understanding the main themes and issues of the course	10	40	50
Help with preparation for the final exam	16	33	49
Development of my skills so that I can do better in the future	8	34	42
Advice on essay-writing/structuring TMA answers/study skills	7	27	34
Help with identifying my strengths and weaknesses as a student	6	26	32
Discussion, practice in developing skills in argument	8	24	32
Support, reassurance when depressed, worried about my studies	9	21	30
Help with pacing my studies, identifying priorities	3	18	21

Adapted from Kelly and Swift (1983)

NOTE: TMA - Tutor Marked Assignment
        CMA - Computer Marked Assignment

Table 4.3   Student perceptions of the help they need from tutors

Attitude Statements:	Strongly agree %	Agree %	In between %	Disagree %	Disagree strongly %	No views %
Apart from having my TMAs graded and commented on, I don't want or need other contact with a tutor	2	5	14	36	41	2
	8*			77*		
Without a course tutor there would be no-one in the OU system to whom I could turn for help with study problems	23	46	11	14	3	3
	68			17		
A good tutor can make a course; a poor tutor can spoil one	34	32	15	11	3	4
	67			14		
Some aspects of most courses can only be taught effectively on a face-to-face basis	13	45	20	14	13	6
	58			17		
If the amount of tutor support were reduced it would adversely affect my ability to cope with OU studies	14	31	20	22	9	3
	45			31		
Without the help of a tutor I would probably have dropped out from at least one course that I stuck with	10	15	10	33	27	6
	25			59		
If there were no provision for contact with the course tutor, the OU would lack credibility as an academic institution	28	40	11	11	3	8
	68			14		

* Percentages are rounded up
  or down, as appropriate

Swift and Kelly (1983)

Table 4.4   Student evaluation of the role of the tutor and tuition generally

Students were asked whether they had needed help from their tutor on the course they had studied in 1982 and the responses are shown in table 4.3. On all except one of the 17 types of help listed, at least 30 per cent of students reported needing some or a lot of help. Predictably most (two-thirds) needed help on continuous assessment (tutor marked assignments or TMAs) over half had also needed 'human support and encouragement', 'feedback on how I

was progressing in the subject', and help in 'developing a fuller, more rounded understanding of the subject area than that provided by correspondence and other materials'.

Overall, it was clear from this survey that students value tuition as a whole very highly. Sixty-eight per cent felt that without a course tutor there would be no one to help with study problems and 25 per cent definitely felt that without the help of a tutor they would probably have dropped out from at least one course. Over two-thirds felt that 'A good tutor can make a course, a poor tutor can spoil one'. (See table 4.4).

It was only possible to devise these lists of attitudinal statements because individual tutors had already described their own role in accounts published in 'Teaching at a Distance' and much discussion with tutors had occurred either in interviews or through the regular staff development role of regional staff. Much qualitative 'research' had already occurred, albeit informally; this provided a firm basis for the design of the questionnaire, especially the attitudinal statements shown in tables 4.3 and 4.4.

Correspondence tuition

Many open learning providers will want to monitor and evaluate the performance of tutors in this area which remains otherwise a private transaction between tutor and learner where the learner is especially vulnerable to the effects of poor quality tuition.

Turnround

There is first the turnround issue—how quickly does the learner get back an assignment, after posting or handing in, and how much of this time is taken by the tutor in marking? Many of the European correspondence schools can monitor tutor turnround very easily because learners mail their assignments direct to the institution which then mails on a batch to the tutor, who also returns marked scripts to the school. The system 'knows' therefore when the tutor should have received what, and can chase late returners, if there are any.

In a system like the OU, where students send assignments direct to their tutor, such checking is not possible. Tutors return marked assignments to the University where a record is made onto computer files for both the tutor and the student. Where no assignments have been received by 21 days after the cut-off date (the date by which tutors should receive scripts from their students for that assignment) a 'marker' against the tutor name is made automatically by the computer and the appropriate staff to investi-

gate are notified. In 1986 for example, 20 per cent of tutors were identified as late in this way, on one or more occasions. (Field, 1987.)

This is an imperfect system but it does identify the worst offenders. In a system where tutorial staff number tens and not thousands, it would be possible to monitor tutor turnround regularly for every learner allocated to a tutor for a proportion, if not for all assignments.

Recent research at the OU confirms the assumption that students do want to get their assignments back quickly, though it reveals other issues too. The average time a student has to wait to get back their assignment from marking has varied in different years and also at different times of year. The range has been from 17 days (1983–85) up to 20 days (1986) and, an experimental study of three Social Science courses in 1987 recorded 24 days as the average number a student waits for each TMA to return. A proportion of this time is of course taken while the assignment is in the (second class) post and while it is being processed. Tutors in the same experimental study, tended to keep the assignment 9–10 days for marking. Although many other factors are involved, a majority of students in this study (59 per cent) said they would prefer the assignment to be returned direct to them by their tutor, because they felt it would arrive more quickly by that route. (Field, 1987.)

Students also commented on a number of other issues: the illegibility of some tutors' handwriting, and the particular difficulty of getting assignments back towards the end of a course, when they were needed for revision.

Grading reliability

The speed with which tutors mark and return assignments, is not the only important issue. There is also the issue of tutor reliability in awarding grades. The OU for example has a system for checking leniency/severity in tutor marking. This is based on the assumption that a norm can be created by calculating the percentage of A, B C, D, F grades (or their numerical equivalents) awarded to all scripts submitted by a course cohort, on each assignment in turn. Each tutor's grades for her group on each assignment can therefore be compared with the national distribution of grades and the 'deviation from the norm' observed.

This system provides a performance indicator of reliability but, as is often the case with performance indicators, there are problems with its use. The most important of these is that tutor groups can be quite small—sometimes around 10 or less by the middle of a course—and one cannot assume that each group represents a

'normal distribution' of ability on the course. Some groups do have a higher proportion of really able students than others, for example. The extent to which a tutor is deviating from the mean, and whether in the direction of being 'too harsh' or 'too lenient' a marker, offers again only an indication that corrective action may be necessary. Investigation may show however that grades were justified.

Some of the most effective measures for improving reliability however revolve around opportunities for tutors to discuss their expectations together during the marking process. An OU study where tutors were able to discuss how they marked the first assignment, showed improved reliability on the next few assignments at least. Reliability among a group of markers can also be improved by the kind of procedures used in examination marking; tutors mark, say, four or five scripts independently and then compare grades and comments.

Why are markers 'unreliable' in the first place, you may ask? Evaluation of tutor marked assignments at the Open University in the later seventies confirmed earlier findings from other contexts, that a group of tutors marking the same set of scripts was likely to grade them differently. A selection of assignments covering all faculties was chosen and for each assignment, three tutors marked the scripts of the same 12 students. Some indication of the differences between the assignments is shown in figure 4.5.

The results of the study of grades awarded showed that:

- the same script was given different grades by different tutors; there was often a difference of two or three grades on scripts from group one. Variation in the grades awarded was much larger for scripts in Group 1 than it was for those in Group 2 and 3, where Group 3 was slightly better than Group 2 (see figure 4.5)
- tutors also differed in their ranking of scripts, especially tutors in Group 1
- the average (mean) of all grades awarded by each tutor showed that means often differed, indicating that tutors vary in leniency/severity
- some tutors used a wider range of grades than others
- tutors interpreted the grading scale differently; for example they might agree that a script was one of the best but grade it anything from C+ to A-
- tutors of students in Groups 2 and 3 did tend to be more lenient in marking scripts from 'their own' students but the effects were small by comparison with the variation in grades given the same script.

Group*	Subject(s)	Type of assignment and nature of guidance provided for the tutor	Average grade range per script (University Scale 0-100)[1]
1	Arts, Social Sciences and Educational Studies	Single essay assignments with impression grading. General guidance offered, but no marking scheme. Letter grades used (these being converted to numbers on the University's 1-100 scale for conflation purposes).	2.3
2	Physical sciences and physical science-based technology subjects	3-4 questions per assignment, each often sub-divided into part questions. More specific than those of Group 1. Analytic marking schemes using numbers always given and a numeric grade for a script derived by combining the part scores.	1.2
3 •	Mathematics	2-3 questions each usually divided into parts. Detailed answers given in tutor notes with an analytic marking scheme using numbers. Numeric grade derived by combining part-scores.	0.9

* Group 1 contained six assignments, Group 2 four assignments and Group 3 three assignments.

1 100; A = 93, B = 78, C = 63, D = 48, E = 35, F = 23, G = 7

Byrne, C. Tutor-marked Assignements at the OU: A question of reliability (p.37) adapted from TAAD no. 15 1979.

Figure 4.5 Characteristics of three types of assignment and the range in grades given by tutors

It may be surprising to discover that, even in a subject like mathematics, experienced tutors do not agree absolutely on grades. This means that we would expect to find different grades for the same script even among experienced tutors, and figure 4.6 suggests the range based on the findings discussed here.

The value of this kind of evaluation is not primarily the discovery of unreliability per se since, on the basis of previous research in conventional education 'unreliability' can be expected. Its value in this case was, first, that it demonstrated that tutor unreliability on continuous assessment was no worse than that reported in studies elsewhere on examination marking. Second, it stimulated consideration of the possible causes of unreliability, and provided a very helpful form of staff development for those taking part.

Group	At least 4 points	At least 2 points	At least 1 point
1	1 in 25	1 in 3	2 in 3
2	Very rare	1 in 25	1 in 3
3	Very rare	1 in 70	1 in 4
			Byrne (1979)

Figure 4.6 Approximate frequency with which two tutors would be expected to award grades differing by at least one point on a large set of scripts (expressed on a 0–10 scale)

Those tutors involved discussed their grades and discovered why others had judged a script differently in an atmosphere which was supportive rather than threatening. As suggested earlier, similar exercises, especially at the beginning of a course, can improve both grading and commenting on scripts thereafter.

Although the exercise demonstrated that it would be unrealistic to hope to eradicate unreliability completely, some of the reasons for unreliability became clearer, and a number were associated with the quality of assignment design, where improvements can be made. Some assignments generated more unreliability than others, because of unclear wording, poor student or tutor notes. The single essay question generally came out worst, of all question types, and can be improved by being broken down into a number of components, if that is possible. Students then need guidance on the relative importance of these parts, and problems can be created if this is not given, or if unrealistic word lengths are provided.

Evaluation of tutor reliability can therefore be as much an evaluation of the quality of assignments on a course as of the quality of tutor performances. During discussion of differences of opinion, it was possible to pinpoint aspects in the advice to students, or in the notes to tutors, which were the cause of disagreement, or to pinpoint other inadequacies. These are valuable findings for the redrafting of assignments.

Tutor comments and correspondence teaching

Although the grade awarded a script is very important to the learner, the purpose of the assignment interchange includes far more than assessment of the standard that it reaches. It may often be the case that the learner's work is not graded at all. Whether there is a grade or not, however, the learner is looking for feedback

Attributes of TMA comments:	Importance attached to attributes:		
	VERY IMPORTANT	FAIRLY IMPORTANT	NOT VERY/ NOT AT ALL IMPORTANT
	%	%	%
Analysis and clear explanation of where things went wrong and why.	78	17	4
Constructive criticism – helpful and encouraging comments.	68	25	6
Understanding of reasons for grade awarded to TMA.	52	30	16
Assessment of general progress at several stages throughout the year.	33	33	31
TMA — tutor marked assignment			Kelly and Swift (1983)

Table 4.5 The importance attached by students to provision of four types of content in their tutor's comments on assignments for the course

on general progress with the course and specific help with areas of difficulty. The quality of the tutor's comments on a script therefore also matter as well as the grade, and are not unconnected. A low grade for example can make it very difficult for some students to read comments carefully and learn from them, disappointment and a sense of failure making them want to push the script away and forget about it. Clearly this is a very individual matter, but survey findings suggest that there is little basis for the view that students are only interested in the grade (see table 4.5).

The 1983 OU Survey of students mentioned earlier provides conclusive evidence for the importance of correspondence tuition. Table 4.5 indicates that almost all respondents (over 90 per cent) felt assignment comments were important for explaining errors and making helpful criticism. Students were also asked what they usually did with marked assignments and table 4.6 indicates that fewer than 10 per cent are only interested in the grade. Seventy two per cent read comments carefully and tried to use them in subsequent assignments. There seems good evidence that the quality of correspondence teaching is a vital part in the effectiveness of the system as a whole, from two points of view: the learning process and the performance of students on continuous assessment.